

APPENDIX 20: SAFEGUARDING LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Children can be looked after by agreement with parents or by order of a court. Most children in care are safe from harm and do well, however for some there are particular risks (see [NSPCC – Looked after children](#)).

Definition of Being Looked After

“Under the [Children Act 1989](#), a child is legally defined as ‘looked after’ by a local authority if he or she:

- gets accommodation from the local authority for a continuous period of more than 24 hours
- is subject to a care order (to put the child into the care of the local authority)
- is subject to a placement order (to put the child up for adoption).” [HM Government](#)

Children who are looked after may be living:

- with foster parents;
- at home with their parents under the supervision of Children’s Social Care;
- in a residential children’s home;
- with extended family members (known as kinship placements);
- with friends of the family or other ‘connected persons’ (such as a teacher, youth worker, etc.); or
- other residential settings like residential schools or secure units.

Therefore, even though the child is looked after, they may not be living in what may be traditionally seen as a “care” environment.

There are a variety of reasons why children and young people enter care.

- The child’s parents might have agreed to this – for example, if they are too unwell to look after their child or if their child has a disability and needs respite care.
- The child could be an unaccompanied asylum seeker, with no responsible adult to care for them.
- Children’s services may have intervened because they felt the child was at significant risk of harm. If this is the case the child is usually the subject of a court-made legal order.

Children may enter care for all sorts of reasons. But many enter because they have been abused or neglected. These experiences can leave children with complex emotional and mental health needs, which can increase their vulnerability to abuse.

Placement Instability and Disrupted Relationships with Caregivers

Many children move repeatedly in and out of care, or between placements. Placement breakdowns can have a detrimental impact on a child’s emotional wellbeing and mental health. It can also prevent them forming stable relationships with the adults who could help protect them (Rahilly and Hendry, 2014).

Peer Violence and Abuse

Many looked after children have previous experiences of violence, abuse or neglect. This can lead to them displaying challenging behaviour and having problems forming secure relationships. Some find it hard to develop positive peer relationships.

A child stops being looked after when they are adopted, return home or turn 18. However local authorities in all the nations of the UK are required to support children leaving care at 18 until they are at least 21. This may involve them continuing to live with their foster family.

Statistics

- Over 400,000 children in England were identified as being children in need in 2022.
- Nearly 51,000 children in England were on child protection plans in 2022 .
- Approximately 81,000 children are in care in England.
- Children in care are 4 times more likely than their peers to have a mental health difficulty due to their experiences both before and during care. Some research suggests that around 45% of looked-after children have a diagnosable mental health disorder, and up to 70%-80% have recognisable mental health concerns.
- A small proportion of children in care experience further abuse and neglect whilst in care. ([The Safeguarding Network](#)).

Know the Vulnerabilities

Children who are looked after are:

- at greater risk of being [bullied](#) or abused by peers;
- more likely to be the target of [exploitation](#);
- significantly more likely to [run away from home](#);
- at greater risk of misusing substances due to early life experiences;
- more likely to suffer social, emotional and mental health difficulties due to trauma;
- at a higher risk of having some form of developmental delay;
- potentially going to have issues with their identity;
- more likely to have [special educational needs or disabilities](#).

Know the Risks

Children who are looked after often face a number of additional risks:

- risk of offending behaviour;
- risks associated with separation and loss;
- risk of institutional abuse;
- risks regarding lack of suitable placement;
- risk associated with instability in placement / lack of consistent carer;
- risks in transition to adulthood;
- risk of educational failure and exclusion;
- previous experience of abuse can increase the risk of being abused in the future.

How the Church Can Help

Church can settings play a key role in protecting children in care. It is everyone's responsibility to make sure that children who are looked after are safeguarded.

- Be aware of signs of abuse and neglect.
- Be aware of vulnerabilities of children in care.
- Focus on the individual needs of the child.
- Know what the specific plans are for any looked after child that you are responsible for.
- Listen to the child's 'voice' (verbal, behavioural or otherwise) and act upon it. Remember, just because they are in care doesn't mean they can't still be abused.
- Work collaboratively with other agencies.
- Report any concerns to the designated safeguarding lead and follow your safeguarding procedures ([see Appendices 14, 15 & 16](#)).

Supporting Looked-After Children

Providing a secure, caring environment can help looked after children overcome their early life experiences. [NSPCC research](#) has identified five priorities for change to improve emotional wellbeing and mental health.

- **Embed an emphasis on emotional wellbeing throughout the system.** Professionals working in the care system need the skills and knowledge to understand how they can support
- **Take a proactive and preventative approach.** Support for looked after children should begin with a thorough assessment of their emotional and mental health needs.
- **Give children and young people voice and influence.** Looked after children and young people need more opportunities to identify what is important to them and influence their own care.
- **Support and sustain children's relationships.** Children's carers require training and support to be sensitive, understanding and resilient.
- **Support care leavers' emotional needs.** Help young people identify and strengthen their support networks.