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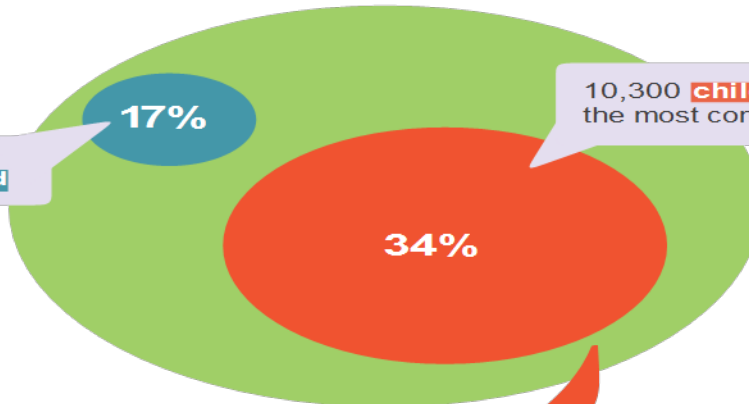
- Returning home to a parent or relative is **the most common outcome** for children in care - **34%** of all children who ceased to be looked after.

- **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 68,840 children in care in England.

30,430 children left care*

17%

5,050 of those were adopted

10,300 children returned home: the most common outcome.

34%

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

Safe or unreported as suffering abuse or neglect

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 signification 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.

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

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.***