

Residential Child Care debate and questions from the House of Lords

26th June 2006

Children's Homes

6.57 pm

The Earl of Listowel rose to ask Her Majesty's Government what is their strategy for children's homes.

The noble Earl said: My Lords, I hope it may helpful if I first provide some context for the subject of this debate, the evolution of children's homes and their international context. I shall then examine some of the strengths and weaknesses of current government policy. Underpinning this is a concern that Her Majesty's Government take a more strategic grasp on this challenging area of policy. I shall read from my notes, because there is a lot of ground to cover in a short time.

A turning point in the history of children's homes was the Seebohm report of 1968. There followed the move from specialist to generic social care. According to Wolmar, the author of *Forgotten Children: the Secret Abuse Scandal in Children's Homes*, this signalled the loss of specialism in residential childcare. I hear from those working at that time that many of the best managers in children's homes chose then to move from residential care to management of the new social service departments. It was intended that residential childcare workers would be required to have the new social work qualification. That did not happen, perhaps because of the cost it would have incurred.

At the same time, there was a large increase in children coming into care and, by 1975, there were 34,600 children in residential care. That same year, a period of national austerity began. Starved services and poorly qualified and supported staff provided part of the context for the abuse scandals that followed: Beckford, Pindown and Kincora, to name but a few. A regular attender of the Associate Parliamentary Group for Children and Young People In and Leaving Care, Mark Belsham, described to me his experience of a children's home in, I think, the 1970s. One of the staff regularly took one of the boys from the dormitories at night. The boy later hanged himself, and was discovered by Mark Belsham and his fellow residents. In his account, Christian Wolmar expressed his surprise that no audit was kept of the number of abuse cases over this time.

Moving to the 1990s, Norman Warner, now the noble Lord, Lord Warner, produced his report on staff recruitment and training, *Choosing with Care*, and Sir William Utting produced his two reports. In his opening remarks to *People Like Us*, Sir William urges that the best safeguard for children is an environment of overall excellence. The new Labour Government took their cue from Sir William and entitled their first ring-fenced spending programme on looked-after children: Quality Protects. Sir William Utting produced a follow-up report, finding that safeguards had significantly improved and that children's homes were far more open. He emphasised the need for looked-after children to have a range of appropriate

placements, including good quality residential placements. Again, the Government took their cue from him and entitled their second programme of investment and change to commissioning: Choice Protects.

However, partly because the reputation of children's homes had become so tainted, the number of placements has now declined to 8,550. Generally speaking, these are now the children who have experienced the most disruption and who are the most challenging to work with. Yet, in 1998, 70 per cent to 80 per cent of staff had no relevant qualification. The Government have set a target of 80 per cent of the workforce to have an NVQ level 3. I would be grateful if the Minister will write to me with details of how that is progressing.

Perhaps I may now move from the historical to the international context. Across the English-speaking world, where standards of staff qualifications tend to be variable and are often poor, there are similar histories of abuse. Other than Belgium, I am not aware of such patterns in Europe. The Department for Education and Skills has funded research into residential childcare in Denmark and Germany. Their staff are known as pedagogues. About two-thirds of staff in Danish children's homes have completed a three-year higher education qualification. There are few job vacancies, and it is a highly esteemed profession. In France, Germany and Denmark, it seems to be fair to say that they place their best professionals with their most vulnerable, needy children. About 50 per cent of looked-after children in those countries are in residential care—they have such faith in it. In France, at least, the main focus is on reintegrating children with their families. The expertise of the home is used to support parents and children. Where reintegration is not possible, young people may continue in their residential home into their late 20s, if they wish to do so.

Researchers asked pedagogues what was their first duty to their children. Upwards of 80 per cent of Danes said that it was to support their children. About 95 per cent of Germans gave a similar response, as did about 41 per cent of English residential childcare workers. By contrast, 59 per cent of the British placed first the need to follow procedure. That suggests that less-qualified English staff lack the confidence to provide the emotional support to their children that Germans and Danes can. When I told a German pedagogue that English residential childcare workers were directed not to travel alone in a car with a child, he laughed in surprise. I have spoken with very experienced practitioners in this country, and when I saw one of them give a child a hug, he felt that he had to give an explanation for his behaviour.

So, that is the context. A lack of strategic thinking led to a situation in which our most vulnerable children were cared for by our least qualified and supported carers. The situation must at least have contributed to the widespread historic abuse of children in care.

What have the Government done to remedy the situation? I have already mentioned the very welcome Quality Protects and Choice Protects programmes. The establishment of the Commission for Social Care Inspection has been welcomed by children's homes managers because it enables them to have more control of the admission of children and allows them to ensure a balanced clientele, rather than simply having to respond to crisis admissions from local authorities. There are many highly experienced and dedicated people in the field, and research suggests that morale is remarkably good given the circumstances. Even so, vacancies are at

upwards of 11 per cent in children's home, and double that in London. That is significantly higher than vacancy rates for family and child social workers.

The introduction of children's trusts and their boost to multi-agency working should strengthen the role and effectiveness of residential childcare. The promotion of multi-disciplinary team working—teachers, nurses and social workers functioning within a children's home—is much to be welcomed. The Government's funding of the National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care is also most welcome.

However, what are the current weaknesses? The most immediate and obvious is the apparent ineffectiveness of the strategy for commissioning good-quality placements. Short-term thinking seems to be allowing some of the bad providers to drive out some of the good. The Independent Children's Homes Association says that,

"many of the models that influence purchasing strategies in a significant number of areas are more applicable to the purchasing of manufactured goods than to the purchase of childcare resources".

The ICHA believes,

"that there is a crisis in childcare fuelled by very significant examples of appalling childcare practice where the needs of the budget holder or performance targets override the interests of the child".

That concern is widely held within the sector and not just by the independents.

I shall conclude as I see the time. I look forward to hearing my noble friend Lord Ramsbotham perhaps discuss the role that children's homes can play in keeping children out of custody. I also hope that the Minister will find this debate helpful in the preparation of the forthcoming looked-after children Green Paper. Looking back, one can see how the lack of a strategy contributed to the abuses of children in care. As I say, there is considerable concern about the commissioning of residential childcare. I hope the Minister will say what more is being contemplated to encourage regional commissioning.

Although I welcome the NVQs in childcare, the professional capacity of residential childcare workers is still profoundly lacking. Will the Minister consider a transformation fund for residential childcare similar to that for early-years childcare workers? Residential childcare caters to such a wide range of children with varying needs. Children's homes need a clear focus and purpose. Will the Minister consider encouraging the introduction of tiered provision catering to different levels of need? I am most grateful to noble Lords who, at such short notice, will be contributing to this debate, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Lord Ramsbotham: My Lords, I apologise for my late arrival. I was taken by surprise at the start of the debate. I hope my discourtesy will be forgiven.

It is always a privilege to take part in a debate that has been promoted by my noble friend Lord Listowel. One has come to appreciate that the subjects he chooses are invariably relevant not just now but for the future, particularly in connection with children, who will be our future.

The subject is the strategy for children's homes. I have to admit that my knowledge of children's homes is not great. But I have been involved with secure children's homes, which I believe should be part of the equation. One thing has worried me with the children I have come across in the criminal justice system. So many agencies are responsible for them in one form or another that there is a huge danger that any attempt at joined-up care will break down because there are so many cracks in the system through which they can fall.

I appreciate that there is a Minister for Children sitting in the Department for Education and Skills. That gives me no concern, because she must be somewhere, but I find it surprising that the Minister for Children does not have responsibility for—for example—the operation of the criminal justice system on children. It would make sense for her to do so and then to be able to spread the influence of all the other activities connected with children into the criminal justice system, so that children receive the same treatment.

They say that soldiers can only do things and think in threes. To prove that to be absolutely correct, I should have liked to have discussed three separate issues: first, what is the strategy for secure children's homes; secondly, what is the strategy for those who come under the criminal justice system? I decided to concentrate on the third: what is the strategy for one disadvantaged group who fall under both those categories; that is, looked-after children when they come into the hands of the criminal justice system?

I realised when I read the statistics from the criminal justice system that looked-after children are invariably the most deprived and most socially excluded group of any taken into young offenders' institutions. I was therefore not surprised when reading the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister publication *Transitions: young adults with complex needs* to find that the second-highest group of young adults who access services were the 11 per cent of care leavers. The only category that beat that was homeless people. That was interesting to me, because one would feel that if the system was working properly, care really would mean care. In fact, I do not find that that is so.

I was a member of the inquiry conducted by the noble Lord, Lord Carlile, into the use of restraint and seclusion in children's homes. During that inquiry, one thing that struck me most about all young offenders, but especially those coming from care, was the huge number of mental health problems found. It concerned me that the only secure children's home with mental health on its agenda was Orchard Lodge, near Crystal Palace, which had been run for years remarkably well by Southwark Council—as demonstrated by the fact that many of its staff had been there for a considerable time. All those concerned with looked-after children realise that continuity of care is critical. The home has now been privatised and sold off. The concern of those running it was that all the expertise that they had built up over the years would be lost.

I mention that because, in connection with strategy, I should like to know what the strategy is for the mental health treatment of young people coming into the hands of the criminal justice system and entering children's homes.

The issue of mental health was brought home very starkly to me when I received a copy of a publication by the National Children's Bureau on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills. I am sure that the publication is well known to the Minister. It is entitled *Tell them not to forget about us*. It is a paper commissioned as a guide to practice with looked-after children when they enter custody. What I found disturbing is that it states:

"For most young people the local authority remains their 'corporate parent' and continues to have statutory and moral responsibilities for providing that young person with the support any good parent would".

Later, in the body of the report, we find that, far from that being the case:

"The picture that emerged was one of fragmented planning and poor outcomes. There was a tendency for the welfare approach of local authority children's services to be marginalised whilst youth justice processes took centre stage. Yet children's services are those that should be providing looked after children with holistic support into adulthood, long after the youth justice system has bowed out. This is not a criticism of the many dedicated practitioners involved with the children in the project. There were examples of effective joint working but these were achieved in spite of, rather than because of, the systems within which practitioners were operating. The children themselves expressed a real fear of being forgotten in the midst of this confusion".

I mention this in connection with what I said at the beginning about the position of the Minister for Children because the report also highlights that part of the difficulty that arises for these children is that, if they enter the criminal justice system, they are subject to two different planning systems. That is because the Department for Education and Skills, which has responsibility for looked-after children, and the Youth Justice Board function within completely different conceptual frameworks. The DfES framework is said to be welfare, and the Youth Justice Board framework is said to be criminogenic. The danger of operating in isolation from each other is that particularly vulnerable children will fall through the cracks. It seems to me that the work done by the Youth Justice Board is always to strengthen the sentence-planning process because of the targets and performance indicators that it must meet for another ministry, while the burden of the common assessment framework under which the Department for Education and Skills works goes in a completely different direction.

I am very sorry for the Minister, because much of what I am saying refers to another ministry and another judgment. Yet the responsibility for children, particularly vulnerable children, rests very firmly with him. I do not know whether he saw the clutch of letters in the *Guardian* this morning under the general title, "Protecting children from abuse", but one, from someone called Anver Jeevanjee, says that no one really seems to care for young people when they get banged up and that,

"this is the main cause of our current juvenile delinquency and hooliganism, despite us being one of the world's richest economies".

The letter also says:

"The knee-jerk attitude of politicians, advertisers and parents, and demonisation by the media is largely responsible".

Even more significant to me was the letter from the chairman of the Association of Youth Offending Team Managers, who said:

"Youth offending teams are committed to working with others to prevent crime and antisocial behaviour"—

which is what the noble Earl was talking about—

"but we are battling against the flood of new legislation and new initiatives. Along with other agencies, we need to be allowed to keep our eyes on the ball, not to be constantly distracted by media-grabbing pronouncements from politicians condemning our efforts".

That is powerful stuff. You may say that the association is not totally connected with these children but it is, because it has to pick these children up and do something with them. There is a danger at the moment that local authorities are neglecting children who are in the hands of the criminal justice system, and that their resettlement is being made more complicated as a result. I hope that when the Minister considers the strategy for children's homes, he will not forget the strategy for secure children's homes and other places where those who break the law go, because they must be included in an overall strategy for this very serious problem.

Baroness Walmsley: My Lords, I thank the noble Earl, Lord Listowel, for introducing the debate. I do not know where your Lordships' House would be without him to raise the voice of these most disadvantaged children. He does a wonderful job.

There is some good news about children's homes. Children can enjoy living in good children's homes. Their behaviour can be significantly modified and improved in good children's homes. Some children prefer them because they feel threatened by a family environment, and they prefer to have a peer group—other young people who can understand how they feel and who feel the same way—in the same establishment. Some young people can gain education and skills and tackle long-standing health problems in good children's homes. The trouble is that not all our children's homes come up to the standards that we would all want for all our children.

Many organisations representing children are united in the improvements they call for. They would like to see the voice of the child in care treated with a great deal more importance, the children treated as individuals with brains, feelings and wishes, and provided with more stability. They would like local authorities to stop changing the children's placements, not make them subject to policy changes in their local authority, try to reduce the turnover of staff so that children can develop strong relationships, and stop moving them from school to school.

Organisations are also asking for more independent representation and for someone whom young people can regard as a confidante, especially when they are in trouble. Specifically, a young person who runs away from a children's home and then comes back needs someone independent who they can talk to about why they

ran away and, perhaps, why they came back, and who could look at those causes to see how they might be addressed.

On education, it is salutary to remember that we are spending £2 billion on children in care, yet only 8 per cent of them get five good GCSEs. Only 1 per cent go on to higher education. I know that the Government are turning their attention to that appalling track record. I welcome the new duties on schools to promote the educational attainment of children in care and the new duty in the Education and Inspections Bill, which has just come to your Lordships' House, to force a school to take a child who has been excluded from two other schools. We cannot have those children going around searching for a school that is prepared to take them.

However, the issue is not just admissions. We have to remember that 60 per cent of children in public care have suffered neglect or abuse. They are very damaged both physically and emotionally, and sometimes intellectually. I often wonder how I would feel if I had been a vulnerable child who knew nothing but an abusive family or a family who found itself for one reason or another incapable of giving me the nurturing that I needed to develop. Children's development is seriously affected by these traumatic experiences, after which they are dragged away from the only family they know, inadequate though it may be. Very often—usually—the parents love their children but are unable to give them the care that they need.

Such children are put in public care and are given a corporate parent. There is one big problem with corporate parents: you cannot cuddle them. That is why we try to find foster, substitute or adoptive families by preference for children in such care. That is right and as it should be. Unfortunately, it cannot always be done and children have to spend some or all of their time in care in residential homes.

We cannot expect children to fulfil their educational potential if they are not at ease with themselves and the world. I believe that not enough attention is being paid to the mental health and well-being of children in public care. I am pleased that Ofsted inspections will report on how far schools contribute to the well-being of children, including their attainment, personal development, care and support. It would be nice to know that local authorities will also be assessed on the level of support that they give to those students—sadly just a few—who go to university.

Last week I attended a meeting run by the Frank Buttle Trust and chaired, I believe, by our colleague the noble Baroness, Lady Howe. Unfortunately she is not able to take part in this debate. While it was very inspiring, it really brought home to those of us who attended how few young people go on to university from public care and what a struggle they have had to get there. It is also important, once they are at university, that they are given adequate support by their local authority. Two young people talked about how they are different because they have a flat of their own; they do not have families to go home to in the recesses. Money is short. Their experiences are different from those of the other students with whom they share lectures. Often they do not have a lot in common with them, and because so few students have been in care, they cannot easily find other students to share their common experience. They greatly appreciate a good local authority that gives them someone to turn to, thus providing a little extra support and encouragement in their studies.

If we want to reach the Government's targets on educational attainment for children in public care, we must take several steps back from the school itself and look at what we must call the child's home context, the residential home. Many staff in care homes for children are wonderful people doing an excellent job, but like the noble Earl, Lord Listowel, I was interested to read about the approach taken in Denmark. It is a model to be followed. I read an article about the Josephine Schneider House in Copenhagen. Its approach results in an atmosphere different from that in our own residential homes, and the outcomes are also completely different. In Denmark, 60 per cent of children in public care go on to higher education, so they must be doing something right.

What is the difference? They do not have any rules; children are treated as individuals. Staffing levels are high and the staff are well trained pedagogues. Pedagogy in this context is not just the science of teaching, but can be described as the process of nurturing the development of a child or young person based on a profound set of principles about what constitutes human flourishing and well-being. Personal creativity is emphasised, with plenty of art, music and drama to enable young people to express themselves and to acquire the capacity to make strong and easy relationships with others. One of the key aspects of staff training is how to create close relationships with the children while remaining professional at all times. In the UK it is all about targets and paper chasing, and I think we can learn a great deal from the experience in Denmark.

Training for social work here is all about the law, procedures, targets, minimising risk and keeping children safe. We do quite well in keeping children safe once they are in public care, although there have been scandalous exceptions to the rule, but we are very risk averse and I cannot help feeling that that might be rather stifling. It gets in the way of the desirable strong personal relationships I mentioned earlier. There is a renewed interest in pedagogy among professionals here in the UK, and I wait with interest to hear what the Minister has to say about the Government's response to that renewed interest. It could indicate a new and very desirable approach.

Baroness Morris of Bolton: My Lords, I add my congratulations to the noble Earl, Lord Listowel, and I echo the comments of the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley. This has been a thought-provoking debate with important contributions from all sides of the House on the issue of looked-after children as well as the situation in children's homes. The noble Earl took us through the harrowing histories of life for some young people in children's homes, but as always he reflected on and promoted the need for well qualified staff to lift standards. I was interested in the examples that he cited from abroad where the best professionals work with the most vulnerable, and I took on board absolutely what the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, said about Denmark—it sounded most interesting. As always, the noble Lord, Lord Ramsbotham, made a powerful speech on looked-after children in the criminal justice system, particularly in regard to the treatment of their mental health problems. Again, I agree with the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, on the damning indictment of the education results of looked-after children in our country.

I welcome the start that has been made on the reform of standards for children's social care this June. It is clear that the industry is looking forward to change. As the chief executive of the Fostering Network said,

"we want to make sure the new standards focus on outcomes and the experience of service users. There has been a concern that the current standards put too much focus on box ticking".

I hope that the Minister will be able to update us on this consultation in his reply. After all, radical changes are needed to the system if it is to provide children with the best possible chance in life compared to the parents who too often have failed them.

There are some excellent children's homes. The independent sector is now the majority provider of residential children's services, although, as we heard from the noble Earl, Lord Listowel, they are in turmoil. In the past 18 months, there have been significant shifts in the market—changes that the industry thinks have been ill thought out. But these homes provide high-quality care with dedicated and compassionate staff, the majority of which, as I have said, are in the independent sector. Evidence from the National Children's Bureau, which has a wealth of experience in residential childcare, shows, as the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, explained, that children can enjoy living in good residential establishments and that this can impact positively on their behaviour.

I know from first-hand experience that some children feel safer and more secure in a children's home, where they have the camaraderie of their friends and carers and where their wariness and mistrust of adults can be patiently and sympathetically rebuilt. When I had been married for a few years, my husband and I decided to look into adopting. We had heard of two little girls, not related, who had formed a bond in care and whom the authorities would have liked to be adopted together if possible. We made all the inquiries, went through all the checks and had our home visit. We will always remember the words of the social worker as she left: "Just because you're well educated and live in a nice home doesn't mean you'll make good parents".

Although we were put off pursuing events through our local authority, we went along to the Catholic Children's Rescue Society in Didsbury, Manchester. All the older children had made posters asking for a mum and a dad, but there was one poster from a boy in his early teens who did not want to be adopted or to go into long-term foster care because he had found happiness in his children's home and felt at home for the first time. All he wanted was a family who would have him for the weekend so that he could have a ferret. I often wonder if he found his family and his ferret—I so hope he did. I discovered that I was pregnant soon after this, and I should like to say to that social worker that I think we are pretty good parents, and our son had a ferret—three in fact.

We on these Benches believe that in the hierarchy of childcare, however good it is, the removal of a child to a children's home should always be treated as the last resort, especially when kinship and concurrent programmes are showing such encouraging signs of success. However, we recognise that there will be individual children who will benefit from time in a children's home and that children's homes play a vital role, especially in short-term care. We also recognise that the choice of care should be dictated by what is best for the child and not by what is cheapest for the local authority. So it is in everyone's best interest—children, providers, social

services, parents and extended family—that the homes are of the very best quality and offer choice and flexibility.

It is also in everyone's interest that providers enter the market for the right reasons. As I understand it, you currently do not need planning permission if you want to set up children's home for six or fewer children. This has led to the development of clusters of private children's homes in residential areas, creating a significant shift in the community's dynamic. This has been especially noticeable in some coastal areas, where a combination of a lack of supervision and the removal of the child from familiar surroundings has led to that child becoming involved in anti-social behaviour and petty crime—the very negative cycle that we are often trying to break in removing the child from their family in the first place.

As I have said, there are many good children's homes, owned and run by dedicated people, but a few are tempted by the high fees that they can charge—anything up to £3,500 a week in specialist children's homes. We must be careful that those who are motivated by money rather than the well-being of the children do not give the industry a bad name. I know that that is taken very seriously by the Independent Children's Homes Association, which believes that any company that breaks the rules should be dealt with swiftly by the regulatory regime.

As at 21 March 2006, there were 1,388 independent children's homes registered with CSCI. These include 1,257 homes run by private providers and 131 homes run by the voluntary sector. In 2005–06, 284 homes deregistered. Deregistration can occur for a number of reasons, including the voluntary closure of a home, enforced closure resulting from regulatory action, change of ownership and change in the category of service provided. However, details relating to the reason for deregistration are not recorded, so we do not know how many enforced closures there were. Could that be changed?

Inspection of homes has greatly improved, but it could be better. There needs to be less emphasis on the number of taps and the condition of the buildings and more emphasis on the ethos and quality of care. Dame Denise Platt, the chair of CSCI, is right when she says that the Government should be bolder and more radical in reforming the ways in which children's services are inspected. But the changes to the inspection regime mark the fourth change in social work inspection in seven years and we must be careful that this does not lead to a period of instability.

I have a few questions that I would like to ask the Minister. Not all London boroughs have children's homes and, although I am not saying that they should, there is a strong case for greater co-ordination between them, especially when it comes to specialist services for dealing with those most in need. What steps are the Government taking to improve communication and co-ordination on this front?

As your Lordships know, each looked-after child has a reserved, named social worker who is responsible for them. But when a child is moved far away from home, it is difficult for the social worker to keep a watchful eye on them if they have to travel miles to see them. Inevitably, the quality of the care and the relationship will suffer. How are social workers expected to monitor the well-being of the children in their care if it takes a day to get to them? We often forget to thank social workers for the tireless work that they do. Although I approve of the continuity in workers seeing

a case all the way through, what feasibility is there to deal with these potential added burdens?

Despite the fact that more children are in care than at any time over the past 10 years, there is still a serious shortage of child social workers, with vacancies in the thousands. We on these Benches have always promoted the importance of placement stability, not only for children in homes but for those in fostering and adoption programmes. It is important, particularly in the most vulnerable cases, to prevent children from being constantly moved from pillar to post. How would we feel—the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, touched on this point—if we suffered the trauma of being separated from our families, however inadequate those families may be, and then, when we were at our most vulnerable and fragile, also lost contact with our wider family, with our friends and with all that is familiar and comforting?

We welcome the moves that the Government have made in this respect, but the changes are not being implemented fast enough. What steps are they taking to speed up this progress? As we have discussed in relation to recent children's legislation, attachment and belonging help to give children the confidence, resilience and sense of self that they so desperately need to develop into well rounded individuals.

Flexibility in the care of children must be the key, through concurrent planning to kinship care to children's homes. On kinship care, there have been promising reports that children in kinship placements feel loved and wanted when living with relatives. They feel normal rather than different.

I take the opportunity in every debate that I can to sing the praises of early intervention. We should ensure that our resources go to help families to stay together and that only as a last resort should children be taken into the care of the state. But when there has to be a last resort, that care should be of a high standard and the most appropriate for that child. Our children in care deserve no less than the care that we would wish for our own children.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Education and Skills (Lord Adonis): My Lords, the noble Earl, Lord Listowel, speaks on the issue of children's homes with immense knowledge and personal commitment, which has been reflected in all the other speeches made in this short debate. The House is grateful to him for giving us the chance to discuss this important issue this evening.

I start with some facts. At 31 March 2005, there were around 5,700 children in children's homes in England, which was around 9 per cent of the looked-after children population. At the same time, there were 1,985 children's homes of all descriptions, providing a total of 11,360 places, representing a significant oversupply. As the noble Baroness, Lady Morris, rightly noted, the average size of a children's home is under six places, and more than half of them have fewer than five places. The private sector is increasingly dominating the market. Most homes are run by private providers, with local authorities running only 34 per cent of homes and the voluntary sector only 6 per cent. So interaction between the public and private sectors in this area and proper commissioning arrangements, about which I shall have more to say, are absolutely vital for driving up standards. The old image

of a children's home as one that is directly managed by a local authority is increasingly outdated, although the state directly manages custody arrangements for some of the most vulnerable looked-after children. The noble Lord, Lord Ramsbotham, referred to that, asking a specific question to which I shall have to reply separately. They are clearly vital to the well-being of the most vulnerable group of all among looked-after children.

Performance remains highly variable. Children's homes, on average, now meet 74 per cent of the national minimum standards, compared with 56 per cent in 2002–03, which was the first year in which the standards were assessed. So there has been improvement, but improvement varies across sectors. Almost one in five voluntary sector homes were already meeting more than 90 per cent of the standards three years ago, compared with only one in ten for private sector homes and one in 20 for council homes. Around 27 per cent of private sector homes and 17 per cent of council homes now meet more than 90 per cent of the standards. While, therefore, the Commission for Social Care Inspection judges that there has been a threefold improvement, there remains scope for considerable further improvement in the sector.

The simple answer to the question posed by the noble Earl is that quality improvement is the underpinning element in our strategy for children's homes. Looked-after children are among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in our society.

They deserve and require good quality residential care to secure stability and achieve better outcomes. That is why we are looking, first, at what actions we can take to develop the residential care workforce, which has rightly been highlighted as a key priority; why, secondly, we are reviewing and improving standards, providing guidance, empowering local authorities better to protect the interests of those in their care and, since last year, funding a National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care, to which the noble Earl referred; thirdly, we have set a challenging national target for improving stability and raising educational attainment, and in the Children Act 2004 we introduced a new duty on local authorities to promote the educational attainment of their looked-after children, to meet precisely the unacceptable situation described by the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley; fourthly, we are looking to ensure that provision is cost-effective and that we have an effective commissioning regime in place for improving provision.

Those are the four key elements in our strategy for improving children's homes, and I shall say more about each in turn. First, on improving the residential care workforce, we are considering further issues affecting staff working in residential settings. Our future thinking about the workforce will build on the children's workforce strategy, which identified children's social care as one of the priority sectors for reform, as the noble Earl recognised in his remarks. That work is now being taken forward as part of the Options for Excellence review of the social care workforce, led jointly by my department and the Department of Health. It is charged with identifying creative but practical actions to increase the supply, and improve the quality, of social workers and social care workers, particularly in London and the south-east, where recruitment issues have proved especially challenging. We will have more to say about this in the proposals we will set out later this year on improving outcomes for looked-after children.

Secondly, there is the issue of raising standards. As I have noted, evidence from inspection makes clear that the quality of care provided by children's homes is highly variable. We are currently reviewing the national minimum standards for children's social services. We will consider what changes are needed to the children's homes national minimum standards to allow the responsible regulator, currently the Commission for Social Care Inspection, to act more responsively and to target its activity where it can be most effective in raising the quality of care.

The review will consider changes to regulation and inspection so that standards properly reflect recent legislative changes and recent developments in professional practice. For example, the revised national minimum standards will need to take account of the new framework for safeguarding children introduced following the Children Act 2004 and the latest requirements to improve planning for looked-after children; for example, the requirement that all care plan reviews must be chaired by an independent reviewing officer.

In future, fuller compliance with revised standards will ensure that providers of services for looked-after children deliver the outcomes that we expect to see for all children so that those children are offered the care needed to reach their potential. We intend to provide all stakeholders, including children and young people themselves, with the opportunity to contribute to the review process. A full public consultation will be held on all key proposals relating to these national standards once they are published.

Thirdly, with regard to improving educational performance, I am glad to say the figures given by the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, have been improved upon of late. If I give the figures, the House will understand how dire, frankly, the situation remains. It is now the case that 11 per cent of looked-after children got five or more A* to C GCSE grades in 2004–05, but that compares with well over 50 per cent for the population at large. The noble Baroness gave a figure of 1 per cent in respect of higher education. The latest figures I have are that 6 per cent of 19 year-old care leavers reached university last year. Again, that is a pitifully low figure compared to averages in the rest of the population, even among the most deprived parts of the non-looked-after part of the cohort.

The White Paper we published last year makes clear that we expect the new School Improvement Partners, who now have a relationship with all secondary schools and will do so in due course with primary schools, to hold schools to account for how well they support looked-after children, and for improving their educational outcomes—not least those in children's homes.

We have also been consulting on new regulations giving looked-after children top priority in school admissions, thus strengthening the existing code of practice. We have now gone further than that, and, as the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, noted, we have introduced government amendments to the Education and Inspections Bill to allow local authorities to direct schools to admit looked-after children, not only at the beginning of the academic year, but also outside the normal admissions round. We regard that change as of key importance, because looked-after children too often change their carers, including their children's home, outside the normal academic year. Ensuring that their transition into a school that suits their needs is as smooth as possible is of great importance to them.

These reforms will underpin the new duty on local authorities in Section 52 of the Children Act 2004 to promote the educational achievement of looked-after children. However, formal admission to a school is only the first step in ensuring that looked-after children get a decent education. Local authorities should do what any good parent would do to promote their child's educational aspirations and achievements. As corporate parents who are responsible for the placement of children, local authorities should be ensuring that providers of residential children's homes meet, if not exceed, the prescribed children's homes national minimum standards relating to the support of education. The capacity of a placement to meet the assessed educational needs of the child must be absolutely central to deciding its suitability, whether this is in a children's home or any other type of placement.

All children's homes should have clear written education policies setting out the arrangements for ensuring regular school attendance, high-quality support in areas such as homework and reading, robust monitoring of progress relating to the content of a looked-after child's personal education plan and effective liaison between the home, school and children's services department of the local authority making the placement. As the noble Baroness, Lady Morris, said, in many cases that will involve actual visits, but there are many other ways in which those responsible in the host local authority can take a keen and active interest in the ongoing progress of children in their care. We will have more to say about that also in the looked-after children Green Paper.

Fourthly, we are working to address major challenges in cost, quality and commissioning. The overall cost of residential care has risen from £717 million to £920 million, a rise of over a quarter, in the three years from 2001–02 to 2004–05, although the number of children placed in the residential sector remained broadly static over that three-year period.

As I have said, evidence from inspection makes clear that the quality of care provided by children's homes is variable. However, local authority commissioners are responsible for making sure that the costs of care are related to children's outcomes. The Commission for Social Care Inspection's recent report *Making Every Child Matter: Messages from inspections of children's social services* makes clear that,

"children's social services commissioning arrangements are under-developed and they have little influence over the social care market . . . Placements are overwhelmingly spot-purchased with few preferred provider arrangements and uneven cost control . . . Contract monitoring is developing, but still limited".

This is not a satisfactory situation. The Government are promoting a number of developments in relation to commissioning and contracting. In March this year, as the noble Baroness, Lady Morris, mentioned, we launched the Joint Planning and Commissioning Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services, which expands on statutory guidance for the Children Act 2004. Written with the assistance of those for whom the guidance is to be used, this sets the standard for how we expect commissioning in children's trusts to look in five years' time. Every local area is producing a children and young people plan, which sets out clearly how local outcomes will improve. We are providing support for children's services commissioners, including sharing of learning, toolkits, and direct help from

commissioning and procurement experts. We are also aware that the Association of Directors of Social Services is developing a national contract for the placement of children and young people in children's homes. This, we understand, will be launched later this year. We are supporting this development. I will respond in writing to the many other points that have been raised, as I have run out of time.

In conclusion, much is being done to ensure that all children and young people living in children's homes experience high standards of care, but there is more to be done. The Government, the inspectorate, local authorities and the national centre all have key roles to play in achieving improvement. We will continue to play our part in promoting reform and improvement.

House adjourned at seven minutes before eight o'clock.