



Children's experiences of child protection procedures

**For the Munro Review Progress Report
From interviews by the Office of the Children's Rights Director**

Introduction

As Children's Rights Director for England, I have a legal duty to consult children to find out and report their views. I have this duty for children in care or looked after by local authorities, for children living away from home in boarding or residential schools and colleges, for children who are placed for adoption, for children living in residential family centres, and for children getting any sort of help from children's social care services.

We do our best to report what children tell us, as faithfully and fully as we can. We do not add our own thoughts or comments, and we do not leave out things that we or people we send our reports to may disagree with.

Our reports of children's views go to the government, people in parliament, all local councils in England, and Ofsted. We put all our reports on the children's rights website www.rights4me.org, and anyone can read them or download a copy there.

As well as consulting children, I and my team give advice on children's rights and welfare, and we do casework to advise and help individual children who contact us over issues to do with their rights or welfare.

In 2010, the government asked Professor Eileen Munro to carry out a review of child protection in the country, and to make recommendations to make it better in the future. Professor Munro asked me and my team to consult children to make sure their views made a difference to her report and recommendations, and we carried out a number of different consultations where children gave their views directly to Eileen Munro. She drew on those views for her report.

In 2012, Professor Munro asked us to help her again, this time to consult children who had recently had experience of being involved in the child protection system in some of the local authorities which had been given permission to try out more flexible procedures. This was to assist her in making sure that children's views and experiences were taken on board in her progress report to the government.

We individually interviewed eleven children in detail about their experience of being involved in child protection about themselves. This was both to find out what they thought of the child protection procedures, and to test out how we could ask children to assess the child protection system without asking for personal details of what had happened to them beforehand and without ourselves getting involved in what was happening in their cases now.

We gave Professor Munro the information the children gave us in our interviews. This report summarises for other readers those eleven children's experiences and views of the child protection system. It does not, for obvious reasons of

confidentiality, say who the children were, which local councils they came from, or what had happened to them to lead to them being involved in the child protection system.

Dr Roger Morgan OBE
Children's Rights Director for England

The children and the interviews

The eleven children we interviewed were volunteers from different local authorities (LA). The LA's involved have been given special permission by the Department for Education to set local rules about how many days it takes to assess a child who may need help, instead of following rules set by central Government for the whole country.

They are testing out this new way of working because Professor Munro recommended that professionals should be able to use their own judgment to decide how they handle assessments for children who may need help, as long they put checks in place to make sure cases are not taking too long.

We contacted these authorities to ask them to invite children, who they had been recently working with using these new procedures, to meet with us.

Each interview was carried out by one of two members of the Office of the Children's Rights Director. We met the children either at a local office of the council, or at their home. In eight of the interviews, we met the young person alone, and the young person was of an age to agree to that. We met two children from the same family together, and we interviewed one younger child with their carer present, having checked that that was acceptable to everybody concerned, including the local authority. Each interview lasted between half an hour and three quarters of an hour.

The questions we asked at the interviews were all to do with what the children thought of the procedures they had been through, and how they had been involved in what was happening. Fully involving the child was one of the main recommendations made by Professor Munro. We were careful not to ask questions about why they were involved with the local authorities or about any abuse or harm that had happened to any of the children. We told the children that we may have to pass on to their local authority anything they said that made us think this was necessary for their protection, but this did not become necessary in any of our interviews. We assured them that they would not be identified in this report in any way.

The eleven children interviewed were from three different local authorities. The youngest was nine and the oldest was 17. The middle age of the group was 15.

Three of the eleven children had not had a change of social worker since they had been involved with social care services. Two had had two social workers since they became involved with social care services, two had had three, two had had four, and two told us they had had five different social workers.

The children's assessment of the child protection system

We asked each child a series of questions through our interview with them, and took notes of their answers. We encouraged each child to add any points or issues they wanted to raise. All our questions were about the child protection process as they had experienced it, and not about things that had happened to them to trigger child protection procedures. The questions we asked are set out in the Appendix.

Knowing what was happening

Eight of the eleven children we interviewed said things had been properly explained to them and they understood what was happening, and what would happen, in the child protection process. One of these children told us they understood what was happening because their social worker explained things 'brilliantly' and had gone through with them everything that would happen. Another described how their social worker had gone through their report fully with them, and they had felt that the report had got the right things in it and that they understood what was happening and why. They hadn't needed to ask many questions.

Three out of the eleven children told us that things had not been explained properly or fully to them. One of these children said that how things were explained to him were 'not that good', and he was 'in the middle' in his view on whether he understood what would happen next. Another two said that things weren't really explained to them, and that they only understood 'a bit' about what would happen next. One said that things had been explained to them, and they understood what was said, but the problem was they didn't agree with it and weren't able to ask questions or get answers.

One other child, who said their social worker had explained things well and told them all the basics, did tell us that their social worker had used some words the child didn't understand. They hadn't felt able to ask many questions about things that had been explained but which they hadn't really understood because of this.

Children and young people had very different experiences of whether they had been given enough chance to ask questions about the child protection process, and to get answers about things they wanted to know.

Seven out of the eleven children told us they were given enough chances to ask questions as the child protection process moved on, and that they were given the answers they needed. One told us that they had been helped in this by having an advocate with them, by being able to write their questions down to be answered, and by being taken out of the house by the social worker for a meal and a talk. They told us how important it is to be able to check out big worries about child protection; 'the first thing I was worried about was whether the social worker was going to take

me away from my family. She explained that that wouldn't be happening'. They fully understood what did happen; 'I'm on a protection plan and I know why'.

Four children told us they didn't have chance to ask the questions they wanted to ask about the child protection process. Two children said that they didn't have any chance at all to ask questions they wanted answered. Another said they had asked questions about things they disagreed with, but their social worker didn't listen or answer them, and just kept saying that as they were a teenager they would have to accept how things were. This young person said their social worker had also given them different reasons for decisions at different times. For them, this was all a lot to do with the personality and approach of a particular social worker though, and their new social worker after a change of social worker was much better; 'I've got a new one now and she listens to me – she seems to understand young people better'.

As with other young people we spoke to, a change of social worker could of course mean losing a good one or one you had built up a good relationship with, but sometimes a change of social worker was a good thing as it meant changing to a better one or one you got on with better.

Another young person told us that they didn't really get enough chance to ask questions, nor did they really get answers from the questions they did ask. But whether they had their questions answered had depended entirely on which social worker they had at the time. They had had three different social workers in their child protection case over two years. The first 'told me things but they weren't the right things. They didn't get the details right' and the family had made a complaint about this. The young person didn't see this social worker very often, and they were 'never there' when the young person rang their office, and didn't ring back when the office said they would. The young person said this first social worker didn't really help the family or try to find out what the problems were. The second social worker was good, but then left; 'she would speak to me on my own and listen to what I had to say. She went on maternity leave'. The third social worker often cancelled meetings at the last minute, so the young person had not really had the chance to talk to her. Which social worker you had made all the difference, and many children had experience of very different social workers.

What child protection processes were like for these children depended very much on what each individual social worker was like.

One young person summed up having things explained well and being able to get answers to questions: 'I know why the social worker was involved and I know what their plan is. Everything has been explained to me. I understand why there is a plan and I've been given the chance to ask questions and have my say about what it says'. They went on to explain why they had a good understanding and plenty of chances to ask questions and get answers; 'I haven't found this difficult at all – I have a really good relationship with my social worker'.

Any concerns the child had about the process

One young person was concerned that they would have the same experiences of the care system as their mother had had, and that as soon as social care services got involved they would be taken into care. Another young person had also assumed, and worried, that social workers would simply take them away from home and into care. This young person commented 'I'm not sure how you could stop that, because that's what everyone would think'. Yet another said they thought social workers would immediately take them away the same day, never to come back. One said they expected to be taken somewhere away from home, like Tracey Beaker.

Altogether, six of the eleven children told us their main worry had been that as soon as social workers got involved with them, they would take them away from home and into care. That some children expect social workers to take them away into care, because that is what they understand social care services do, is a key point from many of our interviews.

Some children had felt able to ask their social workers about their worry that they would be taken straight into care, and had been reassured by the answers they got. But some had not felt able to ask about this, especially if they did not yet know or trust their social workers, or if they found them difficult or frightening to talk to.

One child told us that they usually talked about things with their friends, but for the first time in their lives their friends couldn't help. None of their friends knew anything about social care services or child protection, they didn't want any of their friends to know about their situation anyway, and they were frightened that if their friends found out, they would judge them.

Two children told us they had worried about how difficult it was to open up and tell difficult things to someone they didn't know at all. One said they had not told their social worker about some important things because they were strangers and what the child needed to tell them was 'a bit rude'. Another said it had helped when their social worker had said they could go at things in their own time and didn't have to go straight into talking about difficult things until they felt ready.

Yet another child said they had been worried that the judge would laugh at them, or at what they were going to say in court.

Three children told us that they had not felt able to raise their worries with their social worker because their social worker was a scary person they didn't feel able to talk to. Another explained to us that a child needs to get to know and trust someone before they can talk freely to them, and that takes time. You can't be expected to trust a social worker and feel you know them well enough to tell them difficult things as soon as you meet them.

One child told us that their main feeling and concern was not really a worry, but that they felt ashamed that social workers were involved with them, and they had found that this made life hard.

We asked all the children whether people had dealt OK with any worries they had about how social workers were dealing with things.

Four of the eleven children said yes, their worries had been dealt with OK. One young person told us how this had been helped by their social worker taking them out on their own to talk through any worries. 'I could talk to her on my own lots'. They also said that it was helpful that they had a very good relationship with their social worker – and that they could have a laugh about things together.

Another told us that at first their social worker hadn't listened to their worries, but that had been solved when an advocate helped them get their worries across, and helped them to get some wrong information corrected. They had only been shown the social worker's reports an hour before the child protection meeting where the report was to be discussed, and that was not long enough to understand the report, question what was in it, or ask for wrong information to be corrected. As a result, some wrong information had gone into child protection meetings in some early reports, but this was sorted out now with the help of an advocate and wrong information was getting corrected.

One child told us how helpful their social worker had been in checking for any worries they might have. Each time they talked, the social worker listened to what had been happening since their last meeting and picked up and checked out things that might be a worry for the child.

One child said that the worries they had raised had been sorted out OK, but that they still worried about the reasons why social workers did some of the things they did.

Seven of the eleven children told us they had not told anyone their worries about the process (although one said they hadn't had any worries to raise). One child told us they had worries, but 'I'm shy, so I didn't tell them'. Another told us they felt they couldn't tell anyone they were worried that social workers might take them away into care. Because of this worry, they also hadn't told their social worker everything about what had been happening. Later on, the social worker had explained things more and talked more to the child and reassured them that they were not about to take them from home into care, and that had improved things so they could talk more easily.

One child simply told us that they had not been able to raise worries with their social worker because they hadn't seen them often enough, and so didn't tell them what was going on.

Another young person told us they had told their worries to their social worker, but instead of sorting them out she would tell everyone in meetings or tell the young person's parents what she had said. The young person felt their social worker was more for their parents than for them.

One child told us that the worst thing about the process for them had been waiting for a number of days before meeting their social worker, and spending that time not

knowing about what was going to happen to them, and worrying that they would be taken into care when the social worker came.

Meetings and visits

We asked whether children thought there had been too many, or not enough, meetings and visits by social workers during their child protection procedures.

Five of the eleven children told us they thought they saw their social workers about the right number of times. From some interviews we heard that weekly or two weekly contacts often felt about right. Two young people said how valuable they had found being able to get hold of their social worker on the phone if anything happened that they needed to talk to them about. Another told us they had seen their social worker often enough, but had not been at a lot of the meetings that had been held about their case. They didn't know why. One child said that it had been very helpful that their social worker had discussed with them how often they should meet.

One of the eleven told us they thought there had been too many meetings or visits with their social workers. Another said they had often met their social worker, but felt the meetings were pointless because they usually criticised the young person and the social worker did not listen to, or understand, their point of view.

One of the people who thought there had been the right amount of contact with their social worker said that they had however only had one meeting with them on their own, and they thought they needed more meetings alone rather than as a family.

Two young people thought there had not been enough meetings or contact. One told us that they had only had one meeting about their situation. The other said that they had not actually had the number of meetings that had been planned. They said that they had not had enough contact with their current social worker – and that this social worker had only just cancelled their latest planned meeting.

Having a say in what was happening

Three of the eleven children we interviewed thought they had a definite say in what was happening. One said that their views had made a difference. Another said their views had made 'a bit' of a difference. Two told us their views hadn't made a difference to what was happening. Again, how much your social worker asked you things, explained things, listened to you and understood where you were coming from were important issues in having a say. The same child could have a different amount of say at different times, depending on who their social worker was at the time.

One young person told us they had had a very definite say in what was happening and what was being decided. After going through the process and plans with them, the young person told us 'they had a plan and I told them why it wouldn't work. I

pointed out three things that were wrong with their plan and they listened and changed things’.

Four of the eleven told us their views weren’t listened to enough, or they hadn’t been able to have a say in what was happening to them. One said their social worker spent much more time talking to their parent than to them, and so they felt their parent had much more say in what would happen than they did. Another said that they hadn’t asked or said anything as they thought they would be told they weren’t allowed to.

One other child told us they simply didn’t know whether anyone took any notice of their views. Another said their advocate had played an important part in making sure they had a say in what was going on.

Most of the children put their views across to their social workers, but one said they had tried to get their views across at meetings (though they didn’t think that had made much difference).

Two children told us that their social workers had discussed their views regularly with them, so that they would know if they had changed their views. Another said nobody had checked to see if their views had changed. One said their views weren’t regularly listened to – ‘I was told to stop being childish and they didn’t listen’.

We heard some of the things that had helped children to have a say in what was happening, and to get their views across. These included social workers making children feel relaxed and sometimes having a laugh with the child, being good listeners, and understanding where children and young people are coming from in what they say. As we have already heard, it was helpful if social workers didn’t dive straight into things, but gave the child time to get to know them and relax first. We also heard more about the importance of social workers not always talking to children in their home, but taking them away from the house to discuss things and check what their views really are.

One young person suggested to us that how much say a child actually has is mainly to do with how confident they are in speaking up for themselves. ‘I think it’s important that kids have the confidence to speak up. What I’ve found is that when you do speak up the social worker actually listens.’

Getting the decisions right

In our interviews we asked the children whether they thought the right decisions had been made for them in their child protection processes.

Five of the children we interviewed said yes, the right decisions had been made. One said they thought the decisions made were probably the right ones, and two more said they didn’t know whether they were the right decisions. One said the wrong decisions had been made.

One person told us the main decision about them – their current placement - hadn't been made by their social worker or social care services at all. One young person was very pleased with the results of their child protection process; 'they've got everything right ... it's been better than I thought'. Another said the social worker they had now had made the right decisions, but their previous social worker had not. Yet another told us that their social worker had promised to make important arrangements for the young person (arranging a family contact that was important to the young person) but had failed to do so.

One young person told us they thought the fact that the right decisions were made for them was entirely due to the right attitude of their social worker at the time. They thought a social worker with a different attitude to them would not have reached the right decisions. They told us that if the relationship with the social worker isn't working right, then the young person can react very differently to how they would if they got on with their social worker. They also said that having the right relationship doesn't mean avoiding difficult discussions that the young person doesn't like – and it isn't just about the social worker making an effort. The young person has to give the social worker time too.

Trusting social workers

Many in their interviews had told us about how important it is to know and trust your social worker. We asked a specific question in our interviews about whether each child trusted the social workers who had worked on their child protection case.

Out of the children who gave us a definite answer on this, four said yes, they did trust their social workers, one said they trusted them a bit, and three said they didn't trust them. One of the young people said they had not trusted one social worker, but had trusted another.

Some things had happened that made children less trusting of their social workers. These included finding it hard to talk with particular social workers, which made it harder to trust them to get things right for you. One child had not trusted their social worker when she had knocked on the front door without saying she would be coming – the child was on their own in the house, and the social worker said she would still come in and asked to be taken up to see the child's bedroom. The child told us 'I didn't think that was good'. Another reason a child gave for not trusting a social worker was that they just found them to be scary.

Other things that had made children not trust their social workers were what the child said to their social worker not being kept confidential and passed on to other members of the child's family, not listening to the child, not telling the truth as the child had told it to them, cancelling meetings with the child, the social worker being too serious about everything, everything you said getting written down, a social worker always backing the parent's view and decisions to the young person, and social workers not dealing with things that needed sorting out.

In one interview we were told that the young person didn't really trust their social worker because they felt they were questioning and judging them all the time. This

young person said she felt it was easier to share her problems and talk them through with their best friend rather than their social worker.

We heard too of things that helped children to trust their social workers. These included having a good relationship, not being pressured to talk, the social worker thinking about how the child feels and asking the child's views, the social worker keeping things private, actually doing what they tell the child they will do, and arriving when they say they will to see the child.

Speed of the process

We asked whether the children thought their child protection process had gone at the right speed for them, or too fast or too slow.

Five out of the eleven children said their child protection process had gone at the right speed for them. As one young person put it, 'OK, not too fast, not perfect, I'm happy with it'.

One young person told us their process had gone too slowly. They thought things that could and should have been sorted out quite quickly had simply dragged on, and they were not told why. They told us they'd had three different social workers and two had they thought worked at the right pace, but the third didn't get things sorted out so problems carried on.

One young person felt that everything had happened too fast for them.

Three children told us they were not sure how to answer this question, and one couldn't remember whether things were too quick or too slow.

One of the young people who thought the pace of things had been right said that things had gone too quickly at first, but their social worker had slowed things down when the young person started having problems with what was happening.

Whether social workers need more or fewer rules

Six of our eleven children said they could not really advise on this. Four knew their social worker was following rules, but thought social workers did not need more rules. One thought social workers needed more rules to follow, to 'boost what they do' to get things right.

One of the young people said that although they knew there were rules, they did not work to prevent different social workers doing things well or badly. They had experienced both good and bad support from different social workers, even though they were probably all following whatever rules there were.

Another of the young people told us they understood that their social worker had rules to follow, but said that they didn't 'make the rules too heavy' – their social worker 'explained what he has to do, but still seems to be doing things for me first'.

Sometimes children thought there was a particular rule that social workers had to follow in their case. One said their social worker had told them there was a rule that said all social workers must look at a child's bedroom every two weeks. Another said that there was a rule that they couldn't see a relative, but that nobody had explained why this was.

Repeating your story

One of the things professionals sometimes say is a problem for children in child protection procedures is that the child often has to repeat the story of what has happened to them to different people working with them. We asked about this in our interviews.

One young person said that having to keep repeating the story of what had happened to you was just something all children who have a social worker have to face. They saw this as just part of a social worker's job to keep checking up on things.

Two children told us they had not had to repeat their story to anyone else – once they had told it to the first social worker, it had been passed on by them to other professionals who needed to know. Four children said they had needed to keep retelling their story.

The one main reason that children had to retell their story to different people was that their social worker changed, and they had to tell everything again to their new social worker. Two children said that they had not yet had to tell their story again, but they expected they would have to do this if their social worker changed.

Children's proposals for making child protection processes better in the future

Young people we interviewed made a number of proposals for how they thought work with children and in particular the child protection system could be improved in the future. Here is the full list of all their proposals:

- Social workers need to spend more time talking directly to children
- Keep in close touch with the child – a lot can happen and change quickly
- Social workers need to talk to children on their own, without anyone else hearing

- Offer to talk to children away from the house, for privacy and where family and carers cannot hear
- Social workers and judges need to get to know the child well enough to stop them being shy and unable to tell them things
- Seriously listen to children and take what they say seriously rather than telling their parents or carers what they say
- Don't try to have serious talks with children at odd times, like just when they have woken up
- Speak to children clearly and slowly if needs be, and be prepared to repeat things if you haven't got your point across
- Please don't get people mixed up (one child told us their social worker had mixed them up with another child at one point)
- Think of ways a child might find it easier to say difficult things to you – like writing something down, having someone else speaking for them, or even having a conversation with eyes shut rather than while being looked at by a social worker
- Children who are old enough should be seriously listened to – that means from the age of about six upwards

Our experience of children assessing their child protection experience

To some extent, this series of eleven interviews with individual children about their experience of child protection processes and assessments has been a pilot check on whether and how this type of review by children can be done. From our experience of this pilot series of interviews, our conclusion is that it is definitely possible to secure direct feedback and evaluation by children of their experience of child protection processes. Our recommendation is that this should be considered both in the process of inspection of child protection, and in future monitoring of implementation of the 'Munro reforms'.

There are clearly logistic issues to be taken into account. We had approached four authorities initially, but in one case we were not able to negotiate interviews to the

required timescale. We also ended up interviewing fewer children than we had originally invited, for a range of practical reasons and through a drop-out of volunteers, though not through any stated objection to the idea of being interviewed.

Anyone repeating the exercise on a larger scale for monitoring or inspection purposes will also need to decide whether to offer children payments for taking part. We gave each child a high street voucher as a token of thanks to them for their time and trouble in meeting us.

Negotiation and time allowances are also needed on locations of interviews. We met children at council offices and in their own homes, as was most appropriate. For some children, one or another location may be better or not appropriate, so flexibility and travel time need to be planned in to such an interview programme.

A major decision in each case has to be whether the child or young person is interviewed alone, or with a supporter present. Age is clearly a factor, as is consideration of the need for a 'chaperone' for some sensitive one to one interviews. We have found that for older young people, one to one interviews are possible, subject to the consideration of a need for chaperoning, but also that interviewing even on such a topic is possible with a supporter present, as long as that supporter is acceptable to the child and is not judged by the local authority as inappropriate to be present given any involvement in the case.

Perhaps our most important practical finding from this pilot series of interviews is that it is very possible, and not at all difficult, to keep the focus entirely on discussing the child's view of how the child protection process itself went for them, without asking or being told sensitive information about the content of their child protection case or about past issues or abuse that led to child protection procedures. This differentiation was well understood by all the children and young people involved, and in no case did we find ourselves either straying into discussion of the content, rather than the process, of any child's child protection case, nor did we find ourselves being given any possibly new case information that might need to be passed on for the child's current or future protection.

Some conclusions

The biggest factor the children reported to us as affecting them in the child protection process was what their social worker was like as an individual. What mattered was the social worker's personality, their approach to the child and the issues in the case, how good they were at talking with children and young people, and how the child or young person felt about them. There were very big differences between social workers, according to the eleven children, and these were more to do with the people they were than with what they did or what rules they followed. Many we interviewed had had a number of very different social workers – some they

had got on well with, some they hadn't. A change of social worker was sometimes bad, but sometimes good.

A strong message from children was that it is difficult to talk openly to a social worker about often very difficult things, or to ask them about what is worrying you about the child protection process, when you don't yet know them and feel relaxed talking to them. Some described social workers as basically scary people. Some told us they had not told social workers important information about what had been happening to them, especially at first. It takes time to get to know, trust and feel able to talk easily to someone, and social workers need to give the child this time.

Children often didn't know what the 'rules' were for what they were supposed to say to their social workers – for example, the young person who thought they were not allowed to ask the social worker questions of their own, or the young person who thought the social worker was visiting their bedroom to check that they had a games console and computer to use. What they thought their social workers were doing made a difference to what they said to their social worker, and how they took part in their own child protection processes.

Another major message from these eleven interviews is that many children believe, and worry, that once a social worker gets involved with you, that means they are going to take you away from home and into care. That makes a big difference to how many children talk with their social workers, and is something that social workers need to know and discuss with children honestly, reassuring them if the plan is not to take them into care.

Finally, I want to say a sincere thanks to each and every one of the children and young people who so willingly and helpfully talked to us about very sensitive things, and to each of their local authority staff who helped us by organising our interview meetings with the children.

Appendix:

The questions we asked the children and young people

We asked each child the following questions about the child protection processes they had just experienced. The questions were asked in individual interviews and the child's answers written down on a standard template. The question set was agreed with Professor Eileen Munro as relevant to evaluation of aspects of child protection procedures relevant to her Review.

1. How well were things explained to you?

How well did you understand what was happening and what would happen next?

Did you get enough of a chance to ask questions as things moved on?

Did you get the answers you needed?

2. Did people deal OK with any worries you had about how social workers were dealing with things?

3. What were your main worries about the process that was happening?

How could it be done better for children and young people in future?

4. Were there too many or not enough meetings?

... Did your social worker see you and talk with you often enough?

5. How far did you have a say in what was happening?

... Did your views and feelings make a difference?

... How did you get your views across?

... Did people check whether your views had changed as things moved on?

... Any ideas on how children can have more of a say in the future?

6. Do you think the right decisions got made for you?

7. Did you trust the social workers who worked on your case?

... Any reasons for your answer?

8. Do you think the process was done too fast, too slow, or just about right?

9. Do you think the social workers would have done a better job if they had fewer rules they had to follow, or if they had more rules to follow about what they were doing?

10. Did you get asked to keep telling the same things to different people, or not?
