

BECOME.

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

Written submission to the Education Committee inquiry into the children's social care workforce

August 2019

Become is the charity for children in care and young care leavers. We provide help, support, and advice to make sure care-experienced young people can unleash their potential and take control of their lives. We help make the care system work better by ensuring that young people's voices and perspectives shape policy and service provision. Until November 2016, Become was known as The Who Cares? Trust.

Introduction

Become welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to the Education Committee's inquiry into the children's social care workforce.

We particularly welcome the Committee's decision to include a specific set of questions for those with lived experience of children's social care. It is crucial that care-experienced people of all ages are encouraged and supported to contribute their experiential expertise in order to improve the care system for all and provide every young person in and leaving care with the stability, support and love they deserve.

Given Become's role as the voice for children in care and young care leavers, we have chosen to respond specifically to these questions based on what we hear from young people in care through our direct support work, research and listening activity, whilst also commenting where appropriate on wider inquiry questions relating to the capacity of the social care workforce. Our submission includes particular reference to previous research work carried out by Become, including our 2017 *Perceptions of Care* report and a series of informal interviews carried out in 2018 with care-experienced young people as part of a commissioned piece around what young people want from their social workers.

Executive summary

- In order to do their job properly, young people want their social workers to have a strong understanding of what it means to be in care and to establish good relationships with other key adults in their lives (such as foster carers and teachers).
- Children in care are acutely aware of the pressures facing social workers in their practice. They want them to have manageable caseloads and good support from the local authority to enable them to stay in post for longer.
- Current paperwork and other requirements placed on social workers are sometimes seen by young people as restricting their capacity to deliver high-quality support.
- Young people in care want their social workers to listen to them carefully, communicate with them appropriately and often, and help them have their voices heard in decisions made about their lives.
- Supporting the development of positive relationships – with their social worker and their peers, family members and others – is seen as a crucial area of good social work practice by young people.

Response to call for evidence

1. What does/did your social worker need in order to do their job properly?

1.1. In order to do their job properly, young people want their social workers to have a really good understanding of what it means to be in care. Our *Perceptions of Care* report, which explored what young people in care think the professionals in their lives think about them, found that only 31% of children in care and care leavers thought that social workers understood what it means to be in care.¹

“A social worker has just been given a textbook. They don’t understand the things behind being in care. To them, we’re just a case.”²

1.2. To develop this understanding, young people in care want their social workers to receive training delivered by care-experienced people who can share their experiences in order to inform social workers about the impact their work can have. This training should cover what it means to be ‘care-experienced’ from the perspective of young people with that lived experience.

1.3. Children in foster care want their social workers to have good relationships with their foster carers. Some young people don’t believe their social workers respect the expertise of their carers or consult with them enough, despite being the adults they spend most of their time with. Establishing a positive working relationship with carers is seen by young people as a key part of a social worker’s role that allows them to do their job properly in supporting them.

1.4. Similarly, children in care want to see their social workers develop good relationships with their schools and trusted teachers. Young people in care often feel as though they have to manage relationships between professionals themselves and encourage adults supporting them in different areas of their lives to talk with each other.

“That’s where it would have been helpful for my social worker to step in. They knew there were some days I just wasn’t going to be able to take my exams. They could have spoken with my teachers and helped me figure out a different time.”³

1.5. Social workers have the opportunity to speak with other adults involved in supporting young people on their behalf where appropriate and with consent. School is a key part of all children’s lives – for children in care, they are likely to see their teachers more often than their social worker.

1.6. Our own *Teachers who Care* report identified how teachers might know a lot about the children in care they speak with each day, but don’t always have opportunities to make links with the other professionals in a child’s life. 31% of teachers who responded said that their biggest challenge in working with children in care in their classrooms was not enough support from children’s services.⁴

¹ Become and Voices from Care Cymru, June 2017. *Perceptions of Care*. <https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/for-professionals/resources/perceptions-of-care-2017/>

² Become, 2018. Quote from series of informal interviews with care-experienced young people about social workers. Unpublished

³ Become. Quote from series of informal interviews with care-experienced young people about social workers.

⁴ Become and Voices from Care Cymru, September 2018. *Teachers Who Care: How to help teachers and schools support looked after children*. <https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/for-professionals/resources/teachers-who-care-2018/>

2. What helped, or didn't help your social worker have what they need to do their job properly?

- 2.1. Children in care and care leavers are typically very aware of the pressures facing the professionals supporting them. Young people know that social workers are often constrained or worn down by the limitations of the care system itself and understand that this can impact on their ability to practice as they'd like to. Unfortunately, we even hear of young people who actively choose not to raise issues they might be facing to their social workers so as not to burden them with additional work.

*"They come into the profession with the right intentions but after so many cases and being constantly put under pressure from caseloads and other pressures they begin to become immune to the children and young people they are dealing with."*⁵

- 2.2. Young people want social workers to be supported well by their local authorities. They want them to have the freedom to practice in the best interests of each child and to be able to prioritise developing a supportive and trusting adult relationship. Meetings with social workers are often seen as a 'box-ticking exercise', where social workers are overburdened by regulation, oversight and paperwork so much that they're unable to properly listen to the young people they're supporting.

*"Social workers should have more time for us and not tell us they are always busy."*⁶

- 2.3. Above all, young people wanted their social workers to have time – time to spend getting to know them as individuals and to develop long-term relationships with them over many years. Too often, young people will see social workers come and go, forcing them to tell their stories again and again to new people. This can be incredibly problematic as feelings of rejection can be compounded by a rotating carousel of supporting professionals – having multiple social workers is associated with a lack of trust.⁷

- 2.4. If social workers do change, young people want a managed transition with the chance to say goodbye and the opportunity to get to know their new social worker as soon as possible.

- 2.5. The most important thing that can help social workers deliver good support to young people is time, provided by proper management, support and manageable caseloads.

*"I feel social workers know everything about me and then they leave and I have another one."*⁸

3. Do you think the job that social workers do today has changed in the past few years? If so, how has it changed, and why do you think that might be?

- 3.1. The young people we hear from are often frustrated by how the rules and regulations which govern what social workers do and how they work aren't aligned with children's everyday lives.

⁵ Become and Voices from Care Cymru, *Perceptions of Care*.

⁶ The Care Inquiry, April 2013. *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*. <https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/for-professionals/resources/the-views-and-recommendations-of-children-and-young-people-involved-in-the-care-inquiry-2013/>

⁷ Selwyn, J, Magnus, A and Stuijzand, B, Feb 2018. *Our Lives, Our Care: Looked after children's views on their well-being in 2017*. University of Bristol and Coram Voice. <https://coramvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/1053-CV-Our-Lives-Our-Care-report5.pdf>

⁸ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*.

New technology, and particularly social media, has not only changed the ability for people to make (and break) friendships and relationships quickly, but has also impacted on how young people speak with professionals.

“It sounds really silly, but I’d text her at like half six in the evening and she’d still reply. I’m not saying workers have to have their phones on them 24/7 – you’ve got to have a life outside of the job – but I knew it was a little bit more than a job for that specific worker.”⁹

- 3.2. Issues which children in care and care leavers face are not restricted to typical working hours, and they want to be able to communicate with trusted adults in ways which suit them. Some don’t feel as though the job which social workers do and the way they do it has ‘caught up’ with the increasingly mobile and digital way that young people lead their lives.

4. What does good social work look like to you?

We have summarised the key things which care-experienced young people tell us they want to see from their social workers into the two areas below: communication and relationships.

Communication

- 4.1. Above all, children in care and care leavers want their social workers to listen. They want to be taken seriously and have their voices heard and acted upon in the decisions made about them. Children and young people are supposed to be asked about their views, wishes and feelings about where they should live, what support they should receive and other choices in their lives, but too often we hear from young people that this isn’t happening regularly. Social workers need to be able to help young people to contribute their own thoughts in a supportive and comfortable way, paying close attention to the needs and challenges of each child.

“I would practise what I was going to say in the mirror. I’d rehearse the sentences I was going to say to them before they came. I would tell myself ‘I am going to say this’. But then they’d come, go through their list of questions quickly, ask me if I had anything else I wanted to say, and I’d just shake my head and say no.”¹⁰

- 4.2. Young people understand that the decisions made about them may not entirely reflect what they’d like to happen, but when this does happen, good social work involves clear and honest communication. Young people tell us that they’re used to being told ‘white lies’ about contact, placement moves or other issues rather than the truth, hindering the development of a relationship founded on honesty and trust; they don’t want to be made promises which can’t be kept.
- 4.3. Communication should be age-appropriate – not patronising nor confusing. Wherever possible, young people want professionals to avoid using jargon which can make them and the people they love feel pathologized or dehumanised. Good social workers communicate with young people in language they understand, and which makes them feel ‘normal’; good examples of positive youth-friendly language choices can be found in TACT’s *Language that Cares*.¹¹

“My social worker was bogged down with using the right terminology for everything.”¹²

⁹ Become. Quote from series of informal interviews with care-experienced young people about social workers.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ TACT Fostering and Adoption, March 2019. Language that cares: Changing the way professionals talk about Children in Care. https://www.tactcare.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/03/TACT-Language-that-cares-2019_online.pdf

¹² Become. Quote from series of informal interviews with care-experienced young people about social workers.

- 4.4. When feedback is given to professionals about decisions which have been made or the way in which something has been communicated, young people want their social workers to reflect on this and consider making changes to their practice, not to 'go on the defensive'. Often, those in care feel as though their identity is out of their control. The people who know about their status as a 'looked after child' is something determined by the actions of others including their social workers; they may be taken out of lessons at school for review meetings or social workers may wear their badges when out with them in public.
- 4.5. Unfortunately, we hear from children and young people in care who have been given misleading or incorrect information by their social worker. Good practice is having a comprehensive understanding of the rights and entitlements available to looked after children and providing this information in a timely and appropriate way. Young people sometimes feel as though not all the information is being given to them, either because their social worker doesn't know or is reluctant to advertise things like additional funding.

Relationships

- 4.6. A good social worker will take the opportunity to get to know each child they support as an individual – their hobbies, interests, likes, dislikes, worries, successes and ambitions. They will be focussed on the young person and developing both a professional and personal relationship with them, not just assessing their needs in discrete categories of 'health' and 'education'.

*"If your social worker doesn't listen it makes you feel less important."*¹³

- 4.7. Young people often worry that professionals make judgements about them based on paper records, and fear that this contributes to the stigma they experience in their daily lives. Our *Perceptions of Care* report highlighted that 35% of children and young people said that they think that social workers think children in care are not as clever as other children, and only 56% said that they thought that social workers are ambitious for children they work with.¹⁴ Young people want their social workers to be aspirational for them when others aren't – to encourage them to pursue their dreams and help them make them a reality and not to assume based on statistical outcomes.

*"I was a straight A student, whose teachers wanted me to go to do a law degree, my social workers told both me and my foster parents that children in care don't go to university and to stop encouraging me. I did go to law school though!"*¹⁵

- 4.8. Children in care also want their social workers to help them develop relationships with other people in their lives, including their peers, family and other adults. This involves supporting them to understand their own past and why they've come into care, to help them navigate their identities and develop a sense of belonging and agency in their own lives. In a 2015 survey, just over half of young people in care said they did not understand why they were coming into care at the time, and many still hadn't been supported to understand later on.¹⁶
- 4.9. It also involves helping them develop social networks with their peers, especially as young people often tell us how they struggle to speak with their friends about their situation for fear

¹³ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*.

¹⁴ Become and Voices from Care Cymru, *Perceptions of Care*.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Children's Commissioner, 2015. State of the Nation: Report 1. Children in Care and Care Leavers Survey 2015. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Care-monitor-v12_1.pdf

of stigma or judgement. Changing where they live and where they go to school can prevent them from maintaining old friendships and creating new ones, and we know that social isolation and loneliness are real problems for older children in care.¹⁷

“I wish someone had sat me down and told me how to make friends.”¹⁸

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¹⁷ Selwyn, J, Magnus, A and Stuijtzand, B. Our Lives, Our Care: Looked after children’s views on their well-being in 2017.

¹⁸ Become. Quote from series of informal interviews with care-experienced young people about social workers.