

# **BECOME.**

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**THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE  
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS**

## **Submission to the Education Select Committee's Children's Homes Inquiry**

**April 2021**

Become is the national charity for children in care and young care leavers. Our vision is that care-experienced people have the same chances as everyone else to live happy, fulfilled lives. Our mission is to help children in care and young care leavers to believe in themselves and to heal, grow and unleash their potential. We work alongside them to make the care system the best it can be.

## **Introduction**

Become welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to the Education Select Committee's Inquiry into children's homes. Children's homes can be the best choice for many young people, and more needs to be done to ensure that residential care is considered as an equally valid and viable placement option alongside foster care and kinship care – not seen as a 'last resort' option after a series of placement breakdowns.

In our submission, we respond to the elements of the terms of reference that are most relevant to our work based on what young people with experience of residential care tell us about their experiences through our advice, support and participation activity, and point to key pieces of evidence which support and provide additional context.

## **Summary and key recommendations**

- Educational outcomes for children living in children's homes must be understood in the context of the characteristics of children who typically live in residential care. However, children's homes can and do make a material difference to educational progress by providing supportive environments for learning, and staff in children's homes and in schools must be trained and supported to do this well.
- Above all, children with experience living in children's homes tell us they want to be supported to develop and maintain trusted relationships with their peers, family and the professionals supporting them. At present, inequalities in leaving care policy and opportunities risk unfairly disadvantaging those leaving children's homes and other residential settings.
- The government's proposals to establish a set of national standards for currently unregulated accommodation risk establishing a two-tier care system and a dangerous precedent which denies young people the type of care they tell us they want to receive at age 16 and 17. All settings where children in care live must include a guarantee of care.
- Increasing use of unregulated and out-of-area placements are a symptom of the lack of capacity in children's homes in the areas they're needed most. Despite repeated warnings, the government has failed to invest in and deliver any comprehensive plan to grow sufficiency in the regulated children's home sector.

## Response to call for evidence

### 1. Educational outcomes for children and young people in children's homes, including attainment and progression to education, employment and training destinations.

- 1.1. Research has shown that young people with recent experience of residential care typically perform less well at GCSE level than those with a more recent kinship or foster placement; young people living in residential or another form of care at age 16 scored over six grades less than those who were in kinship or foster care in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Some of this is reflected in the length of the final placement, whereby a stable, longer placement can provide a 'protective' factor which increases the likelihood of better educational attainment or progress.
- 1.2. A higher number of placement moves and school changes and late entry into care are identified as risk factors associated with poorer educational outcomes. This is important considering the research from the Children's Commissioner which demonstrates that rates of multiple placement moves are highest for those children whose first placement is in secure/specialist residential care (25.5%) or a children's home (16.7%) and for older children who have recently entered care – the rate of sustained placement instability for children who entered care aged 12-15 was more than double the average rate for all children in care in 2018-19.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.3. Other research has similarly found a correlation between last placement in care and future educational or employment outcomes; around half of those who had been in foster care before leaving care attained a positive educational outcome compared to just 17% of those who left from residential care, and greater career outcomes were associated with those leaving from foster care rather than other settings.<sup>3</sup> Longitudinal analysis has also identified poorer socioeconomic outcomes for adults who spent time in residential care as children.<sup>4</sup>
- 1.4. In analysing evidence of differential outcomes by placement type, it is important to recognise that the educational outcomes for children and young people in children's homes and other residential settings cannot be disentangled from the overall characteristics of the children and young people who are more likely to be placed in such settings – i.e. their outcomes are better explained by other factors associated with greater likelihood of residential care experience, such as the presence of more acute special educational needs or later entry into care. Children's homes typically care for those with the highest levels of need.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is important to look at educational *progress* alongside attainment to understand the effectiveness of children's homes in supporting the education of the children they care for.
- 1.5. However, the level of support which young people living in children's homes receive from professionals can have a material impact on their educational outcomes. Some young people tell us they were supported by residential staff who prioritised education as a key element as part of their care planning, whereas others tell us they weren't helped with homework or supported to make the right choices at key stages in their education; sometimes this wasn't seen by residential workers as their role or young people described them as lacking confidence in supporting them with this. Other young people speak to the practical difficulties which living in a children's home can create, such as not having a quiet and private space for homework or consistent access to the internet.
- 1.6. ***We recommend that staff in children's homes must have access to regular and high quality training and supervision to ensure that they are well-supported to do their jobs, and that all***

***children have the practical support they need to engage in learning where they live. The government should respond positively to the consultation on establishing registration and professional standards for the children's home workforce<sup>6</sup> and deliver a national campaign to recruit and train new children's home staff.***

1.7. Our Teachers Who Care research identified a training need amongst teachers and recommended better communication and joined-up working between professionals in children's social care, including residential workers, and teachers.<sup>7</sup> Teachers reported not being in close enough contact with other key professionals in a child in care's life and therefore feeling ill-equipped to support them when at school.

1.8. ***We recommend that all teacher training routes include information about children in care. Residential workers must be supported to keep in regular contact with teachers by social work and Virtual School colleagues as part of joined-up working between children's social care and education professionals.***

## **2. The quality of, and access to, support for children and young people in children's homes, including support for those with special education needs, and the support available at transition points.**

2.1. Young people tell us that they want the staff supporting them in children's homes to have a strong knowledge of their rights and entitlements and to support them in accessing these through the local authority, to understand how the impact of their previous experiences influences their behaviour and emotions, to listen and speak with them and support them to have a voice in the decisions made about them, and to build trusting relationships and support them to build strong relationships with others in and outside of the home.

2.2. Above all, children tell us they want the staff supporting them to care about them and spend time with them. Particularly, they want them to have good communication with each other, particularly between shifts or when staff leave; young people might disclose problems they are encountering to one worker and find there isn't always someone there with the right knowledge to support them. They want to be able to choose who their key workers are, and to have the time to develop strong relationships with them.

2.3. Whilst some care-experienced young people tell us they felt part of a supportive family within their children's home and developed lifelong relationships with the staff who supported them, others highlight poor experiences with frequent changes to staff. Here are suggestions a young care leaver supported by Become recently offered to a group of children's home managers on how to improve the support they offer<sup>8</sup>:

- *Make it essential to foster relationships and genuine interest in the children living there – not only will this help young people to feel cared for and thought about, but it will make it easier for them to talk about the things they are struggling with.*
- *Create opportunities for them to socialise and bond with the other young people living there and the staff (e.g. creating inviting communal spaces with a games console; organising monthly trips to the cinema or activities like go-karting; arrange house meetings to discuss any changes they'd like to see). Having someone 'external' come in can also make young people feel more confident to speak.*

- *At the same time, make sure there are also opportunities for 1:1 support so young people don't always need to share concerns in front of their friends and peers.*
  - *Encourage the development of life skills like establishing a rota for getting involved in cooking meals.*
- 2.4. We know that looked after children are much more likely than their peers to have a diagnosable mental health condition (45% of children in care and 72% living in residential care<sup>9</sup> compared to 11.2% of all 5-15 year olds<sup>10</sup>). Other research has found that 38% of those living in children's homes had a statement of special educational needs and 62% had clinically significant mental health difficulties.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, training and support for staff working in children's homes around social, emotional and behavioural needs is of paramount importance (see recommendation 1.6 above).
- 2.5. We hear consistently from young people that one of the most significant failures of the care system is its lack of focus on developing and strengthening relationships which last throughout and beyond a young person's time in care, and particularly during key transition points (e.g. move to a new placement or when leaving care).
- 2.6. One research project surveying a small leaving care sample that only one-third of young people in residential care were in monthly contact with a former carer two or three months after leaving care, and this dropped off significantly afterwards, with many young people not receiving any support to keep in touch.<sup>12</sup>
- 2.7. Following the introduction of Staying Put (which allows young people in foster care to remain in a living arrangement with their former foster carers until age 21), the government pledged to introduce a national rollout of Staying Close (which allows young people in children's homes to continue receiving support from previous carers).<sup>13</sup> However, although pilot evaluations have since been published<sup>14</sup>, we continue to await further action to deliver a national rollout.
- 2.8. Therefore, at present, young people leaving care from a residential setting are not entitled to the same level of support as those leaving care from foster care. This inequality is likely to compound some of the poorer outcomes associated with a last placement in a residential setting, explored earlier in this submission. The option for a child to remain living in a children's home beyond age 18 is already possible providing the home continues to provide care for children primarily, but our experience suggests this is rarely used.
- 2.9. ***We recommend that the government pushes forward with a national rollout of Staying Close which includes opportunities for young people to remain living in and/or accessible to ongoing support from their children's home, with a commitment to long-term central and sustainable funding for local authorities to deliver this.***

### **3. The use and appropriateness of unregulated provision.**

- 3.1. There are currently over 6000 children and young people in care living in unregulated semi-independent and independent accommodation<sup>15</sup>, an 80% increase since 2010.<sup>16</sup> A marked growth in the numbers of older teenagers looked after in recent years has placed an increased demand on residential capacity, predominantly met by private providers offering semi-independent and independent accommodation.

- 3.2. With a continued shortage of capacity in regulated children's homes in the areas it's needed most, more and more children have been forced to live in unregulated settings, often outside of their local area. In 2018-19, 1 in 8 children spent time in an unregulated placement.<sup>17</sup>
- 3.3. There has been little change in the rates of children in children's homes experiencing multiple placement moves, but when these children are moved they are increasingly moved into semi-independent accommodation; 422 children who started the year in a children's home had at least one move into semi-independent accommodation during 2018/19, up 70% on the numbers from 2015/16.<sup>18</sup>
- 3.4. Children living in children's homes can expect to receive care. Where this is done well, this looks and feels like typical family life, with someone available 24/7 to help with things like preparing food and support with personal care and medication, for example. The existing Children's Homes Regulations 2015 dictate exactly what care children can expect to receive when living there.<sup>19</sup>
- 3.5. Young people living in semi-independent and independent settings are legally only able to receive support. Many young people tell us that the level of help provided by such settings isn't sufficient and they have felt forced into more independent living situations before they were ready. They often see minimal support from key workers, poor quality accommodation with few communal spaces, and may live alongside vulnerable adults above the age of 18. These living situations can make young people feel unsafe and unsupported, leading to incidences of poor mental health, barriers engaging with education or work, and poorly developed social networks to turn to for help.
- 3.6. Here is how a care-experienced young adult working with Become described their experience in a semi-independent setting:
- "It was very isolating. I considered it just a place to sleep... There were no activities or opportunities to socialise with the others, and it felt uncomfortable living in a house alongside people you didn't know... CCTV cameras everywhere made it feel like an institute or a prison... There were no significant staff members – the only one I remembered was the security as it was the first thing you saw when you walked in. Staff were more like gate keepers. They lacked knowledge and experience so even if you wanted to talk to them and get support, they wouldn't be helpful."*
- 3.7. The distinction between 'care' in a children's home and 'support' in unregulated settings creates a paradoxical situation whereby staff working in unregulated settings are unable to provide young people with care, even if they think it's in their best interests and they need the extra support. If they did, the provider would then be operating illegally as they would need to register as a children's home with Ofsted. As such, semi-independent settings often can't adapt to the changing circumstances of those they support; this can put children at risk of additional harm or force additional disruptive placement moves.
- 3.8. Young people tell us they want all settings to provide children in care with what looks and feels like care; examples from young people which feature in our original submission to the government's consultation on unregulated accommodation<sup>20</sup> are shared below:
- *"Living somewhere people care about you where you feel part of a family rather than just living somewhere people pop in and do their job and leave again."*

- *“You should still be somewhere you feel safe and you have instant support if you need it.”*
  - *“Support with traveling for education or work.”*
  - *On help with school/college homework: “Yes, peers would still receive support from parents if needed. It shouldn’t be different just because a young person grew up in care.”*
  - *“I don’t think 16 or 17 year olds should have the responsibility of buying food. Support should be given in terms of giving all an additional budget for a weekly budget so the minimal finances left can help them use this for other things they may need to purchase.”*
  - *“I can’t leave before age 18, so why am I being asked to live independently before then?”*
- 3.9. In February 2021, the government committed to introducing a ban from September 2021 on the use of semi-independent and independent accommodation for all children under 16 (approximately 90 children) and to introduce a new regulatory and inspection regime using national minimum standards to benefit those aged 16 and 17 living in such settings.<sup>21</sup>
- 3.10. However, these proposals will formalise a two-tier care system which denies care to children living in semi-independent and independent settings. We believe that all children in care deserve care. The decision to establish a separate set of national standards which intentionally omit care goes against other welcome recent policy development in the care system which seek to extend aspects of care – such as Staying Put and Staying Close.
- 3.11. The government’s proposals establish a dangerous precedent that 16- and 17-year olds in care only require a lower level of support. Those living in children’s homes or foster care do not experience a change in the level of care they receive at age 16, and there is a significant risk that this two-tier system encourages local authorities to place more young people into semi-independent or independent settings at this age – establishing a tacit secondary leaving care age.
- 3.12. The government’s proposals are founded on the notion that such settings provide a helpful ‘stepping stone’, specifically chosen as part of thorough care planning to support them to develop independent living skills before leaving care. However, the Department for Education’s own transparency data shows that just under 40% of children living in independent or semi-independent accommodation moved there within one week of entering care.<sup>22</sup> 1 in 3 children living in unregulated settings are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who may be particularly vulnerable.<sup>23</sup>
- 3.13. The growing use of semi-independent and independent accommodation for older children has not been a deliberate choice made by local authorities, but is a symptom of the lack of regulated residential capacity. Usage should be rare and only when this clearly aligns with a child’s support needs, wishes and feelings.
- 3.14. Increased use of currently unregulated settings will also exacerbate the poorer outcomes in adulthood given the lack of ‘Staying Put’ or ‘Staying Close’-style opportunities for young people leaving care from a residential setting. This is likely to create an even more abrupt ‘cliff edge’ experience, particularly where young people are expected to move again at age 18.

3.15. **Case study:** Become's Care Advice Line received a call from a social worker who was supporting a 17-year-old child placed in semi-independent accommodation who wanted to remain living there after they turned 18. The young person had been inside a Young Offenders' Institution and had recently been released. They were unable to return to their home borough due to risk of exploitation. Despite the semi-independent provider being able to continue offering accommodation after they turned 18, the young person was likely to be reliant on Universal Credit and unable to afford the arrangement once they left care and the local authority stopped covering the full cost of this placement. We supported the social worker and young person to understand their opportunities for challenge and other support available.

3.16. ***We recommend that the regulation of semi-independent and independent settings must include a guarantee of care and that all children in care should live in placements which are regulated and inspected by Ofsted. One obvious way forward is for these settings to follow the children's homes regulations and standards which already apply to age 18 and beyond, as recommended by the Keep Caring To 18 campaign of which Become is a steering group member.***<sup>24</sup>

#### **4. The sufficiency of places in children's homes, and the regional location of homes.**

4.1. The large growth in the numbers of children in care being placed outside of their local area and into unregulated semi-independent and independent accommodation is inextricably linked to the sufficiency and location of places in homes and the failure of the care system to adapt to a change in who it supports – increasingly older children and teenagers with complex needs – which places additional demand on residential settings.

4.2. This increase in the proportion of older teenagers in and entering care particularly has not been experienced evenly across the country, placing particular pressure on certain areas of the country which don't have local children's homes provision to match this growth. Of those who started to be looked after aged 16 or 17 in the year ending 31 March 2020, 29% of them were in London and only 3% in the North East; put another way, 16- and 17-year olds accounted for 34% of London's entrants into care that year but only 7% of the North East's.<sup>25</sup>

4.3. At 31 March 2020, 38% of children in children's homes, secure units or semi-independent settings were placed more than 20 miles from home, compared to 17% of those in foster care.<sup>26</sup> In 2019, the APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults reported that there had been a 77% increase in the numbers of children sent to live in children's homes out of area, from 2,250 in 2012 to 3,990 in 2018.<sup>27</sup>

4.4. Young people tell us the experience of being placed far from home can be isolating, dislocating and contribute to poor experiences in care. The level of support offered and accessible to young people placed outside of their local area is clearly going to be different than for those who have more regular access to professionals, opportunities and communities which impact on their experiences in care. Children have spoken to the Children's Commissioner about how placement in children's homes away from their local communities makes them feel 'different' and 'abnormal', as well as isolated from loved ones and with little agency in their lives.<sup>28</sup>

4.5. The dominance of the private sector in the ownership of children's homes and unregulated settings means they are spread unevenly across the country<sup>29</sup>, often where it is cheapest to operate and not where there is the greatest need for safe and secure places for children to live. This creates a pattern of young people being moved considerable distances to and from particular areas of the country.

4.6. Despite concerns raised about the lack of planning in children’s residential care by Sir Martin Narey in his 2016 independent review of children’s residential care<sup>30</sup> by Amanda Spielman as Ofsted Chief Inspector<sup>31</sup>, by the Children’s Commissioner<sup>32</sup>, by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee<sup>33</sup>, by the National Audit Office<sup>34</sup>, and the APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults<sup>35</sup>, no comprehensive action has been taken by the government to deliver a national sufficiency strategy for children’s residential care.

**4.7. Case study:** Become’s services team recently advised the parent of a child in care living outside of their home borough. They experienced a physical altercation with another resident in their semi-independent accommodation, and claimed they were carrying a knife. The young person ran away from the placement and was reported missing. Following this, a safety plan was put in place and the local authority deemed it safe for the young person to return, but they did not want to return and requested a change of placement. However, the social worker had told her there were no available placements in her area. Our team advised the young person’s parent of their options for challenge and securing a placement where they felt safe and secure.

**4.8. *We recommend that the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care proposes sustainable long-term solutions which seek to grow residential capacity in the care system in the areas it’s needed most. The government must commit to providing financial support to boost capacity in children’s homes, reducing reliance on out-of-area and semi-independent and independent provision and ensuring placement decisions are made in children’s best interests and not constrained by capacity or cost.***

## Contact

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<sup>1</sup> Sebba et al (2015) [The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data](#)

<sup>2</sup> Children’s Commissioner (2020) [Stability Index 2020](#)

<sup>3</sup> Dixon et al (2006) [Young People Leaving Care: A Study of Costs and Outcomes](#)

<sup>4</sup> Sacker et al (2021) [Out-of-home care in childhood and socio-economic functioning in adulthood: ONS Longitudinal Study 1971-2011](#)

<sup>5</sup> Department for Education (2014) [Children’s Homes Data Pack](#)

<sup>6</sup> Department for Education (first published 6 June 2019; accessed 19 April 2021) [Children’s homes workforce: call for evidence](#)

<sup>7</sup> Become (2018) [Teachers Who Care](#)

<sup>8</sup> Notes taken from a training event hosted in February 2020. Unpublished.

<sup>9</sup> ONS (2002) [The mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in England](#)

<sup>10</sup> NHS Digital (2018) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017](#)

<sup>11</sup> Department for Education (2012) [Living in Children’s residential homes](#)

<sup>12</sup> Wade (2006) [The Ties that Bind: Support from Birth Families and Substitute Families for Young People Leaving Care](#)

<sup>13</sup> Department for Education (23 Oct 2019) [Vital new support for young people leaving care](#)

<sup>14</sup> Department for Education (Published 2 Nov 2020; accessed 21 April 2021) [Children’s Social Care Innovation Programme: insights and evaluation](#)

<sup>15</sup> Department for Education (2020) [Looked after children in independent or semi-independent placements](#)

<sup>16</sup> Department for Education (2020) [Looked after children in England including adoptions](#)

<sup>17</sup> Children’s Commissioner (2020) [Unregulated](#)

<sup>18</sup> Children’s Commissioner (2020) [Stability Index 2020](#)

<sup>19</sup> Department for Education (2015) [Children’s homes regulations, including quality standards: guide](#)

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- <sup>20</sup> Become (2020) [Submission to the Department for Education’s consultation on reforms to unregulated provision for children in care and care leavers](#)
- <sup>21</sup> Department for Education (19 Feb 2021) [Unregulated accommodation banned for vulnerable children under 16](#)
- <sup>22</sup> Department for Education (2020) [Looked after children in independent or semi-independent placements](#)
- <sup>23</sup> Children’s Commissioner (2020) [Unregulated](#)
- <sup>24</sup> Article 39 (Published 2020; last updated and accessed April 2021) [Keep Caring For Children Up To 18](#)
- <sup>25</sup> Department for Education (2020) [Looked after children in England including adoptions](#)
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid
- <sup>27</sup> APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2019) [No Place at Home: Risks facing children and young people who go missing from out of area placements](#)
- <sup>28</sup> Children’s Commissioner (2019) [Pass the parcel: children posted around the care system](#)
- <sup>29</sup> Ofsted (2020) [Main findings: children’s social care in England 2020](#)
- <sup>30</sup> Department for Education (2016) [Children’s residential care in England](#)
- <sup>31</sup> Ofsted (2020) [Ofsted Annual Report 2018/19: HMCI Commentary](#)
- <sup>32</sup> Children’s Commissioner (2019) [Pass the parcel: children posted around the care system](#)
- <sup>33</sup> Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee (2019) [Funding of local authorities’ children’s services](#)
- <sup>34</sup> National Audit Office (2019) [Pressures on children’s social care](#)
- <sup>35</sup> APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2019) [No Place at Home: Risks facing children and young people who go missing from out of area placements](#)