



Adoption with siblings

Contact with parents

Roger Morgan
Children's Rights Director

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Office of the children's Rights Director
Ofsted
Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

FREEPHONE : 0800 528 0731
Email: theteam.rights4me@ofsted.gov.uk



Introduction

This consultation was carried out urgently to invite the views of children on two sets of issues and proposals related to adoption on which the government is seeking views. The consultation was carried out by the Children's Rights Director for England and his team. The Children's Rights Director has the job in law of finding out the views of children and young people. The Office of the Children's Rights Director is hosted by Ofsted, but works independently and this report of views is made independently of Ofsted, and does not necessarily represent the views of Ofsted.

The issues and proposals were put forward by Martin Narey, the government's Advisor on Adoption. They are about adopting siblings together, and about contact of children in care and adopted children with their birth parents. The government is now considering proposals for possible changes in the law and in social care practice in both these areas.

We invited two groups of children to join us at the Department for Education offices in London on 30 August 2012 to discuss these issues and proposals, one group to discuss the adoption of siblings together and the other to discuss contact with birth parents. The first group was made up of children and young people who had been adopted, and who had taken part in our

earlier discussions with the Children's Minister about adoption. The second group was made up of children in care from a number of different local authorities. These groups were not groups who normally meet together – they were specially invited for our discussions because of their experience of adoption or care.

As always, we put questions and proposals to the children, and asked their views, as neutrally and independently as possible. We did not know their views beforehand, and we have reported all their views in this report. We have not added our own views or comments, and we have not left out any views that we, the government or its advisors might disagree with, so this report is as purely as we can make it the views of the children and young people themselves.

There were nine children and young people in the group discussing adopting siblings together, and ten children and young people in the group discussing contact with parents. As well as these, six more children sent in their views to us on adopting siblings together, and two more sent in their views on contact with parents. These were children and young people who wanted to come to the group discussions, but who were not able to make the meetings at short notice, so we invited them to send us their views on paper, using the same headings that we had discussed at the group meetings. The children and young people in each of our groups ranged in age from under 12 to over

18. Altogether, this report presents the views of 27 children and young people.

At each group meeting, we met the children without their parents, carers or staff present. One member of the Office of the Children's Rights Director asked the discussion questions, and another member of the team took notes of the children's answers. Questions were asked in two different ways. Some questions were put to a vote of the group, and members of the group made their votes electronically on voting pads, in confidence, and their votes were counted by computer for this report. Other questions were asked and discussed fully by the group. Children and young people were also able to write views down on paper if they didn't wish to make or discuss them in front of others.

Children's views on adopting siblings together

Below are the votes and points made by children and young people in the group discussion on adopting siblings together.

How important is it that siblings get adopted together by the same family?

[The overall view was that it is important for siblings to be adopted together.](#)

In voting in confidence on this question, all but one of the children voted that it is important or very important indeed that siblings get adopted together by the same family. The other member of the group voted that they were 'in the middle' on the issue. No group member voted that adopting siblings together was not very important or didn't matter at all. The same views came in from the six children who sent in their views separately. Five of these told us that it is important or very important for siblings to be adopted together, and one said they were 'in the middle' on the issue.

One young person who sent their views in to us wrote about the need to avoid separating siblings for adoption if they are already placed together in care; "if children are put in care together they should be adopted together".

When might it be right for a child to be adopted on their own, without their siblings?

After we had heard that overall the group thought it important for siblings to be adopted together, we asked if there were any reasons that would make it right for siblings to be separated and adopted on their own. We did not make any suggestions ourselves to the group.

The group gave us eight reasons which might justify separating siblings on adoption:

1. If any of the siblings presents a risk to the safety of a brother or sister
2. If the siblings do not want to be placed together
3. If adoption is right for one sibling, but not for another
4. If the siblings get on very badly with each other
5. If the siblings are of very different ages so that they have little in common and their future plans are very different (eg one is about to leave care)
6. If one of the siblings has special medical needs that need a different placement
7. If the siblings have very different care or education needs that cannot be met in the same placement
8. If one child is likely to become too much the favourite at the expense of others.

Similar views were sent in by the six children who sent their views to us separately. One of these made an additional point, which was that it can be wrong to place siblings together if they have already been separated and don't actually know they have siblings.

Another told us that siblings not getting on together or arguing a lot does not necessarily mean they should be separated – siblings often do that, without needing to live apart.

One young person wrote to us saying that a large sibling group is unlikely to get adopted together, but if that is not possible, consideration should then be given to placing the siblings in pairs.

What would be the GOOD things about adopting siblings together?

We asked the group what they thought were the best things about adopting siblings together, and then what they thought were the worst things about adopting siblings together. Again, we did not make any suggestions ourselves.

The group put forward four main good points about adopting siblings together:

- **No separation anxiety** - "keeps young people together and then there's no separation anxiety"
- **Keeping the bonds that siblings have together** - "siblings have bonds that you can never have with anyone else"
- **Keeping your personal identity** - "it helps with your identity because it's someone that looks like you and your real family"
- **Not having to cope with the experience of adoption alone** – the children and young people told us that adoption is a difficult experience and having someone to share that with who is going through the same and to the same family is a comfort.

The group further discussed the issue of placing siblings together if possible so that each one did not have to go through the adoption process alone. One young person told us they had been adopted together with a sibling, but another sibling had been adopted alone, and had told them how lonely an experience he had found adoption to be. Another child said "I don't know what I would have done without my brother".

The group agreed with the view expressed by one young person that although many people say they know how a child feels as they go through the adoption process and then how they feel as an adopted child, they really don't. Only a sibling who has been through the same process with them actually knows and understands how they are feeling; "people say we know how you are feeling. They don't but if siblings were with you then they would".

The six children who sent in their views separately added some more positive points about adopting siblings together: that it would mean each had someone very close to them in their adoptive family, that it would keep the love and trust that exists between siblings who have spent time together in their lives so far, and that the siblings could support and help look after each other. Some also wrote that it is good to know your siblings well as you grow up together.

What would be the BAD things about adopting siblings together?

The group put forward three bad points about adopting siblings together:

- [Conflict between the siblings](#) – as an example, “One person might not like the parents and one might”
- [Sibling rivalry](#)
- [Different medical needs](#) – the group thought one young person might need more attention than the other so the other might miss out.

Some other points were sent in by the six children who answered our questions on their own. One was concerned that siblings adopted together might not bond so well with their adoptive parents, and another said that in some cases there could be a risk that one sibling might be disruptive and spoil the placement for the other.

Once it is decided that a child is to be adopted, how important is it that the adoption happens as quickly as possible?

There is much discussion these days about the importance of not having any unnecessary delays in getting children adopted, once it has been decided that adoption is right for them.

We asked the group to vote in confidence, using electronic voting pads, on how important it is that adoption happens as quickly as possible once this decision has been made.

[All members of the group, and five of the six children who sent in their votes separately, voted that it is important or very important indeed that once it has been decided that adoption is right for a child, the adoption should happen as quickly as possible.](#)

The one person who did not vote that it is important for adoption to happen as quickly as possible said they were ‘in the middle’ on the question.

Voting on this question was followed by much discussion in the group. Individuals gave us their personal experiences of delays in their adoption once it had been decided that adoption was right for them. We were told that in the experience of those in the group, the adoption process had taken two to three years to complete.

Here are two quotations from those who thought that it is very important indeed for adoption to be completed as quickly as possible:

“there was a two year delay. When you are in foster care you are in limbo, you’re not in the right place and you’re not in the wrong place”

“mum said she’s picked me especially but I was in foster care for two years and I didn’t like it”.

Some said it was important for adoption to be completed quickly, but in their own experience the timing hadn’t been a big issue. One young person said this was because “I was in foster care with my aunt”. Another said that looking back, they couldn’t remember whether their adoption had seemed fast or slow; “I can’t remember, I was young”.

One in the group told us that their younger sibling had been adopted very quickly as a baby, and the group agreed that the younger a child is the quicker the adoption process can and should be.

There was overall agreement in the group that [finding the right adoptive placement is more important than how fast or slow the process is](#); “too quickly and you might not get the right one”, “important to choose the right family so you don’t have to go into care before getting the perfect family”.

One young person told us that getting adoption right for a child is not only about not rushing things, but also listening fully to the child, and not going ahead with arrangements that are unlikely to work; “social services always say they are listening to young people but they aren’t. They say we’re going

to put you in this family whatever”.

One young person said that from their experience, getting the right placement is the most important thing no matter how long it takes, as they had experienced the wrong choice and a change of adoptive family during their adoption; “the day before I was supposed to move in they changed their mind.”

Which is more important – getting children adopted without a lot of delay, or delaying things to see if two or more siblings can be adopted together?

Trying to find a family to adopt two or more siblings together (if that is the right thing for them) often means a delay. We asked the group which became the more important when trying to find a family to adopt siblings together means delay – keeping siblings together and accepting a delay in getting adopted, or getting children adopted without delay, accepting the separation of siblings.

Members of the group voted in confidence on this question, and we had votes from the other six children sent in afterwards to us. [Ten voted that it is more important to keep siblings together, even if it means a lot of delay in getting](#)

adopted. Three voted that it is more important to get the children adopted, even if it means separating siblings. The others were not sure how to answer this question.

Overall, the children we consulted thought it is very important that adoptions happen quickly once the decision is made - but that it is worth delaying adoption if there is a chance that siblings might be able to be adopted together.

Are there any other reasons that would make it right to delay someone getting adopted?

As well as delays in adoption because of attempts to place siblings together, we asked the group if they could think of any other reasons which might make it acceptable for someone's adoption process to be delayed. We made no suggestions ourselves, and the group came up with three other reasons adoption might be delayed:

- If a child develops a mental or physical illness, the process should be delayed to see what happens.
- If the young person isn't coping with the process; "uncertainty and fear. Slow the process down so the young person feels more comfortable with it"
- If a delay is needed "to make sure things have been thought through properly".

Some further reasons were added from the six children who sent their views in separately: a delay can be needed if either the child or the adoptive parents have doubts, if a child being adopted has a disability, and if the adopters need to make practical arrangements such as changes to their house.

What should happen if it has been decided that the best thing for a child is to be adopted, but even after trying hard a family can't be found that can take their siblings as well?

The group knew very well that it is often extremely hard, or not possible, to find a family able and willing to take siblings together, especially if there are more than two siblings. We asked them what they thought should happen if after trying to find a family to take siblings together, this was simply not possible. Again, we asked the group members to vote in confidence on this question.

Both the members of the group, and the children who sent in their views separately, were divided on what should happen. The overall view was slightly more in favour of adopting children on their own if a family cannot be found able to take siblings together, rather than keeping siblings together by not adopting any of them. Six voted that if a family to take siblings together cannot be found, then the children should be adopted on their own, even if it means separating siblings. Four voted that if a family able to take the siblings together cannot be found, then the siblings should be kept together even if it means they don't get adopted. Others told us they didn't know what should happen in this situation.

Voting on this question again led to much discussion. In favour of keeping siblings together, even if it means that they cannot be adopted, young people told us that the bonds between siblings are different to other relationships and can be very tight. Speaking from experience many of the young people said it was difficult when siblings were adopted separately from other siblings. "sibling bonds are more powerful than parents because they are siblings"; "I cried when I had to leave and so did my brothers and sisters".

The other main reason given for keeping siblings together was about the difficult situation where one sibling gets adopted and another doesn't; "the one not getting adopted will think why not me!".

One young person told us that being adopted separately from their sibling, who had been adopted by a different family, had worked for them. They were still able to see each other, but this was possible in their case because the two sets of adoptive parents were already close friends with each other.

Those who were not able to answer this question either way told us they were torn over the difficult choice between getting adopted and living with your siblings. As one summed it up; "on one hand you want to be with your siblings but you also want a family – the choice is too hard".

What rules should the Government make about whether or not siblings should be adopted together?

Before moving on to voting on and discussing proposals that have been made to the government for changes in the law, we asked our group what rules they themselves thought the government should make about whether or not siblings should be adopted together.

Three rules came from the children and young people in this discussion:

- Keep the child's best interests at heart
- Decisions on who should be put forward for adoption shouldn't be made by social workers alone
- The decision should be made by experienced workers who have a lot of information about the family, and not by workers who are inexperienced or new to the family.

One young person described how the different views of different social workers working with different members of their family had led to themselves being put up for adoption, while their younger sibling was left living with their mother – which had not worked and that sibling was later adopted by a different family altogether. The young person believed that if one worker had made decisions about putting the siblings forward for adoption at the same time, they would probably not have been separated.

What sorts of families might be able to adopt two or more siblings together?

We had already discussed how difficult it can be to find families able to adopt more than one sibling. We asked the children and young people whether

they had any ideas about what sorts of families might be recruited to take siblings together. Here are their thoughts:

- Families with enough money and resources to take more than one sibling
- Families with a large enough house
- Families who do not have any children of their own
- Families who have a number of children of their own who are now much older
- Families with enough time to take on more than one child, so that they "don't bite off more than they can chew"
- Families with enough resources to be "someone that can give the whole package not just love and support".

One young person thought that families who seem able to take more than one sibling might still prove unable to cope in the event; "you can't really say though, beforehand they might be perfect but once they have the children it could be a different story, you just don't know how some people will cope".

Children's views on possible changes to the law about adopting siblings together

We went on to ask the children to vote on, and then discuss, some options for changes in the law that are being considered by the government.

Should the law should be changed to say that if there are brothers or sisters, adopting them together must ALWAYS be considered.

The majority vote of both the group and those who sent their votes in separately (ten votes for with one against) was that yes, the law should be changed to say that if there are brothers or sisters, adopting them together must always be considered.

Two main points were made in discussion on this. One was the point, already made, that it is important to consider placing siblings together so that each one does not have to face the adoption process alone.

The other main point was that the children thought **the law should say that adopting siblings together should always be considered, but that did not automatically mean it is always right.** Sometimes considering it might lead to a decision that placing siblings together is not right. The important thing was

that there should always be a consideration about whether placing siblings together is the right or the wrong thing to do in each case.

One young person said he did not think being placed separately from his brother had mattered much, so it was not that important for them, although it had needed consideration. "I don't think it makes a difference me and my brother had a different experience. At the end of the day we all have different feelings and experience things differently."

Another young person told us that placing siblings together should definitely be considered, but may not be the right thing to do if the one of the siblings had got into the role of looking after the others; "I used to look after my brothers and sisters, then when we were placed together I was on edge worrying about them all the time, like at the park and things in case they hurt themselves". As we have already heard, though, another young person saw one sibling being able to look after other siblings as a good argument for siblings being adopted together.

If siblings are not adopted together, how important is it that they keep in contact with each other?

Given that siblings will often be separated on adoption, we asked the group to vote confidentially on how important it is for siblings who are not adopted together to stay in contact with each other. We also had votes on this sent in by the children who gave us their views separately.

Almost all children thought it was important for siblings separated through adoption to stay in contact. "It matters that they have contact when they are separated". Twelve children voted that it is important or very important that siblings separated on adoption do stay in contact. None voted that it was definitely not important, though one said they were 'in the middle'.

The group also advised that contact should be kept up, even if not frequent, to keep open the option for siblings to have more contact with each other when they are adults. If contact has been completely lost in childhood, this option would be lost. One member of the group was approaching adulthood had been told that her siblings wanted to get in touch with her again once she was 18, but there had been no contact during childhood, and the thought was now daunting. "Those people are strangers, if I'd had contact it might have been easier."

Overall, the group thought that children need to know who their siblings are, and to have some contact, even a small amount and even if it is 'letterbox contact' rather than visits or direct messages, to keep up to date with

members of their birth families until they become adults.

The view was also given that even where there is a wide age gap between siblings who have been adopted separately, it is important for their future, and for the decisions they may want to make about contact as adults, that they are kept up with their 'family news' by exchanging information during their childhoods.

Children who sent their views in to us also agreed that it is important to stay in touch because siblings may want their contact in the future. They also said that it is important for siblings to stay in touch if they have already grown up together for part of their lives, to keep contact so they don't worry about what is happening to siblings they have known, and also just because it is usually enjoyable to have contact with your siblings.

The group discussed whether adoptive parents should be able to stop sibling contact if they thought that was best for their adopted child. On a show of hands this time (the vote was proposed by the children rather than being a question prepared by our team for an electronic vote), seven thought that the law should say that adoptive parents should be able to stop contact with siblings, and two voted that they should not be allowed to stop contact.

What would be GOOD contact arrangements with their siblings for someone who has been adopted separately from them?

Contact can happen in many different ways, and we asked our group of adopted children and young people what they thought would make good, and bad, contact arrangements between siblings separated through adoption.

Good contact is regular contact – it can be weekly, fortnightly or monthly, whatever is appropriate for individuals.

Personal contact by visiting does depend very much though on where brothers and sisters live, and how long it takes to travel there. If they live far away from each other, then telephoning, writing or social networking sites and Skype would be good. Some thought that electronic contact can be good, others that it has its own problems – for example, it is not good at dealing with conflicts that start in electronic communications, and you do not always know for certain that an email you receive is actually from the person it says it is from.

One person said that visiting and electronic contacts should not be seen as an 'either / or', but should be used together. Meetings or visits should happen when they can be managed, with electronic contacts in between.

Bad contact is contact that is more frequent than the children want – it is important that contact is as frequent and in a way that each sibling wants, and it can be as wrong to have lots of visits when letters say three times a year would suit everyone, as to lose contact when you wanted to stay in touch. One person said that contact can be bad if it is too frequent – siblings can need contact with each other, but not always so often that they might make each other angry.

Children who sent in their views added that a bad contact experience is contact that gets cancelled, or contact by letters or electronic messages where the other person doesn't respond.

Should the law be changed to say that children should usually not have contact with their birth parents, unless the council thinks contact would be in the child's best interests?

Adding together the electronic votes of the children in our group with those of the children who sent their views in to us separately, **more children supported this proposal than opposed it (by six votes to two), but five voted that they were not sure about this.**

Adoption and other options

Our final confidential voting question for our group of adopted children and young people was to ask them to consider adoption against other placement options, by voting on whether or not they supported each of a series of statements. Adding together the votes of both our group and those who sent their views in separately:

Eleven children voted that it is usually better to be adopted than to stay in care.

Each of the following was supported by nine children;

it is usually better to be placed in a family than in a children's home

adoption, fostering and a children's home should all be considered for every child who can't stay with their family

every child who can't stay with their birth family should be adopted if possible.

Eight children voted that it is usually better to be adopted than long term fostered.

Because all these views came to us from children and young people who had been adopted, and we have not got the views on these statements of children and young people in care who have not been adopted, we plan to ask each of these questions of children in care and in different sorts of care placements as part of our next annual Children's Care Monitor survey. We will publish the results next spring.

Children's views on contact with parents

In our second group, we asked the children to vote on, and discuss, questions to do with children in care keeping in contact with their birth parents. This group of children in care (and some care leavers) were looking at contact for children in care generally, not for children who had been adopted, and were looking at contact with parents rather than with siblings.

How important is it for children in care to keep in contact with their birth parents?

We asked children to vote confidentially on this question. The majority voted that it is important or very important for children in care to keep in contact with their birth parents. A third said they were 'in the middle' on this question, but none voted that it was either not very important or didn't matter at all.

If you are a child in care, what are the good things about keeping in contact with your birth parents?

In discussion following this vote, we asked the group to tell us what they thought were the good things about keeping in contact with their birth parents. We did not make any suggestions ourselves.

The group told us there were two main good things about keeping in touch with parents.

1. Keeping in touch with parents can help to maintain some sort of relationship that will make it easier to renew contact should young people want to in the future - for example after 18 when they have left care or when they are getting married.

2. Not having contact with parents could mess up a placement. Being in

foster care isn't the same as being with your family and young people miss their family. If they don't get to see them, it could break up the placement. "you miss them being in foster care and that could mess up your placement because you'll end up pissed at people".

The other good things we were told about keeping in contact with birth parents were:

- It keeps you in touch with your culture
- It means you know who your 'real' parents are
- It helps people find out important information from family history eg health problems
- Contact with parents provides a route to contact with brothers and sisters.

One young person said "Just because you can't live with them they are still your parents. It's not their fault that they can't cope with you".

If you are a child in care, what are the bad things about keeping in contact with your birth parents?

As always, we asked children to tell us any bad points as well as good points. The bad things members of the group and those who sent in their views separately told us about keeping in contact with birth parents were:

- It could stop people settling into a foster placement
- If a parent has bad habits such as being a drug addict then that could have a bad influence on young people; "might follow the wrong path"
- Keeping in contact may lead social care services to send you back to live with your parents
- "Saying goodbye gets more and more upsetting".

What is main point of keeping a child in contact with their birth parents when they are no longer living with them?

We asked the group to tell us what they thought is the one main point of local authorities trying to keep children in care in contact with their parents.

The group told us there were two main points to keeping in contact:

1. **Children in care need to know who their parents are.** Most of the young people agreed that this is a clear need for children and young people, and also for themselves when they become adults. There were also lots of circumstances when growing up where people would ask "who are your parents?" They felt they needed to know so they could confidently answer the question.
2. **The blood bond is like no other** – the group agreed that this bond is important and it didn't matter what their parents had done. There is an especially important bond between mothers and children; "there'll always be a bond be a bond with your mum, she gave birth to you".

One young person in care summed this up for the whole group; "No matter what they have done to you, they are still your parents".

Is it sometimes wrong to try to keep a child in care in contact with their birth parents?

Next we asked whether there are sometimes good reasons for stopping contact for a child in care with their birth parents, which would make it wrong to keep them in contact.

The two main points raised were:

1. "if they are a negative influence or bad role model" - drug addiction was given as an example. The risk may not so much be contact with a parent who has a drug dependency, although that was part of it, but contact is very likely to lead to contact with the drug users the parents know.
2. if contact isn't wanted by either the child or parent.

The group then raised a point that we had already heard from the adoption group when that group was talking about contact with siblings. The group of those in care said that even if child or parent didn't want contact with their birth parents at the moment, [the option of contact again in the future should always be kept open](#), and this might mean a little contact being kept up; "the option should always be there. Young people might not know they want it or might want contact later".

At the moment the law says that social care services must help every child in care to keep in contact with their birth parents – unless it is not safe for them or is not in their best interests.

The Advisor's advice to the government is that this needs to be reconsidered, so we asked the children in our group for their views about what the law currently says, before asking them to vote confidentially on whether the law should stay the same or be changed to either of two other alternatives.

There was a lot of discussion on this, and four major points were made:

1. [not all the children knew that the law actually says that social care services must help children keep in contact with their birth parents unless it is not safe or is not in their best interests](#) – three out of ten in the group did not know the law said this.
2. [the legal requirement for social care services to help children in care keep in contact with their birth parents is not being carried out for everyone](#) – some in the group told us that this law was not being applied in their cases, and that they did not think this had anything to do with their safety or best interests.

3. **the term 'best interests' is not clear enough** – members of the group said that a risk to safety is clear enough, but on their 'best interests' their social workers were sometimes using this as an excuse for not trying to keep children in contact with their birth parents.
4. **sometimes contact is stopped for reasons that are nothing to do with safety or best interests** – two in our group told us that they had been stopped from having contact with their parents as a punishment ("they said ... you can't see your family because you were naughty"), and others said that foster carers had stopped contact because they didn't like the children's birth parents; "probably because the parents aren't up to the foster carers standards but it's not their choice though".

They group all agreed that if safety was an issue then it would be in the child's best interests not to have contact. But, they were concerned about who should be able to decide whether contact was in a child's best interests when there were no safety risks. Some thought that social workers were simply taking the easy option and preventing contact instead of making sure contact is safe. "Social workers have a preventative mind-set. They may try to stop something rather than seeing how it can happen. They take the easy way out". "Social workers don't know what it feels like to have parents like that. I always look after mum and need to look after her but they took me away! We know what's in our best interests".

The general view of the group was that social workers do not usually work hard to keep contact going, but that they will placate children if they ask for contact. Some in the group thought that having contact with your birth parents should be a right for a child, unless there is a risk to safety; "you should have a sense of freedom to see your parents".

We heard that sometimes not seeing parents was more harmful than seeing them. Social workers might see stopping contact as keeping children safe but if they don't see their parents then they won't be happy and if they aren't happy then they will react and get into other things which could be just as unsafe. As one member of the group put this; "they might say it's to keep you safe but if you're not happy you aren't safe because you'll react and get into other things".

In conclusion the group agreed that social workers and carers needed to be more united to get contact happening; "more unity between social workers and foster carers".

Having discussed the current law on contact, where we received and recorded the children's views but expressed none of our own, we put three options from the government's consultation document to a confidential vote of the group. We asked each member of the group to vote on which option they

thought should be the law in the future. These three options, and the number of group members voting for each, were:

'Social care services must help every child in care to keep in contact with their birth parents unless that is not safe for them or is not in their best interests'

Supported by six members of the group

'Social care services do not have to help every child in care to keep in contact with their birth parents – it is up to social care services to decide for each child whether or not this is the right thing to do'

Supported by two members of the group

'Social care services should only consider making contact arrangements for a child in care if keeping in contact with their birth parents is something their care plan says they need'

Supported by two members of the group.

Overall therefore, the majority of the children's consultation group supported the law not being changed, and continuing to say that social care services must help every child in care to keep in contact with their birth parents unless it is not safe or is against the child's best interests.

Having made their votes, the children who had supported keeping the law the same as it is now added that it was also important that all children in care are told that this is what the law says, that social care services are clearer about deciding what is in each child's best interests, and that what the law says is actually always carried out.

It has been proposed that to make things easier for very young children, contact visits with birth parents for children aged under two should be kept to no more than 2 or 3 three sessions a week of no more than 2 hours each.

This was another proposal being considered by the government. Again, we asked the group to vote confidentially on this proposal.

There was no agreement in the children's group on whether contact visits should be limited for children under two. Four members of the group voted that they agreed with this proposal and four that they didn't agree, with two not sure.

The group discussed the reasons for voting for or against this proposal. Some thought that if a child under two is in care then there must be something seriously wrong so contact should be kept to a minimum.

Another concern was that small children form strong attachments, and if there is going to be a break up between the child and their parents, this would be harder for the child if they had formed a strong attachment. Therefore keeping contact to a minimum was a safety net.

On the other hand, some young people talked about their very young siblings and how difficult they had found it when contact sessions with their birth parents came to an end. Younger children had got far more upset as they didn't have the same understanding as older children.

The overall view of the group was that the frequency and amount of contact should depend on the long term plans for the child. If adoption was the plan then contact should be minimal. If there was a chance they could go back to their parents then they needed to know them and stay in touch with them.

One view on the difference needed between children in care and children who are to be adopted was that "there should be a different rule for young people in adoption and care. In care there's a chance they will go back to parents".

For children of any age, should contact visits with birth parents be less if the child gets upset by them?

The government consultation documents raise the issue of children in care getting upset when they have contact with their birth parents. As members of the group had direct personal experience of contact, we asked them to give a confidential view on this using the electronic pads, and then to discuss the issue more widely.

Half the children in our group (five) voted that contact visits with birth parents should be less if the child gets upset by them. Only two however voted that they should not get less – the others were not sure.

Is contact with birth parents often upsetting?

In discussion on this, members of our group made the following points:

- **You are upset because you've missed them** - when young people don't see their parents for a while it is upsetting when they first meet them again because they have missed each other. Young people return from a visit and can be upset. This isn't necessarily because of the visit itself but that the visit has come to an end. Sometimes workers misinterpret this and reduce contact on the basis that it is too upsetting for young people when in fact if contact was more frequent

there would be less upset. "When you come back you're upset and they think you're getting depressed and want to cut it because you are upset but it's because you don't see your parents often enough".

- **It depends what kind of relationship you have** - "depends how close you are. It can be difficult if you've been neglected or kicked out of the house".
- **A child might be upset because they do not want contact** – if a child has never had the experience of living with their birth parents then they might not necessarily want contact and then contact could be upsetting.
- **You can't make any rules on this – it just depends on the individual** - everyone has a different experience, and the same person's experience can change; "just because you are upset one time doesn't mean next time will be".

What should happen if a child is upset by that contact?

We also asked what social workers and carers should do if a child is clearly upset by a contact with their birth parents.

The general view was that if a child is upset by contact, an effort should be made to find out the reason before making any decisions about future contact; "if a young person come back and is upset the carers should find out why". If a child keeps on coming back upset from every contact they have, then it is even more important to get to the bottom of the problem and deal with it. But the group were very clear that this didn't mean that contact should simply be stopped.

The suggestion was made that if a decision is made to reduce contact between a child and their birth parent, this should be done gradually and the child or young person should know and understand why. "Contact shouldn't just go down, you need to know the reason".

One young person repeated that every contact was upsetting but for no other reason than missing their parents and wanting to be with them. "Every single time is going to be upsetting so why should it stop?"

Do Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) need to do more to check on contact arrangements for each child in care?

The government consultation raises the question of whether Independent Reviewing Officers should be more involved in checking on children's contact arrangements and that what the law says is being carried out for them. We took a confidential vote and [the great majority of the group voted that IROs do need to do more to check on contact arrangements for each child in care](#). Seven members of the group voted for this, and only one against.

What would make good contact arrangements for children in care with their birth parents?

Just as we had asked our adoption group what they thought made for good or bad contact arrangements with siblings, we asked our care group to tell us what made good or bad contact arrangements with birth parents.

[Two things made for good contact with birth parents – first was to be able to go and stay overnight with the family. Second was to have contact in a mutually convenient place.](#) This would be somewhere nice where progress with the relationship could be made, without someone watching all the time and not in an office building. The best places for contact of course depended on what suited the individual. For some, good contact was going somewhere to do an activity together.

What would make bad contact arrangements for children in care with their birth parents?

When we asked what made for bad contact arrangements, the group told us of three factors that make contact bad:

1. [Contact in a foster parents home is bad](#) – it can make both parents and foster carers feel uncomfortable
2. [Supervision of contact is bad](#) - "there were observers there and we couldn't speak freely. There was one person to the left and one to the right", "someone sitting in the corner taking notes"
3. [If the relationship deteriorates after a visit.](#)

One of the two children who sent us their views on this separately described their own experience of bad contact as sitting boringly a long time in one room.

How good are social media (like Facebook, texting, Skype) as ways of keeping in contact with birth parents?

Nowadays people can keep in contact electronically, as well as, or instead of, visits. We asked our contact group of children and young people in care to vote on how good they thought social media such as Facebook, texting or Skype (contact via video calls on a computer) are as ways to keep in contact with parents.

Half the children said that that social media or electronic contact were not much good or no good at all as ways to keep in touch with parents. Five children said this, compared with three who thought they were very good ways to keep in contact.

In discussion, the following reasons were given for saying that electronic contact is not a good way to keep in touch with birth parents:

- **Lack of privacy** - "they aren't private enough, anyone can see what you type"
- **Children are often not allowed access to electronic communication** - "social workers won't let us have access because they think I'll contact my siblings"
- **Not ways of communicating used by parents** - "my parents don't even know how to use Facebook and never have any credit on their phone"
- **Electronic communications can be a bad influence** - "they're not good, can put things in young people's heads – broken promises are really bad things"
- **Electronic communication is superficial** - "it's a superficial way of having a relationship".

One of the children who sent their views to us separately said that electronic communications could be difficult if a child and their parent developed a problem in their relationship.

Who should have the biggest say in decisions about contact between a child in care and their birth parents?

Our last question was to find out who the members of our children in care group thought should have the biggest say in decisions about a child's contact with their birth parents. We asked this using our electronic voting pads for a confidential vote, and children could vote for as many as they wanted (though we asked them to vote for only three and not to vote for everyone on the list).

In order, the people members of the group thought should have the biggest say in decisions about contact with birth parents were:

The child (9 votes)

The birth parents (7 votes)

The social worker (5 votes)

The Independent Reviewing Officer (3 votes)

A court (3 votes)

The carers currently looking after the child (2 votes)

Last word

Finally, these quotes from children show just how complicated these issues can be:

“I hate the thought of children being separated since they have already been separated from their mum and dad but at least they would be getting a family but would not be fair if the sibling did not get a family at the same time.”

“This is very complicated. Sometimes I don’t want birth family to have anything to do with me - they let me down. But contact is very important - I want to know that birth parents are OK and that they think about me. They make me very angry. We write but they continue to let me down by not replying.”