"I wasn’t given any help to settle back in at home, and Mum’s problems hadn’t changed. I couldn’t take it anymore and I ran away”

Achieving positive outcomes for children who return home from care
Questions to consider

• Do the research findings resonate with your experience?

• What are the outcomes for children who return home in your Local Authority?

• What may you need to build on, and what may you need to improve?
Research highlights significant concerns for children who return home from care

- Returning home to a parent or relative is the most common outcome for children in care - 34% of all children who ceased to be looked after.

- High rates of maltreatment following a child’s return home – Farmer (2011) found that almost half of children (46%) who returned home were re-abused or neglected within two years.

- The rate of children who returned home and then re-enter care varies in the studies from 37% to 65% depending on the time of the follow up.

- Data from the Department for Education shows that of the children who went home in 2006–07, 30% had returned to care within five years.

- A third of children in one study experienced two or more failed returns.

- Of those who remain at home, between a half and a third were in circumstances detrimental to their well-being.
Returning Home From Care

In the year up to 31 March 2014, there were **38,340 children in care in England.**

**30,430 children left care***

- **10,300 children returned home** - the most common outcome.
- **5,050 of those were adopted**
- Up to half of children return to care because their move home breaks down.
- **50%**

- A third of these children experienced two or more failed returns home
- A third of those who remain at home continue to receive poor standards of care

*Children and young people leave care for a range of other reasons including, for example, residence orders, special guardianship and independent living.*
Reunification failure costs £300 million per year

• The total cost of failed reunifications is estimated to be £300 million a year.

• In contrast the annual cost of providing adequate support and services to meet the needs of all children and families returning home from care is £56 million.

• This equates to an average annual cost for each child that returns back into care from home of £61,614.

• Compared with an average annual cost of supporting a child to return home of just over £5,627.
There are significant variations in local authority practice

- **The most significant determinant** of whether or not a child returns home is the local authority in which they live, rather than their needs or the circumstances of their family.

- DfE analysis showed that rates of re-entry to care varied from **11% to 59% between authorities**. There were significant variations across statistical neighbours.

- Research shows significant variation in:
  - Assessment and decision making about whether it is in a child’s best interests to return home
  - Support for parents, and the child, to prepare for reunification
  - Help and support after a child has returned home.

- **Data are rarely used** to understand the journeys and outcomes for children who return home.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors associated with successful reunifications</th>
<th>Factors associated with reunification breakdowns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children went to a <strong>changed household</strong></td>
<td>Children had previous failed returns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thorough assessment</strong>, including a case history</td>
<td>Insufficient assessment &amp; lack of knowledge of the child's history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate <strong>preparation</strong> for return had been provided for parents and children.</td>
<td><strong>Weak planning</strong>, particularly when returning <strong>accommodated</strong> children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was consistent and purposeful <strong>social work and monitoring</strong> with the child and parent/s</td>
<td><strong>Service provision was inadequate</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specialist services were</strong> provided for the parent/child</td>
<td><strong>Children had behavioural or emotional problems</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children returned to parents only after <strong>sufficient time</strong> had elapsed for the <strong>problem</strong> that led to the original admission to have been <strong>addressed</strong>.</td>
<td>Parents’ problems had not been adequately addressed - 78% of <strong>alcohol or drugs</strong> misusing parents abused or neglected their children after return, compared with 29% of parents without these problems. (Farmer et al, 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conditions</strong> were set for parents before return.</td>
<td>Parents were <strong>ambivalent</strong> about the return and/or <strong>isolated</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was clear <strong>evidence of parental change</strong></td>
<td><strong>References:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents and older children had <strong>informal support</strong> from wider family, friends or communities</td>
<td>Farmer (2009), Farmer et al (2011), Wade et al (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foster carers or residential workers</strong> supported parents and children pre and post return</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The NSPCC has been working in partnership with local authorities to develop a new approach

- Created research-informed practice guidance, initially known as ‘Taking Care’.

- Co-delivered Taking Care with 9 local authorities between 2012-2015.

- Aim of Taking Care is to assist practitioners to improve assessment, decision-making, planning and support.

- Taking Care promotes structured professional judgement.

- Improvements need to be driven by senior leadership
Evaluation indicates that changes in practice can make a difference

Parents and children

- Positive about the Taking Care; parents and children have an active role.
- Reunification would not have been considered without it.
- ‘Traffic light system’ very clear; parents understood what changes they needed to make.
- Where the decision was made that a child could not return home, parents described the decision being handled sensitively.

Professionals

Local authorities valued Taking Care as an approach and wanted to continue using it.

- Clear structure, increased social workers’ confidence in decision-making.
- The risk classification table helpful in assessing risk and identifying support for families.
- Suitable for all eligible cases.

www.nspcc.org.uk/takingcare
Wider policy changes are also driving change for children who return home from care.

• In October, the NSPCC and University of Bristol will publish revised Practice Guidance and implementation tools.

• These support recent amendments to the Care Planning Regulations, new statutory guidance on permanence, long-term fostering placements and ceasing to look after a child, and changes to Working Together.

• Ofsted inspection samples include a reunified child and a child for whom reunification is being considered. The need for analytical chronologies and assessments has been a key theme in inspection reports.

• To support this the NSPCC has trained all senior inspectors (HMI) on research messages about good practice in reunification.

• More needs to be done to support birth families and look at all permanence options in the round.