

Mental health assessments for looked after children

The Alliance for Children in Care and Care Leavers is the pre-eminent sector-wide organisation that works to support children in care and care leavers. We share a commitment to improving the care system and outcomes of children and young people who spend time in care. A full list of members is available in the appendix.

The Alliance's calls to improve the mental health of children in care are supported by **the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists**, representing healthcare professionals with an understanding of the needs of children in care.

Amendment

NC18

To move the following Clause –

“Assessment of physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing needs

(1) In Section 22C of the Children Act 1989, after subsection 11 insert –

“(11A) Regulations made under subsection (1) must make arrangements for –

(a) the assessment of a looked after child's mental and physical health and emotional wellbeing needs, and

(b) the assessment of the mental and physical health and emotional wellbeing needs of relevant and former relevant children

“(11B) Subsection (11A) shall come into force at the end of the financial year ending with 31 March 2019.””

Explanatory statement

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to make regulations for mental health and emotional wellbeing assessments for looked after children and care leavers. A time delay in commencement is included to allow time for the pilots to be completed before details of the regulations are decided.

1. Why this is necessary? The mental health of children in care and care leavers

Looked after children and care leavers are some of the most vulnerable groups in our society. The majority of looked after children have experienced either abuse or neglect, and many children entering the care system will still be living in the immediate aftermath of these traumatic early experiences.

- Nine out of ten children who have been abused or neglected at a young age will develop a mental health condition by the age of 18.¹

¹ Sroufe, L. A., Egeland, B., Carlson, E. A., & Collins, W. A. (2005), Minnesota Longitudinal study of risk and adaptation.

- Care leavers are more likely than their peers to be not in education, employment or training (NEET),² homeless, in custody,³ and have mental health problems. Care leavers also have a five times greater risk of a suicide attempt than their peers.⁴

2. Why are mental health and emotional wellbeing assessments important?

The Government has recognised the importance of achieving parity between physical and mental health by tabling an amendment in the House of Lords to the corporate parenting principles, which states that local authorities should have regard to children’s physical and mental health when carrying out their duties as corporate parents. We welcome this amendment, but this change in principle must be matched by requirements in the law which ensure that parity between mental and physical health is achieved in practice. **This starts with access to a specialist mental health and emotional wellbeing assessment.**

A mental health and emotional wellbeing assessment is an important tool for identifying mental health conditions early, and ensuring that needs are met before a crisis point, requiring more expensive interventions, is reached. A report by the NSPCC has estimated that investing in the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children in care could **save £22,415 per year** due to associated savings in health, social care, education, and the criminal justice system.⁵ Assessments can:

- Be used in the development of children’s care pathways, to help support decisions about therapeutic foster care placements, and guide foster carers or schools about ways of supporting children in care.
- Help children form better relationships with their foster carers and prevent placement breakdowns and reduce the need for more expensive options such as a children’s home placement (72% of children in residential care have a diagnosable mental health condition).⁶
- Support care leavers who may not qualify for help from adult services due to higher thresholds and lack of expertise in attachment disorders. Transitioning out of care is a particularly vulnerable period associated with increased levels of self-reported mental health problems.⁷ For example, care leavers may be expected to move into independent housing, take responsibility for their own finances, as well as starting college courses or employment. All of these life events can be particularly upsetting for young people who do not have a strong peer or support networks.

It is crucial that all children in care and care leavers should receive the offer of a mental health assessment by a mental health professional and be given the mental health and well-being support they need to thrive.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2015-to-2016>

³ National Audit Office (2015): Care leavers transition to adulthood <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Care-leavers-transition-to-adulthood.pdf>

⁴ Richardson, J; Lelliott, P: Mental Health of Looked After Children. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* 2003: 9, 249-251; Dixon, J; Wade, J; Byford, S; Weatherly, H; Lee, J: Young People Leaving Care: A Study of Outcomes and Costs. London: Department of Education and Skills; 2006.

⁵ Bazalgette *et al.*, *Achieving Emotional Wellbeing for Looked After Children*, NSPCC, 2015.

⁶ Children in residential homes run by local authorities are placed at a cost of £3,170 per week, as compared to £614.60 per week. *Unit Costs of Health and Social Care 2015*, Personal Social Care Services Unit.

⁷ Corbett, R; Mazin, N; Grimshaw, R; Bebbington, P: Thinking of Suicide: Understanding the Risks Associated with Child Institutional Care. *Criminal Justice Matters* 2012, 90:1, 38-40.

Questions for the Government

- Will the Minister commit to amending guidance so that children in care and care leavers have access to a mental health assessment?
- If the Minister won't commit to an amendment now, will he commit to reconsidering legislative change once the pilots have been completed?
- Has the Minister estimated how many pathway plans for care leavers take account of mental health needs and emotional wellbeing?

3. Will mental health assessments be stigmatising?

The Government has suggested that "automatic" mental health assessments for children in care and care leavers would be "stigmatising" for the children and young people, and that it would not always be appropriate for a child in care or a care leaver to have a mental health assessment at the particular moment that they enter care. However:

- This amendment does not propose automatic mental health assessments for all children in care and care leavers at a specific time.
- We believe that all children in care and care leavers should be *offered* mental health assessments, which should be undertaken at a suitable and appropriate time by a mental health professional and in a way that meets their needs.

4. The Government's integrated mental and physical health assessment pilots

In the House of Lords, the Government committed to 6-10 health assessment pilots for children entering care, starting in April or May this year.⁸ The Alliance for Children in Care and Care Leavers warmly welcomes this decision and the Government's commitment to improving the outcomes of looked after children.

However, it is vital that government support is underpinned by primary legislation to ensure it is prioritised appropriately and that it covers both children in care and care leavers. This amendment allows the Government to incorporate the outcomes of the recently announced mental health assessment pilots into the regulations.

Questions for the Government

- When does the Government expect these pilots to commence?
- How long will these pilots run for?
- When are they expected to conclude?
- Will these pilots affect the reporting schedule of the expert working group?
- Will the Government commit to including care leavers in this set of pilots?

5. Annex

i. The current system for mental health assessments

- All looked after children and young people who enter the care system should have an initial health assessment by a registered medical practitioner. Although the initial health assessment should cover mental health and emotional wellbeing as well as their physical health needs, this is often neglected.

⁸ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2016-11-23/debates/BB25F1B0-3E07-446C-97EA-BDFADAD7B300/ChildrenAndSocialWorkBill%28HL%29>

- Additionally, a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) should be completed annually for every child in care. The Care Quality Commission has found that only 72% of children in care in England had an SDQ filled out for them in 2015⁹ The Commission further found that SDQs were only used effectively in a small number of cases and almost never used in the development of a child's care plan.¹⁰
- Local authorities must produce a pathway plan for all care leavers on how to support their development and health, including mental health. Unfortunately, this this does not have to involve a mental health assessment.

ii. How does this relate to the £1.4 billion investment in CAMHS?

- Increased demand for mental health services among children and young people has, together with funding restrictions, led to longer waiting times and higher thresholds for referrals to CAMHS, including for children in care.
- The investment in CAMHS announced by the Government is extremely welcome, but it is crucial that it is used to provide the best possible outcomes for children and young people, and particularly for vulnerable groups such as children in care.
- The Government has advised local authorities to focus on the needs of vulnerable children in their Local Transformation Plans, but analysis of Local Transformation Plans for CAMHS showed that 15% contained no mention whatsoever of the needs of looked after children.¹¹
- Further, as a recent article in the Times showed (based on research by Young Minds)¹², only half of Clinical Commissioning Groups have increased their spending on children and young people's mental health, despite having received money for that purpose from the Government.
- Mental health assessments would offer an opportunity to properly identify mental health problems, ensure the provision of support, and improve of the commissioning of services for this highly vulnerable group of children.

For more information about the briefing please contact:

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Members of the Alliance for Children in Care and Care Leavers:

A National Voice, Action for Children, Article 39, Barnardo's, Become, British Association of Social Workers (BASW), Catch22, Children's Commissioner for England, Children England, CoramBAAF, Coram Voice, Family Rights Group, Fostering Through Social Enterprise (FtSE), Institute of Recovery from Childhood Trauma, National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers (NAIRO), National Children's Bureau (NCB), NSPCC, National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS), TACT, The Care Leavers' Association, The Children's Society, The Fostering Network, The Prince's Trust, Together Trust.

⁹ https://www.cqc.org.uk/sites/default/files/20160707_not_seen_not_heard_report.pdf

¹⁰ https://www.cqc.org.uk/sites/default/files/20160707_not_seen_not_heard_report.pdf

¹¹ *Transforming mental health services for children that have experienced abuse: A review of local transformation plans*, NSPCC, 2016.

¹² http://www.youngminds.org.uk/news/blog/3498_children_s_mental_health_funding_not_going_where_it_s_hould