

Guardian for Children
and Young People

**Report on the Wellbeing of
Children and Young People in
Care in South Australia**

2008-09

March 2010



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Contents

Executive summary	1
Background	3
1 This child lives in a kind and nurturing environment.....	4
2 This child is safe and feels safe	6
3 This child is loved.....	8
4 This child is receiving appropriate shelter, clothing and nourishment.....	10
5 This child is cared for in a placement that is stable and secure	12
6 This child has a secure personal space to which she/he can withdraw and where personal things are kept safe.....	14
7 This child has contact with family, friends and cultural community who provide emotional support and identity	15
8 This child has access to health and disability services that meet his/her needs.	17
9 This child is getting an education suited to her/his needs and the opportunity for artistic, cultural and sporting development	19
10 This child understands to the full extent of his/her capacity why he/she is in his/her current circumstances	21
11 This child has knowledge of and participates in decisions that affect him/her...	23
12 This child has regular contact with the same case worker who is skilled, knowledgeable, respectful and advocates energetically in the child's best interests.....	25

Executive summary

A statutory function of the Guardian for Children and Young People is to monitor the circumstances of children under the guardianship, or in the custody, of the Minister for Families and Communities. The feedback and findings of our monitoring activities are reported promptly to the agencies involved and the Minister.

The purpose of this report is to summarise the information for 2008-09 in one place and to inform others of the general conclusions from the monitoring. This is a broad sweep of what the Office hears and documents. Conclusions are made with considerable caution because of the limited reach the Office has to the 2,200 children under guardianship or in custody. The Office calculates that we have some direct knowledge of 10 per cent. The conclusions are therefore descriptive rather than conclusive.

Conclusions should also be treated with caution because the evidence is point-in-time information and does not reflect children's experience over their time in care. For example, while nine in ten children may be in stable placements at the time of conducting the annual reviews, most will have experienced instability at some time in their care history. We should therefore not be complacent about the need to plan for more stability and security because only 10 per cent are in unstable circumstances. The goal is to ensure that children do not experience instability in care at any time. The same qualification can be made for all of the areas we report on.

The Office's record and reporting is conducted within a monitoring framework that uses 12 quality statements about children based on the 37 rights in the children's charter.

If there is one thing to say about the findings it is that most children in state care are well cared for and demonstrate this in their own enthusiasm, achievement and cheerfulness. To support this statement the Office concluded that:

- More than four out of five children in care live in kind and nurturing environments and nine out of ten are in stable placements.
- Most children in care are safe.
- Ninety per cent of children in care have significant people in their lives who show them care and affection in a trusting relationship.
- There have been noted improvements over the past few years in timely access to health and disability services.

- There is ongoing improvement in the attention paid to the educational needs of children.

Each chapter of the report notes areas for attention, where deficits were found. These include:

- The need to reduce the number of residents in residential facilities to a maximum of four, or, in some circumstances, to six, and to replace the large facilities over time with smaller home-like residences.
- More intensive therapeutic and case management services for young people who run away frequently.
- The development of an alternative care plan that articulates future directions for achieving security, choice and stability.
- A review of the timeliness and adequacy of mental health services for children who have suffered trauma and instability.
- Improvements in the quality of rehabilitation programs for young people who have broken the law.
- Further reductions in the rate of suspension and exclusion from schools.
- Increased use of Life Story Books to assist children keep track of, and understand, their history and current circumstances.
- Increased participation of children in decisions about their lives.

Background

One of the statutory functions of the South Australian Guardian for Children and Young People is to monitor the circumstances of children under the guardianship, or in the custody, of the Minister.

The Monitoring Report brings together the observations and data gathered by the Office of the Guardian in 2008-09 to report on the wellbeing of children and young people under the guardianship or in the custody of the Minister for Families and Communities, hereinafter referred to as children and young people in care. The data is organised under 12 quality statements which are derived from the 37 rights in the *Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care*.

The task of monitoring is complex, requiring the application of limited resources to a range of circumstances for the more than 2,200 children and young people in care in South Australia. The Office of the Guardian calculates that it has some direct knowledge of 10 per cent of children in care. However, the nature of the Office's outreach activities means the Office sees proportionally many more in residential settings than in private homes. The task of reporting is equally complex because the Office does not want to detract from the good work done by so many adults caring for children while at the same time highlighting areas of concern.

The information in this report is collected from:

- Observations and conversations with children, young people and workers during visits to residential care and secure custody facilities.
- Audits of Annual Reviews conducted in Families SA offices. In 2008-09 the Office of the Guardian attended reviews of 5.7 per cent of children and young people on long-term orders.
- Analysis of requests for intervention some of which required restricted action and some of which were investigated further by the Office.
- State-wide consultation with workers.
- Statistical data primarily provided by Families SA.
- A bi-annual review of safety records in secure custody facilities.
- Information collected as part of major systemic inquiries, which in 2008-09 was into the significance of quality contact between children and young people and their case workers

1 This child lives in a kind and nurturing environment

The focus for someone considering becoming a carer should be on wanting to provide a home and a heart for a child who can't live with their family.

GCYP Youth Advisor

1.1 Key message

There is evidence to suggest that more than four out of five children who are in care live in kind and nurturing environments. The children who are more likely to miss out are in emergency placements, in large residential units or in detention. However, even in these circumstances there are many examples of good respectful relationships and many acts of kindness and understanding.

1.2 Limitations to our monitoring

The following observations are based on an audit of 5.7 per cent of annual reviews for children under long-term care and protection orders, periodic visits to residential facilities, including units within the two youth training centres, and data requested from Families SA. As a group, children and young people in residential settings have higher needs than those in family-based care and our general observations may therefore be influenced by this. Our conclusions should be treated with caution because of the limited active monitoring we are able to do.

1.3 Key findings in 2008-09

Eighty-four per cent of the children whose circumstances were reviewed and audited in the annual review process were judged to be in a kind environment. Of the 16 per cent who were not, 11 per cent were in new or tenuous placements and a small number of young people were reported to be missing from their placements.

The numbers in emergency motel accommodation have fallen significantly from 72 at 30 June 2008 to 49 at 30 June 2009 with the median duration of stay halving to 104 days.

During our visits to residential care facilities our advocates observed many acts of kindness and positive engagement between staff and residents such as:

- Joining in games and doing homework together.

- A youth worker consistently offering support to a young person who had withdrawn to his room.
- Conversations at dinner about what had been good about their day and what had not been good.

However, there is evidence of inconsistency in the rules and boundaries in some residential units causing confusion and frustration. Some residents in the larger units also complained about the “violence because there’s too many kids”. This was confirmed by some youth workers who said that they spend more time “putting out fires” than engaging positively with residents.

During visits to youth training centres, many residents reported being treated with respect by the staff, and the advocates observed positive interactions between staff and residents, such as:

- Staff initiating games with residents and sharing jokes.
- Residents initiating conversations with staff who responded positively.
- Working together on a vegetable garden outside the unit.

The physical environment of the Magill training centre detracts from positive relationships because, among other deficiencies, residents have no quiet or calm space to withdraw to.

1.4 Areas for attention

A commitment to reduce over time the number of residents in any one residential facility to a maximum of four, and in some circumstances, to six.

2 This child is safe and feels safe

She is there to help us in bad times and to keep us safe when bad stuff was going on at home.

11 year old girl

2.1 Key message

Most children in care are safe. A small number of children are unsafe, and this is most evident with those who are missing from placement, or who run away frequently.

2.2 Limitations to our monitoring

The following observations are based on an audit of 5.7 per cent of annual reviews for children under long-term care and protection orders, regular but infrequent visits to residential facilities, including units within the two youth training centres, and reporting the key issues in requests for intervention by this Office. As a group, children and young people in residential settings have higher needs than those in family-based care and our general observations may therefore be influenced by this. Our conclusions should be treated with caution because of the limited active monitoring we are able to do.

2.3 Key findings in 2008-09

Ninety-one per cent of children and young people whose circumstances were reviewed were assessed as being safe. In five per cent of reviewed cases the Families SA office had such limited contact with the child it was impossible to assess. Three of the nine matters that the Office of the Guardian investigated in 2008-09 had issues of safety and 11 per cent of the requests for intervention included serious concerns about the child's safety.

The results of our 2009 inquiry into what children want from contact with their case worker showed that most children get a sense of safety from regular contact with their worker. This was particularly evident in the interviews with younger children. However the case file evidence in this inquiry found that 40 per cent of children did not have regular contact with their worker, assessed as more than five visits a year.

Perceptions of safety in residential care seemed strongly correlated with a smaller number of residents in the house and with a concerted organisational effort to assist staff with positive behaviour management strategies. The use of physical restraint of young people has fallen significantly across the board. The fall is

inconsistent though with some facilities using restraint too often. [For further information see GCYP (2010) *Policy and Practice in the Use of Physical Restraint of Children in SA Residential Facilities.*]

There are persistent issues of residents running away from residential placements and being at high risk. While the number may be relatively small the risk of exploitation and harm is very high.

In the youth training centres the introduction of resident committees and the complaints mechanism has given young residents direct communication with the Centres' managers. During visits the residents expressed confidence in both these mechanisms for raising matters of concern. Latterly an exit survey has also been offered to residents on leaving. An improved procedure for responding to residents assessed as being at high risk of self harm was introduced recently. It is too early to report on satisfaction with it.

In 2007 as part of this Office's review of programs in the youth training centres the researchers conducted a social climate survey of staff. While the response rate was low there was some indication that real and perceived safety for residents was low. The recommendation to repeat the survey regularly with both residents and staff has been rejected by Families SA.

2.4 Areas for attention

Improved intensive therapeutic and case management response to young people who run away frequently.

Introduction of social climate surveys of resident and staff views in the youth training centres and in residential care to improve the systematic monitoring of real and perceived safety.

3 This child is loved

3.1 Key messages

Every child should be loved. There is evidence to show that 90 per cent of children in care have significant people in their lives who show them care and affection in a trusting relationship. We must do better for the one in ten who does not.

3.2 Limitations to our monitoring

The following observations are based on an audit of 5.7 per cent of annual reviews for children under long-term care and protection orders and periodic visits to residential facilities, including units within the two youth training centres. As a group, children and young people in residential settings have higher needs than those in family-based care and our general observations may therefore be influenced by this. Our conclusions should be treated with caution because of the limited active monitoring we are able to do.

3.3 Key findings in 2008-09

In the audit of annual reviews at least one significant adult provided consistent emotional support to the child in 90 per cent of cases. Of the 10 per cent who did not have a significant adult to show them love, half were young people approaching independence and would soon have no statutory officer involved either. They will be very much on their own. As one Youth Advisor said, "Being told at 18 that you're on your own isn't my idea of a celebration."

It is undoubtedly harder to establish emotional support for a child in a residential setting where workers are present for shifts. However, there were a number of examples of closeness and trust such as:

- A resident speaking of his trust in his key worker and the key worker speaking about the importance of the relationship to him.
- Youth workers attending school and program events to celebrate with the residents.
- A previous resident invited to dinner every week at the house.

The Office has very little direct evidence of emotional support in secure settings but an advocate observed a number of staff wishing a resident good luck as he was preparing to appear in court. The recently introduced exit surveys may provide more evidence in secure settings.

3.4 Areas for attention

Improvement in the number of children and young people with a significant adult in their lives to at least 93 per cent in 2009-10, as measured in the audit of annual reviews.

4 This child is receiving appropriate shelter, clothing and nourishment

I made a curry once. I put in the usual veggies and some beans and then about eight of these little red chillies. I couldn't eat it, it was so hot. My Mum and sister managed to eat a bit but not me. I've never made a curry since.

GCYP Youth Advisor

4.1 Key message

Most children receive appropriate shelter, with the exception of those who are missing from placement. The physical environment for children in motel-type accommodation, the large residential units and in the Magill training centre, which will be replaced in 2011, is unsuitable for long stays.

4.2 Limitations to our monitoring

The following observations are based on an audit of 5.7 per cent of annual reviews for children under long-term care and protection orders and periodic visits to residential facilities, including units within the two youth training centres. As a group, children and young people in residential settings have higher needs than those in family-based care and our general observations may therefore be influenced by this. Our conclusions should be treated with caution because of the limited active monitoring we are able to do.

4.3 Key findings in 2008-09

Based on the audits of annual reviews, 95 per cent of children in out of home care were receiving appropriate shelter, clothing and nourishment.

Residential accommodation for young people has increased over the past few years and most of the new residences are of an appropriate size accommodating three or four children or young people. The exception to this is the planned opening of two new 12 bed facilities in the metropolitan area, to be operated by Families SA.

During visits, residents reported satisfaction with clothing and food provided. The larger units have more difficulty though in involving the residents in meal preparation. As one recent resident said, "I did a bit of cooking in residential care – helping out in the kitchen. But when it came to living by myself, I just figured it out."

The planning of the new youth training centre will take account of the views of residents of the existing detention centres. Both detention centres now routinely consult with the residents about their needs and views on conditions within the centres and residents report satisfaction with the consultation and feedback process. Initiatives such as the vegetable garden at one unit in the Magill training centre have been warmly received by residents.

4.4 Areas for attention

An alternative care plan should include a commitment within four years to first reduce the number of residents in the larger residential facilities and then to replace the facilities with smaller home-like residences.

5 This child is cared for in a placement that is stable and secure

I wouldn't change anything.

14 year old girl

5.1 Key message

The evidence suggests that nine out of ten children are in stable placements and there have been falls in the numbers of children and length of stay in motel-type accommodation. However, longitudinal evidence from other sources tells us that instability and insecurity remain significant issues that require vigilance and good forward planning.

5.2 Limitations to our monitoring

The following observations are based on an audit of 5.7 per cent of annual reviews for children under long-term care and protection orders, consultation with workers, periodic visits to residential facilities, including units within the two youth training centres, and data requested from Families SA. As a group, children and young people in residential settings have higher needs than those in family-based care and our general observations may therefore be influenced by this. Our conclusions should be treated with caution because of the limited active monitoring we are able to do.

5.3 Key findings in 2008-09

The evidence below is point-in-time information only and longitudinal evidence from other sources, such as data reported by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and research such as that conducted by Dr Paul Delfabbro indicate significantly higher rates of placement change.

Anecdotal reports and the audits of annual reviews suggest that nine out of ten children are in stable placements. This was no change from 2007-08. Ten children and young people, of a total 93, had recently had a high number of placement changes. In one case a child had been in four placements within a recent six-month period and in a second, a child had six placements within two years, including two emergency placements.

The changes to alternative care support payments were welcomed by many in the field consultation and several commented on how well the process of change had been handled. Most Families SA offices have maintained or introduced forums for foster carers and workers report improved relationships as a result. The support to

relative carers has improved as has their access to respite services, though the demand for respite still outstrips provision.

It remains difficult to find suitable placements for 12 to 15 year olds. It was reported in the field consultation that few foster carers are able or willing to accommodate adolescents. There are also few residential options in country areas resulting in young people being moved from country to city.

Staff skills and approach to young residents in transitional accommodation houses was reported to have significantly improved from 2007. The purpose of transitional accommodation houses has not been articulated and the name does not reflect the reality of longer-term stays for most residents.

There was a significant decrease in the median duration of stay in motel-type accommodation from 203 days in 2008 to 104 days in 2009 and a decrease in the numbers, from 72 at 30 June 2008 to 49 at 30 June 2009.

The purpose of residential care is not articulated. It is said to not be a permanent placement option but in reality it is often a long-term arrangement and some young people are satisfied to be in residential care for the foreseeable future. Residents of the smaller residential facilities were more likely to report a sense of security and stability. The proportion of young people in residential care who are accommodated in smaller facilities has increased slightly from 68 per cent at 30 June 2008 to 70 per cent at 30 June 2009.

More than half of the young residents of the training centres are on remand awaiting trial on alleged offences. While their remand period is typically short it is preferable that children await court judgements and sentencing while living in the community, if safety is not an issue.

5.4 Areas for attention

Further falls in the number of children staying temporarily in motel-type accommodation.

The development of an alternative care plan that articulates the future directions for alternative care in achieving security, choice and stability.

6 This child has a secure personal space to which she/he can withdraw and where personal things are kept safe

One thing is when kids find out you're fostered they bully you a lot. You don't tell them but they find out anyway.

16 year old young woman

6.1 Key message

The vast majority of children in care have a secure personal space. The only issue brought to our attention was the lack of quiet space for residents in residential and secure facilities that accommodate higher numbers of children.

6.2 Limitations to our monitoring

The following observations are based on an audit of 5.7 per cent of annual reviews for children under long-term care and protection orders and periodic visits to residential facilities, including units within the two youth training centres. Our conclusions should be treated with caution because of the limited active monitoring we are able to do.

6.3 Key findings in 2008-09

Consistent with 2007-08, most children in care have a secure personal space. The glaring exception is for residents at the Magill training centre where the physical design of the facility prohibits withdrawal to personal space.

In the annual reviews there was insufficient evidence in three of the 93 circumstances reviewed due to lack of contact with the child.

Early findings from an inquiry into the use of restraint in residential facilities indicated that a quiet space to withdraw to is important to maintaining a calm environment, but that the physical design of the larger facilities do not allow for this.

6.4 Areas for attention

The design of new congregate facilities should ensure secure personal space and safe withdrawal to a quiet space as needed.

7 This child has contact with family, friends and cultural community who provide emotional support and identity

Connecting regularly ... not only helps to develop relationships with members of your family, but also helps you to develop your relationship skills with other people such as your friends and partners.

GCYP Youth Advisor

7.1 Key message

Good efforts are made to ensure family contact is regular and appropriate, though a significant minority have no or very limited contact with family. There is some evidence that a small number of children do not see their siblings if separated, or do not see them often enough. There is growing awareness and assistance to the cultural needs of Aboriginal children in care.

7.2 Limitations to our monitoring

The following observations are based on an audit of 5.7 per cent of annual reviews for children under long-term care and protection orders, consultation with workers, periodic visits to residential facilities, including units within the two youth training centres, and data requested from Families SA.

7.3 Key findings in 2008-09

While good efforts, and in some cases, exceptional efforts, were made to ensure family contact was maintained, a significant minority (13 per cent), as measured in the audit of annual reviews had no or limited contact with family. The connection between siblings in separate placements remains an issue. Social workers reported a high level of compliance with court-ordered parental access but were frustrated at the inflexibility in some cases and the seeming disregard of the child's views or best interests.

Close friendships will sustain children and young people in the present and for the future. Some residential environments can do more to normalise the development of friendships.

The field consultation concluded that access to mentors varies significantly, with some reporting ready access and others reporting none. The reason for the inconsistency is unclear.

Compliance with part of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle is improving with 39.1 per cent of Aboriginal children living with an Aboriginal relative in 2009 compared to 27.6 per cent in 2005. [Note: compliance is complex to measure and report, so a more comprehensive monitoring is required before any conclusions can be reached.] Families SA has introduced guidelines for social workers in cultural identity planning and additional reference material was available to workers and carers in 2008-09.

7.4 Areas for attention

Annual reviews should specifically note a child's satisfaction with contact with their siblings, where they are separated.

Review the access to mentors to identify why there is reported inconsistency.

8 This child has access to health and disability services that meet his/her needs

It would be alright if you could talk to someone that doesn't talk to the staff - you know confidential

young person in secure care

8.1 Key message

There have been noted improvements over the past few years in timely access to general health and disability services and to mental health assessments. The waiting time for follow-up therapeutic service is growing. A small number of young people with disabilities are disadvantaged by last-minute preparation for their transition to adult services.

8.2 Limitations to our monitoring

The following observations are based on interviews with managers of residential care and the youth training centres, consultation with workers, and an audit of 5.7 per cent of annual reviews for children under long-term care and protection orders.

8.3 Key findings in 2008-09

There is no reliable aggregate data to determine the state of health or provision of health services for children in care as a group.

The benefits of the Rapid Response commitment are still evident in improved cooperation between agencies, familiarity with the needs of children in state care and improved access to services.

More than one in four of the requests to our Office for assistance with individual children were about access to health or disability services.

However, annual review audits suggest improvement in timely access to services from the previous year and there were improvements too in access to health services in the training centres. The audit found that the level of non-provision of health or disability services was at 10 per cent, down from 14 per cent in 2007-08.

There were also improved health services to residents of Families SA residential services with the commencement of a formal arrangement with The Second Story for health assessments.

An intensive therapeutic service provided by the Yarrow Place Youth Team is about to commence for a small number of young people with high needs.

Anecdotal reports from social workers indicate that mental health assessments are prompt but waiting times for follow-up services are growing again to three to six months.

Access to disability services has improved markedly in the past few years, perhaps with the exception of remote areas and for young people making the transition to adult disability services.

8.4 Areas for attention

A review of the adequacy of mental health services for children in care would identify who is missing out and what is required to intervene early in addressing the distress resulting from trauma or instability.

9 This child is getting an education suited to her/his needs and the opportunity for artistic, cultural and sporting development

Kids in care need individual one on one as I couldn't have gone back [to school] without the mentor from the government.

17 year old young man

9.1 Key message

There is ongoing improvement in the attention paid to the educational needs of children, particularly in the use of Individual Education Plans and in programs to assist students who are at most risk of dis-engaging from school.

9.2 Limitations to our monitoring

The following observations are based on an audit of 5.7 per cent of annual reviews for children under long-term care and protection orders, consultation with workers, periodic visits to residential facilities, including units within the two youth training centres, and data received from the Department of Education and Children's Services.

9.3 Key findings in 2008-09

The audits of annual reviews indicate improvements in support for education and other developmental opportunities. For eight children, of a total 92, skill development and appropriate education was not supported. Of school age children included in the audit process, 83 per cent had Individual Education Plans completed.

Data on the rates of suspension and exclusion in 2008 suggest a slight rise since 2007 but a fall since 2004.

The overall absence rates are slightly higher for students in care compared with the state rate of absence, but some sub-groups of children in care (Aboriginal, non-English speaking background and children with disabilities) have a lower absence rate than their peers in that same sub-group who are not in care.

Access to tutors for additional support appears inconsistent and not clearly related to depth of need.

In general the environment in the larger residential facilities is not conducive to learning because of the noise and limited adult to child attention. The smaller

residential units have more capacity to assist with home study, transport to school and liaison with educators.

The field consultation suggests there are growing benefits from the introduction of Individual Education Plans, particularly in the cooperation between schools, the case workers and carers.

The expansion of the Innovative Community Action Networks supported by the Department of Education and Children's Services is welcome as is the ongoing funding of the school retention strategy that is specific to students in out of home care.

Access to activity and cultural programs in the training centres has improved. Rehabilitation programs remain under-developed.

9.4 Areas for attention

Further reduction in the rate of suspension and exclusion of students under guardianship.

Increased rate of use of Individual Education Plans up from the 83 per cent recorded in the 2008-09 audit of annual reviews.

Improvements to the quality of rehabilitation programs in the youth training centres.

10 This child understands to the full extent of his/her capacity why he/she is in his/her current circumstances

[I like it when] she explains things really well and treats me like a normal person and not some foster kid. I think she genuinely cares when she helps me and my sister with our Story Books.

14 year old girl

10.1 Key message

There is evidence to suggest that nine out of ten children and young people have an age-appropriate understanding of their current circumstances. Over half had Life Story Books to record their history and keep track of their experiences.

10.2 Limitations to our monitoring

The following observations are based on an audit of 5.7 per cent of annual reviews for children under long-term care and protection orders and periodic visits to residential facilities, including units within the two youth training centres.

10.3 Key findings in 2008-09

Most children and young people in care rely on oral information from their carers and social workers to understand their circumstances. Just over half of the children and young people whose circumstances were reviewed in annual reviews had Life Story Books. Despite this, there was evidence in the audit of annual reviews that 91 per cent of children and young people had an appropriate understanding of their current circumstances. This was a significant improvement from the 2007-08 audit where only 66 per cent were confirmed as having an appropriate understanding. For seven children, their long-term foster or relative carers were not prepared to share with them that they were under guardianship of the Minister or why they did not live with their birth parents, and the carers were resistant to the social worker sharing this information.

Children in residential care also demonstrated good understanding of the reasons for them being in care but often expressed doubt or resentment about the reasons for being in residential care. Very few young people in residential care knew about annual reviews.

We have little evidence from children or young people in the training centres about their knowledge of why they are in their current circumstances. [Note: It is not

appropriate that the GCYP advocates ask the residents about the reasons for being in secure custody.]

10.4 Areas for attention

Increased use of Life Story Books to assist children and young people keep track of and understand their history and current circumstances.

11 This child has knowledge of and participates in decisions that affect him/her

My social worker and I have a relationship that has been built over time so that I can voice my opinion. I definitely got a say about my transitioning

18 year old young woman

11.1 Key message

There is clear policy on child and youth participation in decisions and there have been noted improvements in practice. It is not yet systematised though and the involvement of children depends to a large extent on the commitment of individual workers.

11.2 Limitations to our monitoring

The following observations are based on the findings of an inquiry into case worker contact with children, an audit of 5.7 per cent of annual reviews for children under long-term care and protection orders and periodic visits to residential facilities, including units within the two youth training centres.

11.3 Key findings in 2008-09

The audits of annual reviews indicate a small improvement in participation of children in decisions but still only 21 per cent participated directly (in presence or surveys) in the annual review process itself. Some offices did very well at participation while others gave it no priority.

The complaints process and residents' advisory groups in the training centres appear to be working well. Residents were not routinely asked for their account of serious incidents involving them but there was significant improvement in the proportion of residents who were asked. Exit interviews have recently been introduced to the training centres to provide further information about residents' views about conditions.

The 2009 major inquiry focused on what children thought about their contact with their case workers. Half of the children interviewed said that their views had been taken into account on important decisions. The case file evidence tells us that in 70 per cent of cases, some attempt had been made by the case worker over the previous 12 months to include children in major decisions. This proportion reduces to 50 per cent over the previous three months.

Only 31 of the 49 children and young people who had had face to face contact with their case worker in the month preceding the gathering of evidence had their views recorded on the file.

11.4 Areas for attention

Increase the rate of direct participation in the annual review process, through attendance or surveying views.

Improve the rate of recording on file the views of children about circumstances and decisions.

12 This child has regular contact with the same case worker who is skilled, knowledgeable, respectful and advocates energetically in the child's best interests

She found me a safe place to live in... not a bad place... she told me what her job was, in her office.

11 year old boy

12.1 Key message

Four out of five children have contact with a case worker who understands their needs. The contact is not as regular as it should be nor as often as the child wants.

12.2 Limitations to our monitoring

The following observations are based on the findings of an inquiry into case worker contact with children, an audit of 5.7 per cent of annual reviews for children under long-term care and protection orders and periodic visits to residential facilities, including units within the two youth training centres.

12.3 Key findings in 2008-09

The audit of annual reviews indicates improvement in the quality of the contact with case workers, with 81 per cent assessed as having adequate contact with a case worker who understands them, compared to 71 per cent the year before.

The field consultation supports this improvement with workers from other agencies reporting greater responsiveness, knowledge of children and communication from case workers.

As a result of our monitoring in 2007-08 we undertook a major inquiry into the quality of the relationship between case workers and children. The conclusions from the 2009 inquiry into what children think about their contact with their case workers included:

- Most children like their workers and want to see them.
- Social workers like working with children and want to see them more often.
- Most children have a case worker allocated, with only four per cent with no case worker allocated at the time of collecting evidence. However 16 per

cent of children will not have a worker for some time over a 12 month period and they are aware of this and feel lonely or cross or perplexed about this.

- Almost one in five children have not met their allocated worker (or at least there was no evidence of it on the case file.)
- Half of the children in care are likely to experience a change of worker over a 12 month period and sometimes with no explanation offered.
- Children want privacy in their contact with their worker but almost one third who have face to face contact do not have private time with their worker.
- Children want monthly face to face contact at least but the average length of time is 10 weeks between visits.
- At least 25 per cent are not seen regularly by their case worker (that is, more than five times a year) and for no documented reason.

12.4 Areas for attention

More regular contact between child and case worker, assisted by consistent guidance in supervision about what is expected and an organisational review of work-load demands.