

Speech: Social care commentary: children's homes

Today, I want to talk about the children living in children's homes. While the majority of children looked after live in foster placements, around one in 12 children live in children's homes. Too often, children's homes do not get the recognition they deserve for the significant role they play in some children's lives. For some children, residential care is a positive option and it should be seen as such. Did you know that our latest statistics show that 82% of children's homes are good or outstanding? It might not grab the headlines, but it is a real achievement by the sector.

Each child has a unique set of circumstances, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach to caring for them. Some of these children will struggle to communicate easily with others, understand their own feelings or needs, or manage relationships and situations well. For some children, this will be due to a disability or living with autism. Others will have suffered trauma or abuse, often for many years, and may be angry, confused or withdrawn. I realise how challenging this can be for the adults caring for them. I am under no illusion that this is easy work but I equally know how rewarding it can be. All children need a sense of belonging and someone who is 'in their corner'.

For some children, sadly, the very issues that make them vulnerable and most in need of our help and support can prove to be a barrier to finding a placement. All directors of children's services will have at times seen, as I have, social workers wringing their hands as they struggle to find a home that will take on a 'hard-to-place' child.

I've also heard that for some homes, fear of a negative Ofsted judgement can be a factor in their reluctance to take on these children. I'm sure this is a minority, but this misplaced fear should never determine whether or not a placement is offered. Homes can care effectively for children – however complex their needs – and at the same time be rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. Indeed, the proportion of children's homes we have judged to be good or better is at a 5-year high. These homes do exceptional work with some of the most vulnerable children.

I don't want to focus on the role of local authorities in securing suitable placements here, although clearly how they approach commissioning placements is an important part of the picture. In this commentary, I want to discuss what the very best children's homes are doing to help and support these children and share the excellent practice we have found. These are homes that have staff with the knowledge, skills and determination in place to help these children. And their Ofsted judgements reflect that.

I will also identify some of the issues that homes typically find most challenging and how they best deal with them. This includes:

- supporting children with their behaviour
- child sexual exploitation
- children who go missing
- supporting children with autism and disabilities

Responding to the challenges

Children placed in residential care are sometimes frightened and angry. They could have had several unsuccessful placements previously, or be hurt and upset at being made to live away from family and friends. They may have other problems associated with trauma that they need help and support to address.

We know that even in the best homes, residential staff have to deal with incredibly difficult and challenging situations at times. They could be subject to physical violence, verbal abuse or have to step in to prevent self-harm, assaults, or serious damage to property. Usually, police involvement is a last resort. We rarely see homes inappropriately calling the police. When we do, we take action if we need to. Involving the police is prompted by the most serious behaviour, such as fire setting or use of weapons, and only after staff have been unable to de-escalate a situation themselves.

For staff, finding ways to help children manage their emotions in a constructive way is one of the many challenges of the job. All of our behaviour is a form of communication and children are no different. Their behaviour may be a result of what other adults have done to them or because they have a disability that means they find it hard to communicate their feelings.

For many children, testing adults or boundaries or doing risky things can be as a result of low self-esteem or because the children don't care what happens to them. The best children's homes:

- recognise why children are doing what they are doing
- respond with empathy
- support children to regulate their own behaviour, so physical interventions are rare

Having effective matching processes for referrals and planned moves into the home is vital. Homes that do this well make sure that:

- placements are suited from the get-go and have the best chance of succeeding. This secures the ongoing stability of the home for the other children living there
- staff use clear and simple risk assessments and regularly review care and behaviour management plans. This means that they know their children really well and understand their particular needs

As I said in [my June 2016 commentary](#), the importance of good leadership in children's social care can't be overstated. Children's homes are no exception. In the very best homes, we see inspirational leaders who set high standards. In turn, their staff are dedicated professionals whose skill,

enthusiasm and understanding make them excellent role models for children. These staff:

- provide consistent care and measured approaches
- demonstrate tolerance and respect for everyone
- importantly, stick with children when they try to push them away

As we saw in one home in Yorkshire, children learn from the positive example staff set. Children then make good progress in tempering and managing how they react and respond to life. There is genuine affection between staff and children in this home, which is pleasing to see. I believe that the best staff build meaningful relationships with children and that this is the key to their success.

Homes have the most success when they provide clear and consistent boundaries combined with incentives and rewards for children's progress and achievements. In these homes:

- children are helped to understand and regulate their emotions
- negative incidents are reduced and those that do occur are managed well, respecting the child and their rights
- children are involved in their own care planning and, as inspectors saw in some homes, allowed to determine the rewards used. This helps children to feel invested in the home. But it also encourages continued positive behaviour as well as promoting confidence and self-esteem

In one of the homes we saw, children described the response of adults to unwanted behaviour as 'honest and fair'. One child told inspectors, 'I have a positive box and I can choose treats from it. I am doing really well here. I feel settled.'

It would be too much to expect children to live together in harmony all the time. But when disagreements and arguments inevitably occur, the best homes use a restorative approach to help children understand how they impact on each other. This:

- teaches them the benefits of treating one another with warmth and respect
- allows them to explore the reasons behind their behaviour
- helps repair relationships

Staff in good or better homes are specifically trained in understanding cycles of behaviour. This helps them to act effectively when young people don't respond well to life in the home. In one East Midlands home, a member of staff commented on this process, stating 'it is good to be able to reflect'. I don't think you can underestimate how important it is for the adults working with children to have time to think about their practice. When you combine good quality training with supervision and other support structures, staff are better able to meet the needs of young people. Some homes also use the skills and expertise of other professionals such as clinical psychologists, psychiatrists and speech and language therapists to guide practice and support both children and staff to good effect.

Children at risk of child sexual exploitation

So high profile is the issue of child sexual exploitation that many homes are now well aware of the issues, are alert to the risks and have strong protocols and procedures in place to deal with and prevent it. However, as Ofsted has said before in the [thematic report about the sexual exploitation of children](#), this in itself is not enough to protect children vulnerable from the threat of exploitation.

Homes that really excel in this area take a holistic approach to protecting children. Multi-agency working is pivotal. Leaders and staff work proactively with local police and safeguarding agencies, as well as other homes in the area, so they are fully aware of potential risks to young people in the community. This approach means there is a cohesive and uniform response to local risks.

The best places know how to balance risk with their responsibility to encourage safe growth. One home in the West Midlands exemplifies this. Here:

- comprehensive, bespoke risk assessments provide safeguards, while allowing children to take some managed risks
- staff understand children's specific vulnerabilities and how these impact on their daily lives, while also being responsive to their changing needs

Children tell us they value this kind of individual planning and the sense of stability and clear boundaries it provides. This is enhanced when children are given genuine involvement in their own care: a common factor across all good and outstanding homes.

Effective education is vital. In the best homes, staff explore young people's understanding about appropriate relationships, sexual health and online safety. Inspectors have been impressed by the inventive and creative approaches used. For example, a home that we saw in the North East used a variety of different media, such as videos, quizzes, computer animations and other visual aids to enhance young people's understanding of the risks.

Staff in the best places are highly trained both to support young people and to recognise the warning signs. In the East Midlands, one home used support and training from external specialist organisations to enable staff to deliver this work to a high standard.

Children who go missing

Not all children who live in children's homes go missing. This is another misconception about residential care. But children who frequently do go missing pose one of the biggest challenges to homes. For the child, an episode may stem from the most understandable of circumstances, like wanting desperately to be with friends or family. For adolescents especially, testing boundaries and yearning for greater freedoms and new experiences are natural. And while anyone could empathise with what are normal teenage feelings,

children in care are of course more vulnerable and at greater risk of coming to harm. For staff, getting their response right is no easy task.

In the best homes, we see:

- staff focusing their time and energy on finding the missing child
- a good understanding of the children and their individual needs, so they are usually able to locate them quickly
- agreed strategies in place to deal with missing episodes
- close work and coordination with families, police and other agencies

And then, importantly, staff work proactively with children to support them and ensure that they understand the risks of repeatedly going missing. Effective education, again, is vital. Some homes use innovative ways of engaging with young people to help keep them safe. We saw an excellent example of effective, bespoke education from one home in the North West. They used a documentary on gang affiliation to help children understand dangers that are particularly relevant to them.

A staff member told us: 'I speak to [the children] as grown-ups and I try to help them through the transition from boys to men. I want to give them a good platform in life.' This level of passion and compassion ensures that the young people living at the home feel valued and receive the appropriate guidance.

What makes the difference in these places is that that staff are genuinely interested in understanding why children have gone missing and thinking about what they can do to make children want to return to the home. Again, this is why building trusting relationships is so important.

Children with autism or complex disabilities

Many homes specialise in caring for children with autistic spectrum disorder or other complex disabilities, and do so very well. This group of children has unique needs, so specialist training and expertise are essential to ensure that children achieve the very best outcomes.

Those homes doing particularly well first and foremost ensure that placements are stable. Staff in the best homes:

- have an in-depth understanding of children's needs
- are nurturing
- show emotional warmth towards children

Children come to trust staff and have a strong sense of belonging. These placements are usually long-lasting, which can help children to make good progress across all aspects of their development.

Care plans that are bespoke, detailed and influenced by young people prove most effective. These allow for clear strategies to manage any challenging behaviours. Working closely with occupational therapists and therapeutic services, staff in the best homes are able to identify and plan each child's

unique sensory strategies. This approach helps to lessen the frustration and anxiety that young people experience. In turn, this reduces physical interventions and unwanted incidents.

Excellent multi-agency assessments ensure that children's complex needs are understood and met. In one North West home, inspectors saw truly comprehensive multi-professional assessments that produce individual strategies to help young people regulate their emotional health. They are closely followed in practice. For example, staff use individual sensory stimuli such as weighted jackets or beanbags to act as a calming measure and to increase children's feelings of security.

Proactive healthcare arrangements help children to access the right kind of support. Another home we saw gave each child a 'healthcare passport', detailing their communicative abilities and likes and dislikes. This means that health professionals can get the right information from children during appointments and offer appropriate treatment or advice in a way they understand.

Good and outstanding homes also understand the value of maintaining relationships with families. They seek to involve them in children's care at every opportunity. Staff at the best homes facilitate regular contact with families, irrespective of the distance to travel.

Preparing children for independence and the next stage in their lives is key. The best places don't allow disability to be a barrier to accessing opportunities and broadening experiences. A number of homes forge excellent links with the community, allowing young people to develop their social and life skills. In one home in the South East, staff make good use of local resources to meet young people's specific needs:

- a nearby hairdresser allows extra time to cut the hair of children who are anxious
- the charity shop saves dresses for a child who likes to dress up
- the supermarket offers support for young people who are learning to shop independently

These may seem simple steps, but they make a huge and positive difference to children's experiences.

Emergency placements

While a well-planned placement usually has the most chance of succeeding, some emergency placements will always be necessary. I know from my previous experience how we all try to avoid these emergencies, but sometimes things happen. Whether this is due to a sudden breakdown of a previous placement or other unforeseen events such as a parent being taken to hospital, staff in the best homes are well equipped to manage them.

Any child placed in an emergency will be experiencing difficult circumstances. They are likely to feel extremely vulnerable, anxious or distressed. Homes providing this kind of immediate support ensure that they

offer a warm and welcoming environment right from the start. Friendly staff are skilled at engaging quickly with young people. This reassures them and helps them feel safe and settled, as well as helping staff gain their trust. Staff can then better understand the child and their particular needs.

One young person we spoke to said, '[Name of the member of staff] is really good at what she does. She's supportive and a really good listener. She actually cares and can get people to listen to her because she doesn't talk rubbish or lie to you. You get it straight.'

A calm approach from staff enables them to respond to challenges well, reducing the chance of incidents escalating and becoming more serious.

Role of inspection

The very best homes know which children they can work with, and do so. They are equally strong in saying when they are not able to help a child. But as I mentioned above, we sometimes hear of homes using Ofsted and our inspection judgements as a reason for not taking on certain children. I hope that, as with so many things, this is not the case. I suspect that homes that are sufficiently confident in what they do well do not hide behind inspection but learn from it. I do not want inspection to get in the way of children getting the best possible care. And if we are getting in the way, I want to hear about it.

My aim in this commentary is to offer some reassurance that it is possible for homes to support 'hard-to-place' children and still achieve a good or better inspection outcome. If inspectors see that proper support is put in place for a child, then homes have nothing to fear from Ofsted. We understand that some children will continue to go missing and be involved in risky situations, despite all best efforts. Change doesn't happen overnight.

We do however, rightly, expect children to make progress and have positive experiences that contribute to that progress, however slight. But this process is complex, individual to each child and certainly not always linear. This is something inspectors take into account. Of course not all challenges can be overcome, but we do want to see residential homes doing all they can to make a difference and improve children's lives. There are so many places that are doing this brilliantly. I hope others will learn from their example.

[News story: Regional Flood and Coastal Committee \(RFCC\) chair appointments](#)

Following a recruitment campaign for four [Regional Flood and Coastal Committee \(RFCC\)](#) posts – Anglian (Central), Anglia (Eastern), Severn and Wye

and Southern – the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is pleased to announce the following four RFCC Chair appointments:

- Brian West Stewart as the Chair of the Anglian (Central) RFCC
- Paul Hayden as the Chair of the Anglian (Eastern) RFCC
- Shirel Stedman as the Chair of Severn and Wye RFCC
- Dr Martin Hurst as the Chair of Southern RFCC

Brian West Stewart's appointment runs from 2 January 2018 for three years until 1 January 2021.

The remaining appointments will run from 1 July 2018 for three years until 30 June 2021.

We have also re-appointed four RFCC Chairs for a further three years from when their current terms end on 30 June 2018:

- Eddy Poll as the Chair of Anglian (Northern) RFCC
- Vij Randeniya as the Chair of Trent RFCC
- David Jenkins as the Chair of Wessex RFCC
- Colin Mellors as the Chair of Yorkshire RFCC

Their terms will continue to run from 1 July 2018 until 30 June 2021.

All the appointments followed procedures set out in the [Ministerial Governance Code for Public Appointments](#) which came into force on 1 January 2017. There is a requirement for appointees' political activity (if significant) to be declared. None of the appointees for Anglian Central, Anglian Eastern, Severn & Wye and Southern have declared any significant political activity during the past five years.

RFCCs help to provide governance for the [Environment Agency \(EA\)](#) Flood and Coastal Erosion risk management functions and cover all flood risks that are not the responsibility of the water companies.

They have three main purposes:

- to ensure there are coherent plans for identifying, communicating and managing flood and coastal erosion risks across catchments and shorelines
- to promote efficient, targeted and risk-based investment in flood and coastal erosion risk management that optimises value for money and benefits for local communities
- to provide a link between the EA, Lead Local Flood Authorities, other risk management authorities, and other relevant bodies to engender mutual understanding of flood and coastal erosion risks in its area

All Chair posts attract a remuneration currently set at £17,503 for a commitment of five days per month.

Background details of the four appointed RFCC Chairs for Anglian Central, Anglian Eastern, Severn & Wye and Southern are as follows:

ANGLIAN (CENTRAL) RFCC

Brian Stewart OBE is now a portfolio non-executive director and consultant, following an executive career in local and regional government. From 2000 to 2010 he was the Chief Executive of the East of England Regional Assembly. He now sits on the main Board of Clarion Housing Group and is Vice Chair of its subsidiary stock holding Housing Association. He also chairs the Sizewell C Community Forum, sits on the HS2 Need to Sell Scheme Panel and is Vice Chair of Ormiston Families; a major East Anglian children's charity.

ANGLIAN (EASTERN) RFCC

Paul Hayden has been the Chair of the Anglian (Eastern) RFCC since its inception in 2011, working with stakeholders to maximise the opportunities for local decision-making and partnership working. He is a disaster risk reduction and management specialist by background, with 38 years' experience including 15 years working at an international level where he has specialised in natural hazards and climate change related projects. He led national coordination of rescue responses during the 2007 floods and subsequently sat on the Cabinet Committee formed to oversee implementation of the "Pitt Review" recommendations. He was also appointed by Defra to boards responsible for establishment of the Flood Forecasting Centre and delivery of the Flood Rescue National Enhancement Project. In addition to his RFCC and consultancy roles, Paul is a Non-Executive Director of the UK's Natural Environment Research Council, (NERC). He is a contributory author to the World Handbook on Drowning, and is a visiting lecturer at University College London and University of Mauritius. He was appointed as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in the New Year 2018 Honours list and was awarded the Queens Fire Service Medal in the New Year 2010 Honours List. He has an MA in Management and Public Administration, and an MSc in Fire Command and Disaster Management.

SEVERN AND WYE RFCC

Shirel Stedman is currently the Director of Advisory Group, Water Europe at Royal HaskoningDHV providing strategic direction and driving commercial acumen to the group. Early in Shirel's career, she trained as a paramedic in the Army establishing core values of collaboration and compassion. Shirel is a leading Civil Engineer within the UK water industry, and has a reputation that has been established over 25 years in this sector. Shirel first joined the Midlands Regional Flood and Defence Committee (RFDC) in 2008 and has continuously served until the present day. She was the Director of Central and Local Government Partnerships at AECOM, responsible for forming teams of technical, managerial and business development staff for a variety of short-term projects for a range of clients and sectors. Shirel has significant experience within the Midlands and was a Project Director for key Midlands region flood alleviation schemes. Between 2006 and 2009, she worked as a Resources Director at Halcrow and was responsible for over 500 staff. During this time she won a commendation from South Derbyshire MP Mark Todd for her work with communities on the River Dove Strategy. Shirel has been a board member of Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management and was

appointed as the institutions first Managing Director in January 2016. Shirel is a member of the Engineering Council, the Institution of Civil Engineers and the Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management.

SOUTHERN RFCC

Dr Martin Hurst had a long career as a senior civil servant and professional economist, including as environment, housing and planning advisor in Number 10, and Flood and Water Director in Defra – in which he played a leading role in the government’s response to the 2007 floods and the subsequent Pitt review and Flood and Water Management Act 2010. He has wide voluntary sector experience – as trustee and non-executive director – over the past 15 years – and he has a track record of working with the water industry and with local government. Martin is currently chair of finance and treasury for two large housing associations, a visiting lecturer on major infrastructure appraisal at University College London, and has a number of water and housing related trustee, corporate finance advisor and consumer champion roles.

[Press release: World-leading microbeads ban takes effect](#)

Image credit: MPCA Photos on Flickr. Used under Creative Commons.

A ban on the manufacture of products containing microbeads has come into force today – a landmark step in the introduction of one of the world’s toughest bans on these harmful pieces of plastic.

Environment Minister Thérèse Coffey has announced that manufacturers of cosmetics and personal care products will no longer be able to add tiny pieces of plastic known as ‘microbeads’ to rinse-off products such as face scrubs, toothpastes and shower gels.

These damaging beads can cause serious harm to marine life, but the UK’s ban – praised by campaigners as one of the toughest in the world – will help to stop billions of microbeads ending up in the ocean every year. Alongside the success of the government’s 5p plastic bag charge – which has taken nine billion bags out of circulation – the ban puts the UK at the forefront of international efforts to crack down on plastic pollution.

Environment Minister Thérèse Coffey said:

The world’s seas and oceans are some of our most valuable natural assets and I am determined we act now to tackle the plastic that devastates our precious marine life.

Microbeads are entirely unnecessary when there are so many natural alternatives available, and I am delighted that from today cosmetics manufacturers will no longer be able to add this harmful plastic to their rinse-off products.

Now we have reached this important milestone, we will explore how we can build on our world-leading ban and tackle other forms of plastic waste.

Dilyana Mihaylova, Marine Plastics Projects Manager at Fauna & Flora International, said:

Fauna & Flora International has been working to address the issue of plastic microbead pollution since 2009, and we are delighted that the Government took such a clear stand on this issue and that a robust UK microbeads ban comes into force today.

We hope this ban signals the dawn of a new era in the fight for cleaner, healthier oceans, with the UK leading the way and supporting other countries to ensure that plastic will no longer reach the environment.

Dr Sue Kinsey, Senior Pollution Officer at the Marine Conservation Society, said:

We are delighted that such a robust microbead ban has come into force. This is the strongest and most comprehensive ban to be enacted in the world and will help to stem the flow of micro plastics into our oceans.

We believe that this signals a real commitment on the part of this Government to clean up our seas and beaches and hope this is a first step on this road before we see further actions to combat plastic waste.

Today's announcement comes ahead of the government's upcoming 25 Year Environment Plan, which will set out how we will be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it and create clean, healthy and productive oceans.

A ban on the sale of products containing microbeads will follow later in the year.

[Press release: Statement by Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Karen Bradley](#)

It is a great honour to be asked to serve as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, particularly at such a decisive moment for Northern Ireland and the whole United Kingdom. I would like to pay the warmest tribute to my predecessor and friend, James Brokenshire, who did such an outstanding job. I wish him all the very best for his medical treatment and for a speedy recovery.

Northern Ireland is a very special part of our United Kingdom and has huge potential. A key part of my role will be to help build a Northern Ireland that is fit for the future and works for everyone. In seeking to achieve that I want to work closely with all parties, the Irish government as appropriate, and with all sections of the community. Be assured the UK Government remains fully committed to the Belfast Agreement, its principles and institutions.

Clearly, there are immediate challenges. It is now a year since Northern Ireland has had an effective, functioning power-sharing administration, and forming a Northern Ireland Executive, to deliver for the benefit of all, is my top priority. I believe a devolved government in Belfast is best placed to address these issues and take the key decisions which affect people's day to day lives – whether these relate to the economy, public services or issues of policing and justice.

We must also continue the work to deliver a Brexit that recognises Northern Ireland's unique circumstances and avoids a hard border on the island of Ireland while maintaining the economic and constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom.

Alongside these issues, I am conscious of the need to establish a stronger economy and a shared society, to address the legacy of the past and to keep people safe and secure.

In the coming days, I look forward to meeting many different people, parties and other groups as I take on this hugely important and exciting role in the Prime Minister's Government.

[News story: Government renews focus on](#)

[housing with Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government](#)

Following the appointment of Rt Hon. Sajid Javid MP as the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the department will be renamed as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

Housing Secretary Sajid Javid said:

Building the homes our country needs is an absolute priority for this government and so I'm delighted the Prime Minister has asked me to serve in this role. The name change for the department reflects this government's renewed focus to deliver more homes and build strong communities across England.

Further ministerial appointments will be confirmed in due course by the Prime Minister.

Office address and general enquiries

2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Contact form <http://forms.communiti...>

General enquiries: please use this number if you are a member of the public
030 3444 0000