

New legislation to keep brothers and sisters connected in care

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Right to maintain contact with siblings to be strengthened in law for children in care via amendment to Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

Children in care will be better supported to build and maintain relationships with their brothers and sisters under new measures brought forward in law by the government, making life better for vulnerable children and ensuring they have the opportunity to get on in life.

All local authorities in England and Wales will be required to promote and facilitate contact for children in care who are separated from their siblings. This change puts sibling contact on an equal footing with parental contact —recognising the vital role these relationships play in providing stability, continuity and emotional support.

Currently, sibling relationships are not prioritised as much as parent relationships for children in care by local authorities. Many care-experienced people have talked about the difficulties of losing contact with siblings as a result of being placed in care, and the long term impact this can have.

The new legislation will ensure that local authorities will do all they can to provide sibling contact, even if, for instance, they are living a long way away from each other. This includes half and step siblings.

It will apply unless it is not in children's best interests, such as in cases of violence or abuse or where social workers have other concerns about wellbeing.

Children's Minister Josh MacAlister said:

It's a travesty that children in care can end up losing contact with their brothers and sisters when they go into care, and we want that contact be maintained wherever possible for the sake of their emotional stability and their futures.

Every child's circumstances are different, but this amendment is aimed at making life better for more vulnerable children and giving them the best possible start in life.

Chris Hoyle, who was in the care system as a child, said:

After being initially separated, being reunited with my brother in the same foster placement changed my life. My brother is the longest relationship I have ever had, by some distance. How do you define the value of that? How do you put a price on still being in contact with the person who loved you first? I can't.

Jonny is a rock in my life. A 6'2 rock who supports the wrong football team. He keeps me grounded in my identity and provides a safety net that has lasted a lifetime.

The Department for Education once called us 'The Hoyle Brothers'. We are a package deal thanks to the bravery of senior staff who decided that sharing a bedroom was not

worth losing something that cannot be bought.

Wherever it is safe and possible, the relationships of siblings in care should be a priority. Those relationships can last a lifetime and are priceless.

Parice, who has experienced the care system, said:

Sibling relationships are often built on a strong foundation of support, offering both emotional reassurance and practical help throughout life.

For those who have experienced the foster care system, these bonds can be especially significant, providing a vital sense of belonging in times of uncertainty. Shared history and memories create a unique connection, alongside similarities that can feel unlike any other relationship.

The amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill was welcomed in the House of Lords on Wednesday 25 March, following continued discussions with stakeholders and parliamentarians. Final confirmation is expected following further debate in the House of Commons after Easter.

This change forms part of the government's wider work to reform children's social care and ensure that every child has the opportunity to grow up in a stable, loving environment.

This includes work to reduce care placements far from home, and allocating £10.8 million for an expansion of Regional Care Co-operatives to enable better placement planning for children in care.

The DfE is also supporting more siblings in care to stay together with ambitious plans to create 10,000 more foster care places, backed by a total investment of £88m, including £25m to expand existing foster carers' homes so they can foster more children, including sibling groups.

This is on top of £2.4 billion of investment in the Families First Partnership Programme to help keep families together through early intervention, a pilot for financial support for kinship carers, and reforms to support for adoptive families.

Cathy Ashley, Chief Executive of Family Rights Group, said:

Growing up alongside brothers or sisters is a fundamental part of childhood that so many of us take for granted. Yet, for too long, our care system has overseen a quiet injustice that the wider public rarely sees: breaking the links between siblings, often when they need one another the most.

By tabling this amendment, the Government is finally righting this historic wrong. When we provide young people with the right scaffolding, we set them up for a lifetime of success, and sibling bonds are the very foundation of that support. This is a victory for care-experienced young people to ensure our system actively protects the relationships that matter most.

Anela Anwar, Chief Executive of Become, said:

We're delighted the government has agreed to change the law to better protect relationships between children in care and their siblings.

Too often, children are separated from their brothers and sisters, with little done to maintain those relationships. This change will strengthen duties on local authorities to keep siblings connected and better protect these vital bonds.

The amendment is part of the government's landmark Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill which is the most transformative piece of child protection legislation in a generation and will put children at the centre of education and social care.

The government will continue working with the sector to support implementation, share best practice, and ensure children across the country benefit from stronger, more stable care arrangements.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-legislation-to-keep-brothers-and-sisters-connected-in-care>