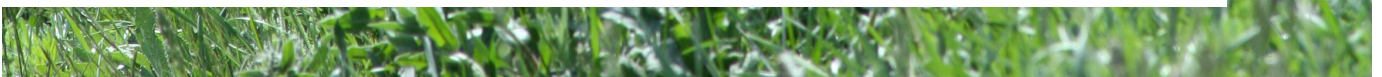




Principles of Care



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Children in care and care leavers must have a good experience of care and positive outcomes.

If a child can no longer be cared for by their parents or they are suffering, or at risk of, significant harm, the state can intervene and remove them from their parents' care. This doesn't happen to many children; in England only around 0.7% of all children will enter care.¹ However, it shouldn't matter how many or how few become looked after. Removing a child from their parents and taking them into care is the most extreme intervention the state can make in family life.

“Being in care in and of itself was a positive thing for me and helped me no end.”²

Children who do enter the care system will have been through traumatic experiences. The decision for the state to remove them from their parents may come from an accumulation of incidents, or may be the result of one single trauma. Although likely to be in the child's best

¹ In 2011 there were 65,520 children in care under 18 and a total of 8,930,800 children and young people under 18 in England.

² NIACE, *Voices of Care Leavers: Stories of young adult care leavers' experience of care and the impact on their learning*, London: NIACE, 2013, p.26 [accessed via: http://shop.niace.org.uk/media/catalog/product/v/o/voices_of_care_leavers-web4.pdf (18/2/15)].

interests, entering care itself will be a traumatic event, taking the child from a familiar environment into a new and uncertain one. No-one will make the decision lightly, but once made, the state has a unique obligation to these children; a moral duty to ensure that they receive not just care which is better than that which preceded it, but the best possible. When a state makes such a life-changing intervention into the lives of children and their families, it is morally right that the local authority retains absolute responsibility and accountability for this care. Furthermore, it is imperative that no one is allowed to profit or benefit in any way from the suffering and trauma of vulnerable children and the circumstances that are beyond their control.

The state, the care system, and the corporate parents within the system should provide love, security and stability for all children, but the way it does this will be different for each child. Every child will have different experiences, and they will all need different things from care: entering care can be a fresh start, a new family, and an opportunity to recover from past trauma. Some will require care to help them build healthy and positive relationships between them and their families, some will require support to recover from abuse or neglect, and others will require care to be the family that they want and need. At its best it can also be a place of rest and healing. Above all, care is a place to have a childhood, to play, learn, grow, discover and develop into adulthood.

‘The balance of evidence is heavily in favour of care being considered as a viable, positive option at an earlier stage for many children. It is essential to promote a more positive picture of care to young people and to the public in general. Ministers should encourage public awareness of the fact that being taken into care can be of great benefit to children.’³

The care system has the power to change a child’s life and give them happiness, opportunities and experiences that they would not have had otherwise. For some children and young people it does just that. Yet too often they tell of a system that does not support them and does not listen to them. They talk of inflexible structures, bureaucratic processes with other factors put ahead of the wishes and feelings of its children and of it failing to be the sort of parent a child would be proud to have. The statistics show that, overall, as a group, children in care fail to achieve their potential at school, are more likely to have mental health needs and are at greater risk of youth offending and sexual exploitation than other children. When they leave care (often much earlier

³ House of Commons Education Committee, *Children first: the child protection system in England*, Fourth Report of Session 2012-13, London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2012, p.8 [accessed via: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmeduc/137/137.pdf> 94/2/15)].

than their friends leave home and with less support) we see too many young people head into the world unprepared and unsupported for their adult life.⁴

Listening to children is powerful. It is their right, the right thing to do, and it makes things better. Involving those who are the beneficiaries of services, development or projects makes for better outcomes. Listening and actively involving those using the service in development leads to provision which is sometimes cheaper, more sustainable, better at addressing local needs and more relevant. This model is used in international development, where listening to the voices of women has changed the way aid is distributed and projects delivered. But we know that this is currently not the case for children in care. They are too often unseen and unheard. If these were your children, it would not be acceptable. That's why getting the care system right matters.

What is care?

When we talk about care, it can be easy to forget that we are talking about real children. They can get lost in the system, lost in talk about outcomes, placements, professionals and meetings. We can forget that we are talking about real children with real likes and dislikes and hopes and dreams. In the practicalities of making sure they attend reviews, have plans and receive their leaving care allowance, we may forget that they need more than that. These are all vitally important, but we mustn't forget that they still need to learn to love, to trust and to take risks. Care is where children have a childhood. It is where they learn to laugh, to love, to ride bikes, build sandcastles and how to have friends. It is where they grow into adolescents and learn to budget, to use a washing machine, to cook beans on toast, to test boundaries and to have healthy relationships. It is where they learn who they are.

“My interests and values are respected and my carers encourage me to talk about what's on my mind.”⁵

Care is more than just the system of social care, it is the people who work within that system, those who care for those children, the places where children live and the day-to-day lives of children who are living in the care of the state. Ultimately it is about people and the relationships between them. Relationships have health benefits, emotional benefits, and practical benefits. They can be a source of happiness, protection against loneliness, and even against diseases.⁶ Ask anybody what the most important thing to them in their life is. They will almost always name

⁴ Barnardo's, *The costs of not caring: Supporting English care leavers into independence*, London: Barnardo's, 2014 [accessed via: http://www.barnardos.org.uk/costs_of_care_leavers.pdf (12/2/15)]; Centre for Social Justice, *Finding their Feet: Equipping care leavers to reach their potential*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2015 [accessed via <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/UserStorage/pdf/Pdf%20reports/Finding.pdf> (12/2/15)].

⁵ *It's my home too*, Who Cares? Issue 107, Summer 2014, p.19.

⁶ Harries E and de Las Casas L., *Who will love me when I'm 64? The importance of relationships in later life*, London: Relate, 2013, [accessed via <http://www.relate.org.uk/files/relate/publication-when-im-64-2013.pdf> (16/2/15)].

people – whether children, parents or partners. Our lives are connected and shaped by the people we know and strong positive relationships form the bedrock on which we build our lives.

Children's lives do not automatically become better when they enter care. They may be safer; their needs may be better met, but this should only be the beginning of the help and support that they receive, and the care that they get. It is not enough to 'rescue' a child and think that that is all that needs to be done. Children and young people who are taken into care will need to be cared for and supported for the entire time that they are in care and beyond into adult life. Their needs, wishes, hopes and dreams may change, but their fundamental need for care will not stop.

Care doesn't stop at the doorstep of the children's home, or the door of a review meeting. It extends into children's everyday experiences. It is vital that children in care have their needs recognised and met in places beyond the care system. Their specific needs should be met by other systems, including the education and health systems. As the traditional African proverb says, 'it takes a village to raise a child' - wider family, friends and the community all play a role in every child's upbringing. For children in care, that village will be the carers and other professionals and people who will be working to give them the childhood they deserve. Multi-agency working is crucial to ensure they get the support, and childhood, that they need and deserve. Some children will take their experience of care with them wherever they go; their trips to the park, to the doctor or to school will all be in some way affected. For others, being in care will have a lesser effect on their childhood. What is important is ensuring that professionals know that it *could* have an effect, and are prepared to support the children if and when they need it. It's about creating the safety net before the child falls. When it works well, the care system can be transformative. It can give a home, love, happiness, emotional security and a positive future to young people for whom this did not seem likely. Children and young people say that good care makes a huge difference to their lives. Research backs this up, showing that good, stable care builds resilience and can help with positive outcomes such as educational achievement.⁷

Care is set in the context of the public sphere. Children in care do not grow up in the privacy of family life and their lives are often subject to political whims and the depths of the public purse. There are many public figures who do their very best for children in care, and who take their responsibilities seriously, but children of the state are affected by politics more often than other children. Care should not be a political football; it should be put first and supported, as a good parent would put the needs and care of their own children first.

⁷ Stein M, 'Research Review, Young People Leaving Care', *Child and Family Social Work*, 11(3), 2006, pp. 273-279.

A child's experience of care

Children and young people who cannot live with their birth parents should be provided with the best possible care. For many this care will come from members of their wider birth family or friends, for others they will be cared for by people whom they previously did not know. What matters is that care is given by the right people for that child at that time and that it is the best possible care.

Children who are in the care of the state should not lose their childhood as a result; being in care should be key to ensuring they get to enjoy it. They should be able to be children first, and in care second. Their worries should be about homework and staying out late, not whether or not they will be allowed to live with their siblings, or how long they will be able to call their house a home.

When children and young people cannot live with their birth parents, they should receive support that meets all of their needs, regardless of where they live or their legal status. This support should not just look to take the minimum steps needed to meet their basic physiological and safety needs, but should be the very best support that exists in all aspects of their lives and the very best opportunities to grow, develop, learn and play. We must nurture their unique potential and look at their own special interests, talents and wishes to give them the very best childhood possible.

To achieve this we must respect children's views, wishes and feelings. This means making children central to planning about their lives, giving them the support they need, listening to them about how things are working and acting on what they tell us. Listening to children and responding to their individual needs should be at the heart of all aspects of the care system. We should not expect a child to fit into a pre-defined structure but should make that structure flexible enough to bend and mould to the child's needs.

They need the right support, at the right time, to achieve emotional and physical health, excel in education and be secure in their adult life. They must have carers, social workers and public services that have the time, skills and resources to provide that support. These people are doing difficult jobs in difficult circumstances. They must be properly supported to enable them to do those jobs well. It's also important that the right people are recruited: people with a talent and passion for caring for children.

“Building relationships is hard if you only have a three month contract. Social workers aren't given time to develop relationships.”⁸

⁸ Young person at the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, April 2013.

Where things go wrong, they must be put right as quickly as possible, taking into account children's timescales, not asking them to fit to ours. Too often things go wrong, or things just don't go right enough. Too many children tell us of missed visits, a lack of support, of a failure to listen.

Golden threads of care

Throughout a good care journey, there are two aspects that we, and the children and young people we work with, consider to be fundamental. They should hold strong throughout every experience a child in care has, throughout every placement, every meeting, every year of a child's life.

Children and young people constantly and consistently say that they want good, strong relationships with those they live with and who work with them. They also say that they want, and need, to be listened to more. These two themes run through our vision, and through this document. Even where it is not explicitly articulated, we see relationships, and listening to children and young people, as central.

Relationships

Our lives are shaped and influenced by those we are close to; they encourage us, advise us and help us when things go wrong. For children in care and care leavers, these relationships can be difficult to establish, short-lived and too easily fractured. Children in care may already be in deficit when it comes to social capital, from times when those close to them have let them down or been unable to support them. Strong relationships are crucial to overcome this, and to be able to lay the foundations for young people to create their own social networks. A strong relationship can make the difference between a child feeling cared about and loved and not feeling cared for or loved. It can be the thing that prevents loneliness and isolation in care leavers. Strong relationships have real benefits for young people; they teach them to trust where often their ability to trust and form attachments has been broken. Where relationships are subsequently fractured, it can compound the emotional harm that they have already experienced.

“Some young people want to build a relationship first - if we've got no relationship and you [a professional] text me on a Saturday you're not getting a reply from me!”⁹

Strong relationships improve young people's experiences of care – young people need to trust those they work with so that the young person will tell the adult what is going right, and what is

⁹ Young person at a The Who Cares? Trust training session for social work students on 9th December 2013.

going wrong. The young person's belief that the adults closest to them want the best for them contributes to the development of self-esteem and emotional security. For many children in care, the most important and influential relationship will be with their carer. Their carer will be the person who they spend the majority of their time with, who puts plasters on their knee, makes sure they are fed and clothed and tucks them in at night, but different relationships will be important to different young people. Research suggests that, while many different professionals may have a role in their lives, children continue to view their social worker as the most important.¹⁰ Without a trusting relationship, the potentially therapeutic aspects of social work (asking about feelings, exploring the past and plans for the future) may be compromised.¹¹ Once trusting relationships are established, they provide information which can be vital in shaping the plans for children's futures, but may also generate ideas and opportunities to improve the local care system for all children and young people.

Although children in care are separated from their birth family, relationships with that family may continue to be important. Of course, not all relationships are safe to be continued, but one relationship that puts a child at risk of harm should not mean that children are prevented from continuing other existing relationships. In fact, regular contact with siblings, birth parents and other family and friends is often vitally important to many young people, particularly where children do not live together. If children's first experiences of building relationships are that they do not last, we should not be surprised when they are reluctant or struggle to trust and form attachments.

"My dad let me down last minute and didn't come to contact."¹²

Listening to children in care

Flourishing relationships will enable young people to feel confident that they are being listened to and encourage them to share their views, wishes and feelings. But it is not as simple as just listening to young people; it means laying the groundwork that enables that to happen. Relationships are key, but properly listening to children and young people requires other things to be put in place. Adults have to value the voice of the child, and change their work to ensure that they can put that at the centre of everything they do. It can require a whole shift in the way people work, but those changes are worth it. The changes don't need to happen before people stop to listen to children in care; listening will go hand in hand with cultural change to amend practice and make systems better. Much of our vision is about putting the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people at the heart of the system and ensuring that they are

¹⁰ Stein M (2009) cited in Oliver C, *Children's views and experiences of their contact with social workers: A focused review of the evidence*, Children's Workforce Development Council: London, 2010, p.7 [accessed via http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/518/1/Children_s_views_and_experiences_of_contact_with_social_workers_report_July_2010.pdf (18/2/15)].

¹¹ Oliver C, *Children's views and experiences of their contact with social workers: A focused review of the evidence*. Children's Workforce Development Council: London, 2010, p. 29.

¹² *Relationships in Care...How are they for you?! Who Cares?* Issue 103, Summer 2013, p.11.

taken into account. However, it's about more than that. It's about ensuring that every child in care is able to have a good childhood, and grow up feeling cared for.

Children and young people live in a different world to adults, and indeed a different one to the world that adults themselves experienced as children. It is a world that has different priorities, different solutions, and different ways to find out information. Adults cannot fully access this world, as their vision will be coloured by an adult perspective.¹³ What is important to adults can differ from what is important to children; children live their lives much more in the present, while adults tend to focus on outcomes and end-goals.¹⁴ Children will identify personal and systemic problems that adults might not even realise are issues; may be able to identify innovative solutions to problems; and may even reassure professionals that things that they think are problems aren't at all the things that keep children awake at night.

Children and young people can offer insight into their own individual worlds, but also the wider world of childhood and care through their own words and experiences. They can offer valuable insights into these two worlds for professionals, whether they are at the very beginning or end of their careers, and whether they work directly with children in care and care leavers or whether their jobs means that they do not come into regular contact with looked after children. Although they may never meet a care-experienced young person, they may be doing jobs that are of utmost importance to these young people. They may be responsible for processing higher education bursaries to care leavers, but may not understand the importance of that money being paid on time until they are told what it means to them by a care leaver, reliant on that support.

“It was definitely beneficial for me to be trained by young people from the service. These young people had experienced the system I am currently working in and therefore could provide specific example of both good practice and areas for development.”¹⁵

Making those changes and taking the time to listen is worth it. Being able to have their views heard, considered and acted upon is a powerful thing, and gives a feeling of control in lives that can often feel very powerless indeed.¹⁶

¹³ Rixon A, 'Learning together', in Foley P and Rixon A (eds.), *Changing children's services working and learning together*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2014.

¹⁴ Mason J, 'A Children's Standpoint: Needs in Out-of-Home Care', *Children & Society* (22), 2008, pp. 358–369.

¹⁵ All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children & Care Leavers, *The Entitlements Inquiry, report with recommendations*, London: All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children & Care Leavers, 2013, p. 45 [accessed via http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/data/files/Entitlements_Inquiry_Full_Report.pdf (19/2/15)].

¹⁶ Mcleod A, 'Respect or empowerment? Alternative understandings of 'listening' in childcare social work,' *Adoption & Fostering*, 30(4), 2006, pp.43-52.

Having said that, we need to be mindful that some children and young people don't want to participate in shaping services or other decisions that often children and young people in care are required to participate in. They are often required to participate in decisions about their care above and beyond that required, or indeed offered for other children. This is a wish in itself that should be respected and where possible fulfilled.

But children in care and care leavers do have to be involved in decisions more often than their friends. It is only right that we facilitate this and make it an act of power and control, not a tokenistic nod to statutory guidance and children's rights. Listening is not the passive act that many think it to be. It requires time, empathy and action. At times it needs bravery and trust. But what it can achieve is even greater. It can achieve real change, give real power and make real differences to children's lives and futures.

“Young people should be listened to because it's their lives; no-one knows it better than they do.”¹⁷

We want all children in care and care leavers to have a good experience of care and positive outcomes. This document sets out our vision for achieving this. We have focused on five key areas: the care system, where the child lives, their education, what happens when things go wrong and leaving care.

This document sets out changes that we think should happen in those areas. It puts the child at the centre of thinking and planning about their life and focuses on ensuring they are able to be a child first, and a child in care second.

These steps for change are not based on political vogue or on what is immediately deliverable. Our ideas are based on research and what children and young people and those who care and work with them tell us. We have not been constrained by financial or political limitations. Just as a good parent would make sacrifices for their own children, we expect the state to make similar sacrifices and compromises in order to provide children in care and care leavers with the childhood and future that they deserve.

¹⁷ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust's participation group's as part of the response to Ofsted's 2013 consultation on the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.



Children and young people must have stable and supportive placements that are right for them.

Why is this important?

In a year, around 90,000 children have contact with the care system in the United Kingdom. Some stay for days, some stay for years, and some stay for the rest of their childhoods. They are removed from their family and their home and given somewhere else to live. It is in this new home that they will spend part, or all of their childhood. It is here that their needs as individual children must be met, to ensure that they are immediately safe, happy and secure and can grow into happy, confident adults, without losing more of their childhood than they already have.

The types of places where looked after children have lived have changed relatively little over the past 18 years. Figures from the Department for Education show that there have been decreases in the use of residential care and placement with parents and an increase in the use of foster homes in this period. The relative decline in use of these placement types may have its roots in cultural change within local authorities or financial pressures, or both.

"The thing I like about being in care is that I'm in a safe home."¹⁸

Placements when a child first comes into care

When a child first comes into care, they have been taken from everything that is familiar, everything that they are used to. Regardless of the quality of family life that they left, they will be scared and vulnerable. They may be separated from siblings, pets, friends and familiar surroundings. Their bed will change, their clothes may change, they may have to leave behind a favourite toy or place. They may already have poor attachment, but this removal from the familiar will further affect a child's emotional stability and ability to make positive attachments in the future. In 2014, 62% of children in care were in care primarily because they had experienced abuse or neglect.¹⁹ These previous experiences of trauma make it harder to form attachments as children grow up, which can be further compounded by poor care, unstable placements and multiple moves.

Placing children in the wrong home leads, usually, to the placement breaking down. Each year one in 10 children in care move homes three times or more.²⁰ Many of these children and young people have moved a great many more times than this: nearly a quarter of all children leaving care in 2014 had four or more placements during their time in care.²¹ Each move will entail a change of carer, friends, bedroom, and bricks and mortar. It will introduce a new routine, new ways of doing things, new house rules. Sometimes it will mean a move to a new area and a new school. Every child is different, and the type of home they want, as well as the difference between what they want and where they are placed will affect both the stability and success of the placement.

"I never got an option to where I wanted to be placed, they just chuck you here, there and everywhere. My feelings and surroundings never came into it, then they moan when a child is acting disruptive and being naughty."²²

Children will come into care from a range of backgrounds, experiences and family types. Some children will need highly specialised, therapeutic care; others will want a new family to live with,

¹⁸ *All About Me*, Who Cares? Junior, Issue 18, Autumn 2013, p.12.

¹⁹ Department for Education, *Statistical First Release, Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2014, Main text, SFR36/2014*, London: Department for Education, 2014 [accessed via <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption--2> (17/2/15)].

²⁰ Department for Education, *Statistical First Release, Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2014, National Tables: SFR36/2014*, London: Department for Education, 2014, Table A3 [accessed via <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption--2> (17/2/15)].

²¹ *Ibid.* Table D5.

²² The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, London: The Care Inquiry, 2013, p. 10.

while some will have strong attachments to their birth family and not want to live in a different family environment. For some children, it will be important that they live with someone of the same cultural background, for others, it won't matter. Getting it right reduces the risk of placements breaking down.

Stable placements allow for the development of stable and strong relationships. It is through these new, positive relationships that children will learn to trust and to develop strong and positive attachments. Developing secure attachment has long been associated with normal child development. Adults with insecure attachment are more likely to have social and emotional difficulties; some forms of insecure attachment are linked with poor outcomes, including higher levels of committing domestic violence²³ and higher levels of alcohol and substance misuse.²⁴ Insecure attachment is also linked to a higher risk of a number of health conditions, including strokes, heart attacks and high blood pressure.²⁵

Placements throughout a child's time in care

A stable home life also supports continuity and stability in other aspects of life.²⁶ It makes it more likely that a child will have a stable education and go on to secondary school with their friends, be able to maintain friendships and other relationships. Having a consistent carer makes it more likely that children will be able to learn to ride a bike, go on holidays and join clubs and develop hobbies.

Stability in a placement also means that they will be able to access health care easily and regularly, as it is. Placement stability, or lack of, can make it harder for young people to access services. Some children and young people report being unable to access mental health services because they are told that they need to have a stable address for a specified length of time²⁷ and yet those children who are most in need are the ones without stable and long term addresses. Placement stability allows for children's needs to be identified and met, because those working with and caring for them will have the time to learn about what those needs are. It also reduces the risk that children will fall through the gaps of the system; too many moves can risk both carers

²³ Dutton DG and Corvo K (2006) cited in Allen G, *Early Intervention: The Next Steps, An Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government*, London: Cabinet Office, 2011, p.15 [accessed via: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/284086/early-intervention-next-steps2.pdf (17/2/15)].

²⁴ Walsh A (1992) and Brennan KA and Shaver P (1995) both cited in Allen G., *Early Intervention: The Next Steps, An Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government*, London: Cabinet Office, 2011, p.15.

²⁵ McWilliams LA and Bailey SJ (2010) cited in Allen, G., *Early Intervention: The Next Steps, An Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government*, 2011, p.15.

²⁶ Department for Education, *Data Pack Improving permanence for looked after children*, London: Department for Education, 2013 [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/264952/final_improving_permanence_data_pack_2013_sept.pdf (16/2/15)].

²⁷ Jones R, et al., 'The effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving access to health and mental health services for looked after children and young people: a systematic review', *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 1(1), 2012, pp.71-85 [accessed via: http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/74451/1/WRRO_74451.pdf (12/2/15)].

and professionals thinking someone else has passed on information, flagged issues or raised concerns.

Above all, it allows their needs as a child to be met. It allows them to undertake normal childhood activities like joining clubs, making friends and having pets; to make mistakes and push boundaries with adults who know them; and be loved and cared for.

"I was supported with acting, they [the children's home] found groups for me."²⁸

A vital part of childhood and child development is the exploration of self, identity and testing boundaries. Good, stable, strong carers provide the roots and foundations from which a child can explore, knowing that they have safety to come back to if things go wrong or get too daunting. Without stability and the continuity of good relationships and attachment, a child will struggle to have the confidence and support to fully explore their identity, a sense of belonging²⁹ and as part of that their surroundings and boundaries. Safety can be found in consistent carers, but also in stable and solid homes and surroundings. However, houses, whether they are foster homes, children's homes or semi-independent accommodation, only become homes when they have been lived in for a while, when they feel like home and where there isn't the constant threat of being moved.

"Social worker would not tell me where I was moving to and didn't tell me how far it was from home."³⁰

Placements as needs change over time

As a child grows up and comes to the end of their time in care, their needs are very different from their early experience of care where they need time to understand what care is, to trust their carers and be safe to play and make friends. They may need less direct time from their carers, but the need for strong relationships and a stable placement are no less important. During adolescence, new relationships are explored, mistakes are made (often with the potential for more serious consequences than childhood mistakes) and preparation for adult experiences and responsibilities becomes increasingly important. When a child moves placements regularly, they may miss out on opportunities to develop skills that will be important in adulthood like budgeting and cooking.

²⁸ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust's participation group's as part of the response to Ofsted's 2014 consultation on inspections of children's homes.

²⁹ The Care Inquiry, *Making not breaking, findings and recommendations of The Care Inquiry*, London: The Care Inquiry, 2013, p.5.

³⁰ McDonnell S, et al., *Action research into the more effective strategic commissioning of children's residential care homes, Interim report*, London: OPM, 2013, p.96 [accessed via http://www.opm.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Action-research-into-the-more-effective-strategic-commissioning-of-childrens-residential-care-homes_interim-report1.pdf (17/2/15)].

Children in care are not a homogenous group, and their experiences and needs differ. However, it is important to remember that they are children, with a childhood, who deserve to have all that that entails. Each child's past, present and future is unique, and they should be able to live in homes that allow them to understand about their past, learn who they are, and prepare for what they want to be. If their placement breaks down because it is unable to meet their needs, for children in care it's not just a move to a different house, it's the loss of yet another home, family, and another piece of childhood.

Do children and young people have supportive and stable placements at the moment?

Children in care currently move home too many times. Their childhoods are filled with placement moves, fractured relationships and poor attachment. They do not always live with their siblings, or in the place where they would like to.

Stability

Children in the general population move home on average three times before adulthood.³¹ Only 19% of children's home placements last longer than a year.³² Moving house is recognised as one of the most stressful life events for any person, because of the lack of control involved. Given that these are children who have already experienced trauma, loss and instability, placement moves are likely to be more stressful. With every placement move comes the ending of relationships and the start of new ones. Trust is broken, and has to be rebuilt. Stories have to be repeated, bikes and swimming lessons get forgotten about, and children miss out. Children can feel like they are to blame, that the reason why placements and relationships fail is some deficiency in them.

"When I wanted to move placements my social worker said "there are homeless people out there... you should be grateful you have a roof over your head."³³

Age and ethnicity have been shown to be crucial variables in terms of young people's stability in care. Those who are younger than eleven, both at time of asking and time of entry, experience more stability in their placements. Those who are older experience less stability and more variability.³⁴ While fostering is by far the most common placement type, Black Caribbean

³¹ Munro and Hardy (2006) cited in Boddy J, *Understanding permanence for looked after children: A review of research for the Care Inquiry*, London: The Care Inquiry, 2013, p.22 [accessed via <https://www.fostering.net/sites/www.fostering.net/files/resources/england/understanding-permanence-for-lac-janet-boddy.pdf> (17/2/15)].

³² Department for Education, *Children's Homes Data Pack*, London: Department for Education, 2014, slide 8 [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/388701/Childrens_Homes_data_pack_Dec_2014.pdf (17/2/15)].

³³ *Fight for Your Rights*, Who Cares? Issue 98, Spring 2012, p.15.

³⁴ Sinclair et. al., (2007) cited in Boddy J, *Understanding permanence for looked after children: A review of research for the Care Inquiry*, London: The Care Inquiry, 2013, p.22.

children have been shown to be more likely to experience residential care than children from other ethnic groups.³⁵

Planning for placements

Local authorities are under a legal duty to ensure that all looked after children are able to live in the home which will 'best promote and safeguard the child's welfare' and give preference to placement with family or friends wherever possible.³⁶ There is also a wider duty on local authorities to ensure that sufficient accommodation exists in their local area for the children they look after.³⁷ Care planning regulations set out how local authorities should plan for placements and the support that should be offered to carers. Unfortunately, this careful planning of placements does not always happen. Many children told the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers' 2013 Entitlements Inquiry that they didn't have a review meeting before big changes happen, including placement moves. Young people talk about not being given any warning, being told that they are going out to dinner and then taken to a new carer's house, of leaving friends and family behind and of being forced to move belongings in black bin bags.

"Every time I moved I had no review, no warning or the reason why I was moving, they would all tell me different stories."³⁸

Out of area placements

Children in care are placed in 'out of area' placements far too often. Some children move 'out of area' because they need somewhere to live that is able to offer specialist support, others move to be kept safe from abuse or gang involvement, and for others it's because there are not enough suitable places to live nearby. While for some, moving from their area will be a positive thing, most children who move 'out of area' will be moved from their familiar surroundings, from their school, family, friends, parks and shops to go and live with carers that can be far away from their home. There is currently a mismatch of carers and placements and the needs of children coming into care – there are not enough carers, or places in children's homes in each local area, forcing local authorities to look in other counties, regions, and sometimes different parts of the UK to find a home for children in its care. 17% of children in care were living in homes that were

³⁵ Owen and Statham (2009) cited in Boddy J, *Understanding permanence for looked after children: A review of research for the Care Inquiry*, London: The Care Inquiry, 2013, p.14.

³⁶ HM Government, *The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review*, London: HM Government, 2010, p.38 [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/336072/The_Children_Act_1989_Care_planning_placement_case_review.pdf (18/2/15)].

³⁷ Children Act 1989, Section 22(G) [accessed via <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/22G> (18/2/15)]. See also Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Sufficiency: statutory guidance on securing sufficient accommodation for looked after children*. Nottingham: DCSF Publications, 2010 [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/273812/sufficiency_-_statutory_guidance_on_securing_sufficient_accommodation_for_looked_after_children.pdf (18/2/15)].

³⁸ All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, *The Entitlements Inquiry, report with recommendations*, London: All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children & Care Leavers, 2013, p.18.

over 20 miles away from their birth home. 37% of children living in children's homes were over 20 miles away from their home.³⁹ Travelling this distance takes approximately six and a half hours by foot and 40 minutes to drive.⁴⁰ This means that it takes 80 minutes for social workers, IROs, family and friends to drive there and back to visit children placed 20 miles away, without factoring in that many children will be much further than 20 miles from their home. Distance impedes professionals' abilities to develop relationships and really get to know the children they care for.

*"I was promised by social services I would be in the same town or near where my sister lived (she is nine, so I felt like I had to look after her/keep an eye on her because of how my dad was) and my friends. Then, out of nowhere I was taken far away from everyone and everything I knew. I felt isolated, lonely, depressed."*⁴¹

Accommodation options

Accommodation is not just an issue for young children, but also for older children who are still in care, particularly for 16 and 17 year olds due to the quality of supported accommodation and other unregulated provision. The Education Select Committee in 2014 heard evidence of young people living, while looked after, in dangerous, dirty and inappropriate accommodation.⁴² This is a particular risk for young people who enter care at 16 or older. While still only children, they can often be living semi-independently and in inappropriate situations. This leaves children to face challenges that they shouldn't have to cope with, and with little time to deal with adolescent problems like balancing school work with their social life or having enough money to go to the cinema and go clothes shopping, much less the strength and support to develop a sense of identity. Dealing with severe problems during their childhood can also leave children feeling that they don't deserve to be happy.

For other children, staying with their wider family or friends is the best and preferred option, and living with wider family members can help children feel part of a family, and reduce loneliness and isolation. However, only 5% of children who are cared for by kinship carers are formally looked after children.⁴³ Only children formally looked after by the state, and their carers, have a

³⁹ Department for Education, *Statistical First Release, Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2014, National Tables: SFR36/2014*, 2014, Table A6.

⁴⁰ Based on a walking speed of three miles an hour and a speed limit of 30 miles an hour.

⁴¹ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, The Care Inquiry: London, 2013, p.10.

⁴² House of Commons Education Committee, *Into independence, not out of care: 16 plus options*, London: The Stationery Office Limited, HC 259 INCORPORATING HC 1033, SESSION 2013-14, 2014, [accessed via <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/259/259.pdf> (17/2/15)].

⁴³ Selwyn J, et al., *The Poor Relations? Children and informal kinship carers speak out*, London: Buttle UK, 2013, p.3 [accessed via http://www.buttleuk.org/data/files/Research_Documents/poor-relations-report-download-version.pdf (18/2/15)].

right to financial and practical support, for those 95% looked after in informal kinship arrangements, there is no entitlement to any additional support. Kinship carers who have been approved as foster carers report lower levels of financial hardship and higher levels of non-financial support from children's services than those who are not formal foster carers.⁴⁴ Kinship carers are often retired or have their own families. They may be dealing with their own lives and problems. Love and family ties can be important in helping children in care overcome trauma, but love alone will not help to heal or enable family carers to overcome those additional challenges.

What should children and young people's experiences of placements be?

Supportive placements when a child first comes into care

When a child enters care for the first time, things need to be put in place to ease their transition. Where possible, children should arrive with toys and familiar items, from duvet covers to photos. A child will arrive in a new house with new rules. It will take time for them to settle into a new routine and to live with new carers and possibly new foster siblings or with other children in a children's home. When children move into a new house, the family dynamics, daily routine and even expectations change. They have to learn new names, what to call their foster carers, obey new rules. They may be used to the landing light being left on at night, but all lights being turned off in their new house. They may be used to eating their main meals in the evening, but their new carers eat their main meals during the day. These things should be talked about and children should be helped to feel as in control of their lives as possible, not passive objects of change. This begins with ensuring children are able to choose where they live.

"The staff are a family so the home is family orientated. The maximum number of young people is 4 and there is 2 other lads in the home at this present time. One of the lads is a year younger than me and he came a month after me, so we are really close."⁴⁵

Not all children will want to live in a foster home. Some will want to live in a children's home, while others will want to live with family and friends. Children will have different needs; from wanting to live with large sibling groups, or requiring intensive therapeutic support; to having special educational needs that they require support with. This means that a range of placements should be available for children, and local authorities should commission placements based on need, rather than assuming that generic placements will be suitable. There should be enough

⁴⁴ Hunt J and Waterhouse S, *Understanding family and friends care: the relationship between need, support and legal status*, London: Family Rights Group, 2012 [accessed via <http://www.frg.org.uk/images/e-publications/ffc-report-1.pdf> (16/2/15)]

⁴⁵ McDonnell S, et al., *Action research into the more effective strategic commissioning of children's residential care homes, Interim report*, London: OPM, 2013, p.102 [accessed via http://www.opm.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Action-research-into-the-more-effective-strategic-commissioning-of-childrens-residential-care-homes_interim-report1.pdf (17/2/15)].

high quality children's homes, and high quality support for family and friends carers so that when children want and need these placements rather than fostering, they are available.

A placement isn't just about having four walls, a roof, a door and food on the table, it's also about the other people who live there and what everyday life is like. Carers need to be well matched with those they are caring for. For some children it will be important that their carers are of the same religion or ethnicity; for others, it may not be. Matching is important for big and little things, and it is important for children to be fully involved in the matching process. By talking to children, those doing the matching will understand what is important to them. They may have had a pet before coming into care, and may settle into a home quicker if they live with carers who also have a pet. Only children themselves will be able to say what is important to them. Children in care should be given the chance to be involved in the choice between placements and, where they know that they are moving in plenty of time, given the opportunity to try out placements and visit their new potential carers. It makes the unfamiliar more familiar and less scary and stressful. Very few people move house without having visited the area and the house. We shouldn't expect children in care to move into someone's home without having had the same opportunity. We also shouldn't expect them to move their belongings in bin bags or plastic carrier bags. They should be given suitcases and boxes and their belongings given the same respect as we would want for our own possessions. Belongings represent our lives, our history, and our stories. They should be respected and valued.

Matching should also include consideration of where the placement is. Children should not have to uproot from their local area just because the best carer who can meet their needs is living in another town, or county. They should be able to stay close to their friends, to the park where they go skateboarding at the weekends, to continue going to ballet class and still see their friends. Imagine how scary moving to a stranger's house, in a strange area can be. Or how disconcerting it could feel, moving to North Yorkshire from Surrey where they ask you if you'd like a bun for lunch, and you're given slices of ham between bread, not a something with icing and a cherry on top, or being asked if you're nithered or mafting, not hot or cold. Or moving from Manchester to Bristol and being asked to put your daps on for PE, when you're used to wearing pumps. Of course some children may need to move to a home that is far away to be kept safe, and some may want a clean break and actively choose to move to a new area.

Alongside a well-matched placement, both in distance and carer, comes high quality training and support for all those who care for children. Not all carers need to be trained to meet all possible needs, but when they are caring for children, they should be prepared and supported to be able to meet the particular needs of that child. Foster carers, kinship carers and key workers should all receive regular high quality training and support. They should be confident that they are able to care for the child or children that are placed with them. If carers are unable to meet the needs

of those they care for, the placement is highly likely to break down, and if it doesn't, a child is living in a home that is not the best place for them to live. Foster carers and key workers should be well trained in attachment theory, and should understand how to work with children who may have poor attachment. They should be well supported to deal with children who challenge authority, to manage other behaviours (some of which may be caused by poor attachment) and create a feeling of belonging in children. These behaviours, if incorrectly managed, can lead to placement breakdown or instability, putting a child at even further risk of poor attachment and all that entails.

Supportive placements throughout a child's time in care

A placement should only break down in rare situations. Things are likely to go wrong in a placement, just as things go wrong in a family home. People make mistakes. Arguments will happen and issues will arise. These should not be insurmountable barriers that result in a placement breakdown. Children need to feel safe and secure and know that they can make mistakes without their carers giving up on them. There should be additional support put in place to ensure that rocky patches are managed, and survived. Families survive turbulent times often purely because they are a family. Children in care and their carers may need extra support to help them through tough times. Respite placements or therapy may help, so might holidays and the opportunity to have fun. Children don't want to be let down. They don't want to be given up on.

"In another home we were fighting and I said I wanted to leave. They thought I meant it so I had to go, but I was just saying it in the moment."⁴⁶

Carers should be equipped to support children's emotional needs. It may be that the child needs access to intensive emotional support, specialist or significant amounts of other support. This support may need to be there for long periods of time, or there in the background for them to dip in and out of when they need it. But it's not just the children that will need the support. Carers will also need their own support in order to deal with their own needs.

Supportive placements as needs change over time

As a child grows up in care, and the longer that they stay in one place, their needs change. As a child grows and develops, they will need carers who are able to advocate for them. They should feel confident to ask for help for their children and young people, to know what they are entitled to, and what to do when they don't receive that support. Children and young people should feel that their carers are on their side. Children in care should have access to independent advocates

⁴⁶ Young person in an interview for an article in Who Cares? Issue 108, Autumn 2014.

who can support them when they aren't getting what they are entitled to, or where they think that they are not being listened to.

A placement isn't necessarily about permanence in every case. Children may outgrow where they are living, or their needs may change and can no longer be met in the home they are in. If this does happen, the way that this is managed will ensure that placements can continue to be stable and supportive, even while changing. The move between placements should be well planned, allowing for matching, choice, and visiting. It gives the child time to adjust to moving on. Stability and support should last long after a placement ends, and carers, where appropriate and when the child wishes, should be encouraged and supported to maintain contact. It is often not just the primary carers that children miss, but also those other significant figures in their lives, like other children living in the house, or a pet. Each house that they live in, every placement that they have, whether positive or negative, becomes part of their past and identity: the importance of this cannot be stressed enough.

No matter how long a placement lasts or how stable and supportive their home life is, children who are in care will never be able to forget that they are a looked after child. Children in care will have different and additional worries to other children and there will always be a review of a plan or a visit from a social worker to remind them. But it's important that children don't forget that they are children first. They need to be able to experience all that being a child involves. They need to be able to play, feel safe, make friends, go to school and have fun. They need to learn about who they are, where they have come from, and be able to explore and develop their identity and sense of belonging.

"[With my foster carers] we do puzzles, we play games, we watch TV, and we eat tea together."⁴⁷

As they get older, and being a child develops into being a teenager, young people should be able to develop healthy relationships, have sleepovers, go on school trips and stay out late in a supported and caring environment. They should learn what it means to be responsible, to make mistakes and to succeed and be able to go through these moments with someone who cares about them, in an environment where they are safe and supported.

Children in care are children. They deserve to be loved, to play, and to have fun. They deserve a home and a childhood, and the state, as a parent, should make that happen.

⁴⁷ *Life is Good! Who Cares?* Junior, Issue 18, Autumn 2013, p.5.



Children and young people must have a positive experience of education that allows them to develop their potential.

“Education is the best provision for the journey to old age.”⁴⁸

Why is this important?

A child’s educational experience provides them with the foundation on which the rest of their life is built. It teaches them literacy and numeracy skills, it gives them basic subject knowledge that they can choose to go on to develop, it shapes what they want to do when they grow up, it teaches them what they are good at and it helps them learn how to be around other people, to play and share and make friends. Children are currently required to attend school for 190 days a year, 52% of the calendar year. School is the place where they spend a significant amount of their time and their childhood. If children are expected to spend so much time in a classroom, almost as much as in their home, this experience should be of the highest quality.

⁴⁸ Aristotle.

Collectively, looked after children are among the worst performing groups in the English school system. These poor outcomes can stem from a number of experiences or additional challenges that young people in care go through in school. These challenges are no fault of their own, but are brought about by their experiences prior to care and their care journey. Pre-care trauma and experiences, as well as a failure to deal with issues that arise from both these and in-care experiences, can have a serious impact on a child's education. It means that for looked after children, their educational journey needs to be more supportive, more consistent and more flexible to ensure that any negative factors that may affect their educational experience do not create overwhelming barriers to accessing and thriving in education.

Education when a child first comes into care

Before children enter care and they are living with their birth family, they may not be attending school regularly, or even at all. When social workers and other professionals enter the lives of children and families they are often primarily concerned about keeping the child safe. They're concerned about making sure that the child is clean, well fed and healthy, and this means that sometimes school assumes less importance.⁴⁹ While this may be the best thing at the time, it can also mean that children fall behind, become unfamiliar with going to school or have underlying problems which remain undetected because of their poor attendance.

"Life outside of school may have been perfect but at school I could be who I wanted, I could be me!"⁵⁰

When children first enter care, they will be dealing with severe disruption in their lives. For some, school will be the only constant and their teacher, friends and lessons may stay the same. However, for others, their school may change, which means they have to learn new names, have a new teacher (or teachers), and make new friends. Arriving at a new school halfway through the school year is not an easy task, but for a child whose life has been completely turned on its head, it is likely to be incredibly difficult. Even if a child stays at the same school or changes school, they will be dealing with severe disruption in their lives and emotional stress. They may be worrying about what to tell their friends, keeping up with their homework, and balancing this with the stress of fitting into a new house with new rules. They may not feel ready for learning. Here well-supported carers are crucial to help ease fears, support change and encourage attendance and learning. Trust and strong relationships are vital for this to happen. For others school may be a sanctuary, somewhere where they can focus on learning and not worry about their life beyond the school gates.

⁴⁹ Penfold C, et al., *Parental Confidence in the Special Educational Needs Assessment, Statementing and Tribunal System*, London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p.57 [accessed via <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/25055/parental-confidence-special-educational.pdf> (17/2/15)].

⁵⁰ *Your shout*, Who Cares? Issue 107, Summer 2014, p.5.

Education throughout a child's time in care

As a child grows up, and as they spend more time in care, school becomes even more important. School is not just about education, but about having the space to make friends, learn about relationships, to play, to explore and to develop a sense of identity. And yet children in care's educational journeys are more likely to be disrupted than the journeys of the wider school-population, either through exclusion from school (children in care are excluded more frequently than the general population),⁵¹ through missing significant periods of school because of placement moves, changing schools, or the need to take time out for review meetings or for extra health or other appointments. Missing school affects a child's school experience and academic performance,⁵² as well as their ability to make and maintain friendships and to build relationships with staff. This can further compound difficulties that children in care have with their own self-confidence and ability to build friendships because of their childhood experiences. Children shouldn't miss school unless they have to, and in the cases where they must, support from the adults in their lives to ensure that children can catch up with work missed and to build friendships is crucial.

“Education was my stability: the only thing that was normal was my school. It was the only thing that stayed the same when I became looked after.”⁵³

When thinking about placement options, social workers are obliged to try not to move a child from their school where possible. When a family moves house, they only change a child's school if they really need to. If they do change schools, they look for the best schools available. Staying at the same school means that children are able to maintain friendships, learn in familiar surroundings and be taught by teachers who already know them. Moving school at the same time as moving placement can make an already stressful experience even more demanding. While it may be the right thing for some children, there is a positive correlation between high attendance and good outcomes at school⁵⁴ and therefore when this happens, it is crucial that

⁵¹ Department for Education, *Statistical First Release, SFR 49/2014: Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England as at 31 March 2014*, London: Department for Education, 2014, p.14 [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/384781/Outcomes_SFR49_2014_Text.pdf (17/2/15)]; Department for Education and Skills, *Care Matters: Time for Change*, London: Department for Education and Skills, 2007, p.80 [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/326311/Care_Matters_-_Time_for_Change.pdf (18/2/15)]; Social Exclusion Unit, *A better education for children in care*, London: Social Exclusion Unit, 2003, p. 12 [accessed via <https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/3623826/A-better-education-for-children-in-care.pdf> (18/2/15)].

⁵² Taylor C, *Improving attendance at school*, London: Department for Education, 2012 (accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180772/DFE-00036-2012_improving_attendance_at_school.pdf (15/2/15)).

⁵³ Young person at the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, April 2014, summary minutes available: http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/data/files/APPG_April14_Summary.pdf.

⁵⁴ Taylor C, *Improving attendance at school*, London: Department for Education, 2012.

the amount of time out of school is as limited as possible and that the transition from one school to the next is smooth and supported.

Children's needs often get picked up through consistent support - by teachers or carers who are familiar with them and are able to make the time to spend with them. 66.6% of looked after children have some form of special educational need, of which behavioural, emotional and social difficulties and a moderate learning difficulty are the most common categories.⁵⁵ This means that many looked after children will need additional support to help them fully engage with learning at school. They may be disruptive in class, find it harder to make friends or struggle to concentrate, because of challenges that they face at home or trauma that they have faced earlier in their childhood. It is therefore very important that when faced with the challenge of difficult behaviour or any other form of potential special educational need, teachers do not assume that children are being intentionally disruptive or disengaged and ensure a proper assessment of the child's needs is carried out. Children and young people say that some teachers do not understand the specific needs that children in care have, or understand the context of care and what it really means to be a looked after child. They also say that some teachers have negative stereotypes about looked after children and have lower expectations.⁵⁶

Education as needs change over time

Throughout a child's educational journey, they have to make big decisions that will affect their future that rely on positive educational experiences, positive role models and goals to achieve. They move from primary to secondary school, they choose subjects to study at GCSE and they will choose what to do next after they leave school at 16. Moving on to further study requires young people to take a chance, on both their academic ability and their ability to make the right choices. At the point of deciding whether to go on to college and university, many looked after young people and care leavers will be living independently and will be making these big life decisions without the safety net of a parent to fall back on, while also coping with additional risks that are related to finance and accommodation.⁵⁷

These decisions, which for most children are made within a supportive family environment, are often made during placement moves, the building of relationships and while coping with prior experiences. Yet these decisions will affect the rest of a child's life. A decision not to take A-levels, taken possibly because of a lack of confidence in their academic abilities, can make it difficult for a young person who later changes their mind and wants to design Formula 1 racing cars. Young people need to feel confident in their own abilities, their capacity to make appropriate choices, and that they can take these risks safe in the knowledge that they will be

⁵⁵ Department for Education, *Statistical First Release, SFR 49/2014: Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England as at 31 March 2014*, London: Department for Education, 2014, p.11.

⁵⁶ Harker R, et al., *Taking Care of Education: An evaluation of the education of looked after children*, London: NCB, 2004, pp.189-191.

⁵⁷ The Who Cares? Trust, *Open Doors, Open Minds*, London: The Who Cares? Trust, 2012, p.35 [accessed via http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/data/files/Open_Doors_Open_Minds_small.pdf (17/2/15)].

supported if things go wrong. Making those decisions is much easier with a goal to aim for, either a subject that they want to study further or a career they want to have. It's important that a sense of ambition and possibility is fostered within all young people, and they have role models and supportive relationships to help them develop their talents. Without something to aim for, talents can be wasted and young people can be lost and without direction.

"There are people, like [...] and virtual school heads, who believe in you and don't mind doing more work if it helps you."⁵⁸

Working hard at school and progressing to further and higher education is an act of aspiration. This sense of aspiration and planning for the future is often sparked and encouraged by a child's parents, but for looked after children, this is more complex. Looked after children say that while they often have one person in their life who has high aspirations for them, not everyone shares these hopes.⁵⁹ Some children report rarely being praised at school.⁶⁰ Everyone in the close circle of support in a child in care's life should have high aspirations for them, just as a good parent would.

Do children and young people have positive experiences of education at the moment?

Currently, children in care and care leavers underperform in education when compared to children and young people in general. This comparison is often deceptive, as this difference in performance comes from a number of barriers, poorly targeted or inappropriate resources, including financial support and an inflexible system that expects students to be at certain educational points at specific ages. In 2014, 12% of looked after children achieved five or more A*-C GCSEs or equivalent, including maths and English, compared with 52.1% of non-looked after children.⁶¹ Looked after children are twice as likely to be permanently excluded from school and five times more likely to have a fixed term exclusion than all children.⁶² At the age of 19, only 6% of care leavers are in higher education.⁶³ This does not mean that looked after children aren't as clever as other children, or that they are less well behaved. It means that they are not receiving the necessary support to ensure that their experiences prior to entering care and their previous and current care experiences are not impacting adversely on their education. It also means that their experiences in education currently are not good enough, and they are not receiving the wider support and opportunities necessary to develop their potential.

⁵⁸ *Nothing's Gonna Stop Me!* Who Cares? Issue 104, Autumn 2013, p.19.

⁵⁹ The Who Cares? Trust, *Open Doors, Open Minds*, London: The Who Cares? Trust, 2012, p.5.

⁶⁰ Barnardo's, *Failed by the system, the views of young care leavers on their educational experiences*, London: Barnardo's, 2006, p.5 [accessed via http://www.barnardos.org.uk/failed_by_the_system_report.pdf (15/2/15)].

⁶¹ Department for Education, *Statistical First Release, SFR 49/2014: Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England as at 31 March 2014*, London: Department for Education, 2014, p.11.

⁶² *Ibid.* p.14.

⁶³ Department for Education, *Statistical First Release, Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2014, National Tables: SFR36/2014*, 2014, Table F1.

*"Lots of children and young people in care are more than book smart. Teachers should notice that, recognise different qualifications and give you support for the things you like and are good at."*⁶⁴

Primary carers

Primary carers are crucial to ensuring that education is supported and the children they care for are benefiting from it and are on track to realising their potential. Yet some foster carers and key workers may be confused by the education system, which may have changed since they, or their own birth children went to school, and feel that they are unable to support young people. They may also feel unable to challenge the school or local authority about aspects of the education of the child in their care. Young people tell us of carers and key workers who do not sit down with them and help them complete their homework, or appear uninterested when they share school success stories.⁶⁵ That is not true of all carers; some care very much about the success of the young people they care for, but a high proportion of carers report not having enough information about the education system and potential choices for young people's futures, which affects their ability to provide support.⁶⁶ In addition to supporting a child's education, it is important to celebrate successes, both academic and extra-curricular just as any good parent would. There should be opportunities for both carers and professionals to reward and celebrate with children, including attending awards evenings and displaying trophies and certificates. These celebrations should include past carers, where appropriate, to help reinforce the relationships that are so important to a child's life and a stable and happy home.

Carers need to be, and to feel, informed about how the system works, and this is particularly important when systems change. The Children and Families Act 2014 introduced the biggest change to the special educational needs (SEN) system in 30 years. However, foster carers lacked confidence and clarity in the previous system,⁶⁷ and are therefore likely to struggle, at least initially, to understand their role and the way that the new system works. Foster carers, and indeed key workers, may enter a process that started before the child was placed with them, and may well be concluded after the child leaves their home.⁶⁸ There is similarly a lack of information and training for professionals who work with children in care and care leavers about providing support and information to young people, as well as how they too can be ambitious for the children and young people they work with while also supporting the child or young person's own aspiration.

⁶⁴ Young person to The Who Cares? Trust at a participation session.

⁶⁵ The Who Cares? Trust, *Open Doors, Open Minds*, London: The Who Cares? Trust, 2012, p.22.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p.30.

⁶⁷ Penfold C, et al., *Parental Confidence in the Special Educational Needs Assessment, Statementing and Tribunal System*, London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009 pp.65-66.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p.66.

“I started my education by learning to write my name in year nine, when I came to the UK. [...] I got help and now I’ve done a degree!”⁶⁹

Virtual school heads

Some virtual school heads are building the capacity of carers and professionals to promote the education of looked after children, and in some cases have been providing training for carers. However, in some areas, Ofsted reports that training is reactive, relying on carers to identify the training that they require. Unfortunately, you don’t know what you don’t know. Ofsted has also found examples of a lack of advice about other education services, for example support for children with SEN.⁷⁰ Within local authorities, virtual school heads have primary responsibility for ensuring that there is suitable education in place for all children looked after by the local authority.⁷¹ The introduction of legislation making virtual school heads statutory means that all local authorities have a specific person who is responsible for promoting the educational achievement of looked after children (but not care leavers), but how they do it will still be subject to variation across local authorities and to budgetary pressures. Children in care, both attending the same school with identical needs but looked after by different local authorities, could receive different levels of support.

Virtual school heads should be focusing on high aspirations and academic achievement, and this has a positive effect on attainment, exclusions and attendance, as well as placement stability and a child’s wellbeing.⁷² Virtual school heads should be the champions of looked after children, involved in decisions about their schooling and how their Pupil Premium Plus allocation is spent, ensuring it is best spent to meet their needs, whether that is on additional maths tuition or ballet classes.

Stigma

Young people report feeling stigmatised at school, that they are treated differently and that their teachers do not have the same high standards for them as for other pupils. Some young people say that they think their teachers expect them not to do their homework; that they are taken out of class for meetings; and some say that their teachers have told their classmates that they are in care, when they didn’t want them to know. This creates a stigma, and one that is perpetuated when professionals are not trained to understand what it means to be in care or to better support their young people. When young people do not achieve because of a lack of support

⁶⁹ *Nothing’s Gonna Stop Me! Who Cares?* Issue 104, Autumn 2013, p.19.

⁷⁰ Ofsted, *The impact of virtual schools on the educational progress of looked after children*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2012, p.23 [accessed via http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/the_impact_of_virtual_schools_on_the_educational_progress_of_looked_after_children.pdf (18/2/15)].

⁷¹ Department for Education, *Promoting the education of looked after children, guidance for local authorities*, Department for Education: London, 2014 [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335964/Promoting_the_educational_achievement_of_looked_after_children_Final_23-....pdf (18/2/15)].

⁷² Ofsted, *The impact of virtual schools on the educational progress of looked after children*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2012, p.6.

they reinforce the low expectations that others have of them. Soon they come to believe that themselves and this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. No parent should believe that their child is doomed to fail. All looked after children should feel confident, know what they're good at, what they want to do, and achieve their goals, with a whole host of supportive people behind them.

“A teacher called me “one of the care-ies”, and I was so angry about being singled out but I like school usually. I feel supported there.”⁷³

Financial support

There are a number of specific strands of funding that have been targeted at looked after children and care leavers. The introduction of the Pupil Premium Plus from April 2014 has meant a doubling of the funding that is given to support looked after children's education. In 2012, our report *Open Doors, Open Minds* found that some schools were not making effective use of the Pupil Premium, and professionals working with looked after children hadn't heard of it.⁷⁴

Responsibility for allocating the Pupil Premium Plus has been given to virtual school heads, which should mean that the money is spent on meeting individual children's needs and providing individualised support, from art or dance classes to additional tuition.

There are additional financial means of support for children in care and care leavers in education. The 16-19 bursary is available to further education students, however this financial support is distributed by the institution and there is huge variability in ease of access and distribution of the bursary. Some students get cash, others get course equipment or food or transport costs covered. In 2012, the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) was introduced for universities in England. Its main purpose was to support disadvantaged students. Each university could have its own eligibility criteria, but care leavers were often beneficiaries of the NSP. The academic year 2014/15 is the final year that the NSP is available, and Government allocation for the financial year 2014-15 reduced to £50m from £100m in 2013-14.

The traditional education system

The educational system is currently built around chronological testing, academic achievement and measuring pupils without taking into account the impact that experiences such as pre-care abuse and trauma and care experiences, including placement instability or multiple schools may have on a child. The system is inflexible and linear and doesn't allow care leavers to find their way through education at their own pace and give them a second chance. We know that 6% of care leavers at 19 are at university,⁷⁵ but we don't know how many go on to graduate or how

⁷³ *Stop messing with my head!* Who Cares? Issue 103, Summer 2013, p.21.

⁷⁴ The Who Cares? Trust, *Open Doors, Open Minds*, London: The Who Cares? Trust, 2012, p.6.

⁷⁵ Department for Education, *Statistical First Release, Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2014*, National Tables: SFR36/2014, 2014, Table F1.

many go on to higher education later in life. It unfairly labels them as underachieving and feeds into a culture that lacks aspiration for them. We also don't know how many go to the best universities. We hear too often of care leavers forced to make compromises; some choose, or are told to go to their local university or opt for universities with lower entrance thresholds or less prestigious universities. We hear of those who work with care leavers, or at universities, not thinking that care leavers go to 'Russell Group' universities.⁷⁶

There is also a lack of support for young people who want to return to education at a later date to gain the qualifications that they were unable to get at the traditional testing times. Current legislation requires local authorities to assess the needs of care leavers up to their 25th birthday if they have returned, or want to return to education or training and to support them with a personal adviser and other support. Young people do not have to know what course they want to pursue, only that they want to return and the local authority should support them to overcome any barriers to returning to education. However, surely those who are not even thinking that going back to education is an option for them are in need of support and guidance.

What should children and young people's experiences of education be?

Positive experiences of education when a child first comes into care

When a child comes into care, and as they grow up, every effort should be made to keep their education stable and consistent. Where possible they should remain at the school they were at before they entered care, and they should be supported to remain at the school and to move to the right secondary school for them, with their friends if they want, when that decision comes.

After a child has been in care for a while, and the initial trauma has been managed and the child is more settled, there will many more obstacles that will occur. Most of them are every day challenges, but many will be slightly more complex because a child is in care. This complexity should be managed to make sure that a child is not at all disadvantaged because they are in care and stability in education maintained.

"My little sister is nine years old and she is left to do her homework alone. The foster carer doesn't help."⁷⁷

Positive experiences of education throughout a child's time in care

When a child grows up, their parents grow through the education system with them, learning as they go about homework and school trips. Very few parents are education experts and feel that they can navigate the system easily. The method for long division changes from one generation

⁷⁶ Professional at the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, April 2014.

⁷⁷ Young person to The Who Cares? Trust at a participation session preparing for the April 2014 All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers on aspiration in education.

to the next, while terminology and technology changes rapidly. A parent will usually only have to navigate the system with a small number of children whose needs are well known to them. Good parents have high hopes for their offspring and will endeavour to nurture aspiration and ambition. However, foster carers and key workers in children's homes may have to navigate the system with tens of children, all with different needs and often with little time to learn about them. The primary carer needs to be able to feel confident about their role in the education system, about who to ask for help and feel that they are supported. They need to feel confident about supporting school and homework, from the earliest age when they have to make sure that a child has read their reading book, to supporting projects and revision and then on to supporting choices about further education and beyond. They need to know how they can reinforce school learning and activities at home, through supporting young people to get work experience or helping develop money management skills. They also need to know what support should be offered at school, so that they can make sure those they care for are receiving the right support. They should be supported to find that information out and understand their role in their child's education.

“You are treated differently. I don't like it when they are too nice. They let you get away with more things.”⁷⁸

The buck shouldn't stop with primary carers. Corporate parents and professionals have a role in supporting young people to achieve and develop their potential. While it is unrealistic to expect all social workers to understand the intricacies of the education system, they should have a working knowledge of it and should be able to recognise children who are struggling at school and know where to get extra support.⁷⁹ The virtual school head should be central to ensuring that children, and those who work with them are supported. Virtual school heads, and social workers should also ensure that children and young people have access to information they need about careers, GCSE choices, and post-16 options. This support should be aspirational and ambitious and encourage young people to expand their horizons and take advantage of opportunities to experience the world of work and different careers. Social workers should be working with the virtual school head teacher and other education professionals to inform them when potential disruption may happen, for example if contact or a placement move is approaching, so that they can be aware of potential behaviour changes or emotional instability that may follow and put their progress at school at risk. IROs and social workers should be monitoring plans closely, and ensuring that children are supported to do their homework, join in afterschool clubs and are able to go on trips. They should also make sure that school assessments are carried out where needed, either as part of the Personal Education Plan (PEP),

⁷⁸ Young person at The Who Cares? Trust at a focus group as part of the research for the Open Doors, Open Minds project.

⁷⁹ 80% of social workers said that they did not have enough information about the education of looked after children. From: The Who Cares? Trust, *Open Doors, Open Minds*, London: The Who Cares? Trust, 2012, p.32.

SEN support or any other assessments that children need. There should be clarity about delegated responsibility between the primary carer and local authority to ensure that children are able to take part in trips and other activities that require permission.

Children in care can be identified as different to other children in school, for example permission for school trips may be required from the local authority, not the primary carer. It can take longer to get, and may prevent them going altogether. This shouldn't happen. Children shouldn't be stereotyped, categorised or labelled at all, let alone based on their care status. However, there is a fine balance between teachers having high expectations for all the children in their class, expecting them to do their best and behave well regardless of their personal situation and taking into account times when a child's personal life may make them struggle at school. Having high expectations without providing adequate support is setting children up to fail. Some children may want to be taken out of lessons for extra help, for their PEP review or for the teacher to give them extra time to do their homework; some may want to leave the care system at the school gates.

Essentially, schools need to understand each child individually to enable them to succeed. The school needs to ensure that designated teachers and those in the school who work closely with children in care and care leavers ensure that they understand the unique needs and situations of each child and that they share enough appropriate information with colleagues. This is almost always best done by building strong relationships with children, but where this isn't possible because of an emergency placement or other reasons, the relationship between the social worker, virtual school head and the school will be key. Relationships should come before processes. Staff in school must play to their strengths; acknowledging where a child has a particularly strong relationship with a member of staff and supporting that to flourish, even if it isn't their role. Team working, and information sharing is crucial to support all children well. Putting relationships before processes is crucial. Schools also have a role to play in ensuring that children in care are not treated any differently by other children. It is the responsibility of the school to have good anti-bullying policies, support networks for children and learning opportunities for other children to understand what it means to be in care.

"I was no different [to any other child at school]; I just didn't have my mum or dad picking me up after school."⁸⁰

Education is not just about what happens in the school day, and this should be recognised by carers and professionals alike. Education is also about igniting curiosity and creating and feeding ambition. Children need to have time to develop their talents and understand what they enjoy doing and are good at. They need access to opportunities to develop hobbies, attend after

⁸⁰ *Your shout*, Who Cares? Issue 107, Summer 2014, p.5.

school clubs and participate in trips and other recreational activities. You don't know you're a talented artist until you've picked up a paintbrush or have a passion for politics unless you're given the opportunity to learn about it. Children in care are all different and they will have different aspirations, talents and dreams. Some will want to be astronauts, pilots and politicians, while others will want to be dancers, entrepreneurs, plumbers and firefighters. Not all these jobs require a degree, although some will; others will require on the job training, a specific talent or level of fitness. All ambition should be supported and fuelled.

Positive experiences of education as needs change over time

As a child grows older and becomes a young adult and care leaver, they should be supported to continue in education or training if they want, or to pursue a career if that is what they want. The merits of all aspects of education should be encouraged, whether it is an apprenticeship or higher education. Young people should also be supported to gain or retake lower level qualifications in order to go on to higher-level study, even if this will take a long time. We know the chronological system doesn't work for all children, and inflexibility in this perpetuates underachievement.

"I think care leavers should get more help if they want to go back to education later in life. When the time is right for you."⁸¹

Where young people do want, or need, to go to university, they should be encouraged and supported to apply to ones they want and that are right for them. They should never be put in the position of having to settle for a local university because they might lose their flat. However, we need to stop seeing university as an end in itself, but rather one of a range of paths that care leavers can take on their way to successful adulthood. Young people need to know about the range of high quality courses and educational routes on offer and feel that taking any one of them is a valued and legitimate option if it leads to the career that they want. These courses should be valued by government, by educational establishments and by society as a whole.

Education is just as important as a child's health and safety when making decisions about their lives. It's the key to a child's future. It's an opportunity for building relationships, learning about the world and discovering who you are and your strengths and weaknesses. Every child should grow up knowing what they are good at, feeling successful and with an ambition to be the best that they can be.

⁸¹ Young person to The Who Cares? Trust at a participation session preparing for the December 2013 All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers on residential care.



Young people must be well supported to leave care and turn 25 having been equipped for, and feeling confident about, their future.

Why is this important?

The age that a child legally becomes an adult is 18. The leaving care age across the United Kingdom is 18, although young people can choose to leave care up to two years before. Young people are leaving care before they are 18. They are leaving care and expected to take responsibility for their own independence before they are legally entitled to smoke, drink or vote, at a time when the average age of leaving home for the general population is increasing. A poll by Barnardo's in 2012 revealed the difference between how the state looks after its children and how other parents do: only 5% of UK parents expected their children to leave home by 18, and 64% expected them to be at least 22.⁸²

⁸² Barnardo's, *Press release: Foster children shouldn't be forced to leave at 18*, 12th December 2012, [accessed via http://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/Foster_children_shouldn't_be_forced_to_leave_at_18/latest-news.htm?ref=84523 (18/2/15)].

There have been many reports written about the principles of leaving care and how young people's experiences can be improved: *In Loco Parentis*⁸³, *Still our Children*⁸⁴, *Survival of the Fittest*,⁸⁵ *Access All Areas*⁸⁶ to name but a few offer suggestions for improving care leavers' experiences. They all agree that care leavers need stability, support and preparation to leave care. Leaving care is a process that begins at 16, 17 or 18 and ends at 25, which is when any final statutory support given to care leavers ends. 25 is an arbitrary age, based solely on the age at which all possible support that care leavers may be entitled to from their local authority stops. For many, this support will stop at 21, and for most this is too soon. A parent's role is to bring up their children to be able to realise their potential as adults in society, and this is no different to the role of the corporate parent. The difference is that society expects its most vulnerable children to be able to live without parental, and often familial, support at a much earlier age than children brought up by their own parents. This therefore makes the importance of appropriate support until that point even more important. Not all care leavers will need or want support until 25, and many will feel equipped and ready to set off into the world before that age. However, many won't, and many don't. They have no one to turn back to when things go wrong.

“Support should always be available, you can be independent but then come up against a new experience and need help.”⁸⁷

When a young person first leaves care

When a child turns 16, they are more than likely doing their GCSEs, choosing where to go to college and wanting to stay out late with friends. They may have aspirations or plans to go to university or start training for a career. They are unlikely to be ready, or indeed willing to take on the responsibility of paying rent and bills, cleaning, cooking, studying or working, and building new relationships. However, many 16 and 17 year old care leavers actively make the choice to leave care and live independently at this age, while they are still children. This may be because they think it'll be better than in care, are excited by the possibility of not having someone tell them what to do, or because they don't realise what living independently involves. For those who have been moved round the system and been subject to broken relationships, breaking free from care can be a welcome prospect.

⁸³ Hannon C, Wood C, Bazalgette L, *In loco parentis*, London: Demos, 2010 [accessed via http://www.demos.co.uk/files/In_Loco_Parentis_web.pdf?1277484312 (16/2/15)].

⁸⁴ Still our Children, *Still our Children Briefing for House of Commons Report Stage of the Children and Families Bill*, 2013 [accessed via http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/data/files/still_our_children_final.pdf (16/2/15)].

⁸⁵ Centre for Social Justice, *Survival of the Fittest? Improving life chances for care leavers*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2014 [accessed via http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/UserStorage/pdf/Pdf%20reports/CSJ_Care_Report_28.01.14_web.pdf (16/2/15)].

⁸⁶ The Prince's Trust, Catch22's National Care Advisory Service (NCAS), The Care Leavers' Foundation and A National Voice, *Access All Areas*, London: Access All Areas, 2012 [accessed via <http://www.princes-trust.org.uk/pdf/Access%20all%20AreasMay12.pdf> (16/2/15)].

⁸⁷ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust's participation group's as part of the response to Ofsted's 2013 consultation on the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.

Moving to independence is hard for everyone, but for looked after children and care leavers it can be much harder. Most young people in care will have had difficult childhoods and experienced trauma, abuse or neglect. They are then cared for by the state until the age of 18, or indeed younger, when the state ends its relationship as the child's corporate parent. From that age onwards, young care leavers will have to cope with all of life's milestones: finding a first job, finishing their education, finding and living in their first home, at an earlier age than young people who are still living with their parents, and often have to do this without familial support and protection. Care leavers quickly struggle with the realities of life as an adult when they lack the social capital of positive relationships and resources to draw support from.⁸⁸ Their transition to adult life is compressed and accelerated – they experience an abrupt break in care and then are expected to grow up quickly, dealing with changes in education, housing, friendship, relationships without the psychological space to deal with these issues, which other young people would be able to have.⁸⁹

Throughout the leaving care process

Taking on a tenancy and living alone at 18 can be incredibly stressful and isolating for care leavers who are often doing it long before other young people. They may move from a foster or children's home which is full of other people, to living by themselves, having to cook for themselves, budget and pay their bills, all while continuing their education or looking for or holding down a job. It is vital that young people have a support network to support them when they need it. Loneliness, which comes with independent living, is a major concern for care leavers.⁹⁰ This can often be exacerbated by a childhood that did not provide the conditions where strong, consistent relationships thrive.

“Once in your own place, your social worker does not help as much: they said they will call once a week, but they called after 4 weeks and said ‘this is a quick call to say are you OK’. You don’t want to say what you really feel then.”⁹¹

Reaching adulthood for a care leaver may bring other unique challenges at first. With the removal of the court order that may prohibit or limit contact between family members, they may be faced with family members getting in touch when the young person doesn't want to make

⁸⁸ Avery RJ, 'An examination of theory and promising practice for achieving permanency for teens before they age out of foster care', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32, 2010, pp.399-408.

⁸⁹ Coleman and Hendry (1999) cited in Stein M, 'Research Review, Young People Leaving Care', *Child and Family Social Work*, 11(3), 2006, pp.273-279.

⁹⁰ Centre for Social Justice, *Survival of the Fittest? Improving life chances for care leavers*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2014, pp.48-49; Morgan R and Lindsay M, *Young People's Views on Leaving Care: What young people in, and formerly in, residential and foster care think about leaving care*, Newcastle: Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2006.

⁹¹ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, The Care Inquiry: London, 2013, p.19.

contact. Conversely, they may want to increase contact with birth parents and siblings. They may feel responsible for younger siblings who are left behind in care and may want to keep or increase contact or take on caring responsibilities. They may look to their birth family for increased support. While for many, the opportunity to develop and control their relationships with their birth family will be positive, for some, their memories and experiences are such that they don't want to resume contact or may find contact challenging or destabilising. They may feel conflicted about these feelings and not have anyone to discuss their options with. They may feel pressured into resuming or increasing contact and find themselves drawn into unhealthy or damaging relationships. They may find themselves let down again.

Throughout the whole experience of leaving care, in addition to the challenges that young people face as care leavers, they also face challenges of being young people, and the pressures of growing up, making friends, testing boundaries and making mistakes that all young people face. Unlike care leavers, most young people know that they can return home if their tenancy breaks down, if they run out of money or get overwhelmed or depressed. Care leavers don't have that safety net, so it is vital that there is support to keep them going through the tough times, out the other side and beyond. When support stops, they need to be stable, confident and able to cope independently.

Leaving care as needs change over time

Living independently at a young age can also bring challenges for finding and keeping employment or staying in education. Some young people cannot take up the opportunity of an apprenticeship because the pay is so low and state support drops off because they are classed as being in fulltime employment. We hear of some young people who want to move away to university but are told that they will lose the flat they have been given if they do.⁹² Young people may get to university but have to drop out because they cannot afford to live and study. Some care leavers struggle to write CVs, job hunt, and don't have the social network or exposure to different type of jobs to understand what it really means to be a journalist, an occupational therapist or a saturation diver, and that having that career is a real possibility for them.

“Support should always be available, you can be independent but then come up against a new experience and need help.”⁹³

Parenting is not just about looking after children until they are 18, it is also about supporting young people to be able to cope with adulthood and be productive members of society. We

⁹² Young people told us this during interviews we held to develop our submission to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into 16 plus care options and is referenced in The Who Cares? Trust's written evidence submission, which is available on the Education Select Committee's website: <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/education-committee/16-plus-care-options/written/6784.pdf>.

⁹³ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust's participation group's as part of the response to Ofsted's 2013 consultation on the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.

would expect care leavers to live in the same way; have a support network to rely on, but in turn be part of the support network of others, whether that is their siblings, friends or colleagues. A care leaver can encounter problems two or three years after leaving care, and with no one to turn to, can find themselves stuck and unable to cope. Care leavers are more at risk of poor outcomes than the general population, for example entering the criminal justice system, not being in education, employment or training (NEET), being homeless or living in 'unsuitable' accommodation or committing suicide as an adult.⁹⁴ The first few years after a young person leaves care can be extremely stressful and problematic for young people and without the right support, without having had a stable home and supportive relationships, they are more likely to end up with poor outcomes.

Society asks parents to bring their children up to be responsible citizens who are able to thrive in adulthood, practically and emotionally. We would ask the same of the state.

Are young people well supported to leave care at the moment?

Young people leave care far earlier and more quickly than other young people leave home. The majority will have to learn to live independently with little support while making important decisions about their future, about their work, their education, and their relationships. Although leaving care support has improved over recent years, care leavers still face a range of barriers.

In 2014, over 10,000 young people aged 16 and above left care and 33% of those left before they were 18.⁹⁵ This means that a third of those leaving care at the age of 16 or over will be considered old and capable enough to live alone before they are legally able to vote, to write a will⁹⁶ or to marry without permission. Not all of these decisions to leave care will have been made by the young person themselves; many young people are feeling forced into leaving care before their 18th birthday, or feel that the decision is made for them.⁹⁷ Children who are living in residential care in particular report feeling pushed into leaving care early.

“My pathway plan is a waste of paper, waste of a tree. They may as well let the tree live longer.”⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Audit Commission, *Against the Odds*, London: Audit Commission: London, 2010, p.5 [accessed via <http://archive.audit-commission.gov.uk/auditcommission/sitecollectiondocuments/Downloads/201008neetscareleavers.pdf> (17/2/15)]; Barnardo's, *Someone to care, Experiences of leaving care*, London: Barnardo's, 2014, p.3 [accessed via http://www.barnardos.org.uk/someone_to_care_final_feb2014.pdf (17/2/15)]; Centre for Social Justice, *Finding their Feet: Equipping care leavers to reach their potential*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2015, p.7.

⁹⁵ Department for Education, *Statistical First Release, Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2014, National Tables: SFR36/2014*, 2014, Table D3.

⁹⁶ For a will to be legally valid, a person has to be 18 or older: <https://www.gov.uk/make-will/make-sure-your-will-is-legal> (18/2/15).

⁹⁷ Evidence submitted to the Education Select Committee's 16 plus care options inquiry. Summarised in the final report, House of Commons Education Committee, *Into independence, not out of care: 16 plus options*, London: The Stationery Office Limited, HC 259 INCORPORATING HC 1033, SESSION 2013-14, 2014, p.31.

⁹⁸ All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, *The Entitlements Inquiry, report with recommendations*, London: All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children & Care Leavers, 2013, p.27.

Leaving care support is currently driven by age and legal entitlement, not need, and is dependent on the amount of time that a young person has spent in care, as well as whether they were in care on or after their 16th birthday. This creates a hierarchy of support that is available, but critically, care leavers have to be in care on or after their 16th birthday to qualify for any support, and some young people feel pressurised to return to their birth families before they turn 16 by their local authority or social worker. If a young person is entitled to support, it falls away in chunks after 18 and 21, and only continues to 25 for those young people engaged in education or training or looking to re-engage. For those who are not in education post-21 or do not want to be, they no longer receive support from a personal adviser, and their pathway plan ceases. Arguably, it is those young people who are not in education who may be most in need of additional support and advice at this point.

Needs assessments and pathway plans

When a young person prepares to leave care, their needs should be assessed and a pathway plan drawn up by their social worker. Pathway plans lay out the agreement between care leaver and local authority about what support the local authority will offer. The assessment of need should be complete no later than three months after the young person's 16th birthday, or the date they become 'eligible' if this is after their 16th birthday.⁹⁹ The pathway plan should be drawn up as soon as possible afterwards and should be regularly updated. It should reflect what the young person wants and needs as they work towards living independently. However, this is often not the case, with pathway plans not being completed, reviewed or stuck to. Personal advisers (PAs) can write this plan, and are responsible for ensuring that the plan is updated and reviewed regularly. Care leavers should get a copy of this plan, but only 50% of care leavers¹⁰⁰ said that they had been given a copy of their plan.

Personal advisers

Personal advisers may have high caseloads and little training; there is no qualification for personal advisers. Without support or good quality training, the ability to form the relationships that young people say is so important can be compromised. High caseloads mean that personal advisers can find that they don't have the time to just spend time with young people. The relationship between a young person and their PA is important;¹⁰¹ young people need to trust those who are there to help them in order to open up and seek help, for example it's unlikely a young person will reveal they are struggling with their mental health unless they trust their PA to help them.

⁹⁹ HM Government, *The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review*, London: HM Government, 2010, p.101.

¹⁰⁰ All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, *The Entitlements Inquiry, report with recommendations*, London: All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children & Care Leavers, 2013, p.11.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* pp.41-43.

Personal advisers should be a consistent part of every care leaver's support network. Supporting young people through this time is an important job, and requires appropriate training in legislation and statutory duties and communication skills, as well as resilience training and support for the personal advisers themselves.

"I'll say 'I'm fine' but my personal adviser knows when I'm not fine. She gives me support, even if it's just a quick phone call."¹⁰²

In addition, often support is available for young people, but receipt of it relies on them asking for it, pushing for it, or seeking it out themselves. Young people may not realise that they need help, or know about the support that is available. Without a strong relationship with a PA or previous carer, care leavers may lose out on support for lack of asking, or someone noticing they need help.

Housing

Housing for care leavers is an issue that many young people report worrying about while they are still in care. There is a range of settings in which young people might live after leaving care. Staying put, introduced in May 2014, means that local authorities must support young people in England to remain living with their former foster carers until they are 21, if they want to, provided both parties agree, however the same right does not exist for those whose final care placements are not foster care.

Supported accommodation is unregulated and often unsuitable. Young people report living in accommodation that is infested with vermin; living with young people, and in some cases adults, who are taking or selling drugs from the house; not receiving allocated support or staff not being on the premises and other unsafe and troubling living conditions.¹⁰³

Care leavers who are living in an out of area placement talk of being forced to move back to their home local authority when they leave care, often moving back to an area that has become unfamiliar, and leaving behind carers, friends and other supportive relationships that are so vital to young people leaving care. Moving back 'home' can often leave young people more isolated; it's the only way that they can be provided with somewhere to live, but leaves them without a social support network, friendly faces and familiar surroundings. They are less likely to have people to help them out when they get a puncture or gas leak, or to help them put up shelves in their bedroom.

¹⁰² Young person at a The Who Cares? Trust training session for social work students on 9th December 2013.

¹⁰³ Young people told us this during interviews we held to develop our submission to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into 16 plus care options.

“It is really stressful when you have to make decisions about leaving care. A 16 year old thinks about ‘freedom,’ but not loneliness, stress and lack of motivation. Care leavers need to be given the chance to try out independence and come back to foster placement if they need to.”¹⁰⁴

Other housing problems frequently reported by young care leavers include being offered only one housing choice; being forced to sign tenancy agreements before viewing the property; being expected to live in uncarpeted and unfurnished flats and being told that if they move away for university they will be making themselves homeless and the local authority will no longer house them.¹⁰⁵ We also hear of young people who can afford to pay the rent on properties while in receipt of housing benefit, however when they get a job and their benefits are reduced or removed, they can no longer afford the rent. Many local authorities do not have sufficient housing stock to be able to offer choices to care leavers, with many young people living in hostels or Bed and Breakfasts.¹⁰⁶ However, we hear of some local authorities that come up with innovative solutions, for example one local authority has built an annex at the bottom of a foster carer’s garden with space for two care leavers to live. This allows for a continuation of stable support from carers, while giving young people the opportunity to stand on their own two feet and move to independence in a gentle transition.

(Not in) Education, Employment and Training

Currently, too many young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET). In 2014, 36% of care leavers were NEET. Local authorities measure destination data of care leavers at 19, which tells us that in 2014 6% of care leavers were in higher education, 26% were in other forms of education and 21% were in employment or training.¹⁰⁷ We do not know how appropriate those destinations are for those young people, and how many go on to employment or higher education in their early 20s, but we know they do, with much success.

¹⁰⁴ Young person at the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, October 2011, minutes available: <http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/pages/26102011-leaving-care.html>

¹⁰⁵ The Who Cares? Trust, *Written evidence submission to the Education Select Committee’s inquiry into 16 plus care options*, 2014

¹⁰⁶ Barnardo’s, *Homeless not voiceless, Learning from young people with experience of homelessness in the North East*, London: Barnardo’s, 2010, p.42 [accessed via http://www.barnardos.org.uk/homeless_not_voiceless_report.pdf (18/2/15)]; House of Commons Education Committee, *Into independence, not out of care: 16 plus options*, London: The Stationery Office Limited, HC 259 INCORPORATING HC 1033, SESSION 2013-14, 2014, p.31; YMCA, *Written evidence submission to the Education Select Committee’s inquiry into 16 plus care options*, 2014 p.2 [accessed via <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/education-committee/16-plus-care-options/written/6830.pdf> (18/2/15)].

¹⁰⁷ Department for Education, *Statistical First Release, Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2014, National Tables: SFR36/2014*, 2014, Table F1.

“I was advised that the best place to go to uni is in London because then they can give you one place and don’t have to find you emergency accommodation in the vacation. If we went away it poses the question: do I still get my flat when I come back?”¹⁰⁸

For some care leavers higher education will be the appropriate route, but for others they find themselves taking a university course because they think that university is their only way of achieving because they do not know about other career choices and progression routes. They may see it as the most supportive option (given that care leavers who go to university are supported for at least the duration of their course) while setting up their own business means that they lose support much sooner. Choosing the wrong route can result in students dropping out, taking on unnecessary debts, taking longer to find a job and other stress and worry.

On the other hand, some young people who do want to go to university are put off by the risk of losing their home,¹⁰⁹ fees and lack of support or information. Many universities offer excellent support to care leavers, however, from the academic year 2015/16, the National Scholarship Programme, which was a source of funding for many care leavers at universities, will no longer be available for undergraduates. In April 2014, it became statutory for local authorities to employ someone (a virtual school head) to carry out the local authority’s duty to promote the education of looked after children. This is a positive step, however the virtual school head’s statutory role does not extend to care leavers, despite local authorities having a duty to assist with meeting the education needs of care leavers.

“Councils think all young people want uni but we’re all different. People have different strengths and interests.”¹¹⁰

Care Leavers Charter and Strategy

In October 2012, the Government launched the Charter for Care Leavers (a voluntary charter for local authorities to sign up to which outlines their commitment to care leavers), and in October 2013 published the Care Leaver Strategy,¹¹¹ which details what cross-government departments will do to support care leavers.¹¹² It builds on the principles set out in *Access All Areas*.¹¹³ This includes work by the Department for Work and Pensions to attach a marker to care leavers’

¹⁰⁸ All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, *The Entitlements Inquiry, report with recommendations*, London: All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children & Care Leavers, 2013, p.28.

¹⁰⁹ Young person at the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, April 2014.

¹¹⁰ *Any questions?! Who Cares?* Issue 110, Spring 2015, pp.13.

¹¹¹ HM Government, *Care Leaver Strategy*, London: HM Government, 2013, [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/266484/Care_Leaver_Strategy.pdf (17/2/15)].

¹¹² A one year on report was released in October 2014, which set out what the government had achieved following the strategy.

¹¹³ The Prince’s Trust, Catch22’s National Care Advisory Service (NCAS), The Care Leavers’ Foundation and A National Voice, *Access All Areas*, London: Access All Areas, 2012.

records so that advisers are aware of their circumstances as a care leaver and to highlight their particular vulnerabilities, for example to benefit sanctions. In some areas, Job Centre Plus is allowing care leavers to fill in advance claim forms before their 18th birthday. However, both of these require self-identification of the young person's care status, and prompts the debate about whether the state should be bringing its children up to go straight onto benefits at 18. This is a difficult debate; benefits are a safety net for the most vulnerable and can often support care leavers to go on to bright futures. It is vital that care leavers are offered the support to springboard off benefits and into employment.

“You get encouraged to go on benefits as soon as you’re 18. They’re too keen to get you onto benefits and you can get in that trap.”¹¹⁴

What should young people's experiences of leaving care be?

Well supported and confident when a young person first leaves care

No young person should reach 16 and want to leave care to live alone. Their care experience should be the very best it can be. They should be happy, in a home that cares for them, with supportive relationships and in education or training, getting ready for a positive future. Where a child wants to return at 16 to their parents, this should be treated as any other reunification at five, 10 or 15, and they should be supported to do so, but no child should think they are better in a flat by themselves than in care.

No child should feel that they have to leave care before they are 18, or that they would be better off living by themselves. Young people should feel encouraged, enabled and empowered by their carers and others who work with them to stay in their placement at least until their 18th birthday.

Much of the answer lies in support and preparation prior to leaving care. Young people should leave care ready to do so as a young person should leave their parents' home ready to do so. Throughout their care experience, they should be being trained for life, as any child would be as part of the parenting task. It is everyone's responsibility to prepare young people in care for adulthood, no matter how long or uncertain the placement. Children should be given appropriate responsibility to care for themselves and their childhood homes so that they are ready to live successfully when the time comes. They should also be given the support to learn about themselves and to recognise they are struggling and see asking for help and support as a strength, not a weakness. The year of turning 18 is eventful and busy. It's the year young people can buy alcohol and cigarettes and vote. It is also, for many, the year of exams, of going to

¹¹⁴ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust's participation group's as part of the response to Ofsted's 2013 consultation on the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.

college or university, or starting a job. Therefore, the transition from looked after child to care leaver and moving out shouldn't happen until the end of the academic year in which they leave care; having to juggle a move in accommodation, an increase in responsibilities and exams or finding a job shouldn't be something that young people have to do all in one go.

When the time comes, young people need to be offered a stable and safe place to live; somewhere that they feel can in time become their home. They should be given a choice about where they want to live, both geographically and in terms of the type of accommodation. They should be clear about what choices they have and it should be the right choice for them, whether it is staying with their former carers, moving into supported lodgings or moving into independent living. If they leave care into temporary accommodation, this should be their choice and a permanent place for them to live found in an agreed timescale.

"There should be more checks on the suitability of leaving care accommodation. I was offered a B&B in the worst part of town."¹¹⁵

Young people need to be offered real choice about where they live, rather than offered the option of one single flat. This isn't choice. Accommodation should meet young people's needs, and those needs extend beyond four walls and a door that locks. They need to feel safe, they need to have good transport links (particularly if they are living in an area away from friends and family), still be able to go to school or work easily and affordably, near to a support network and be close to health and other services. They should get the opportunity to view the flat, and should not be forced to sign a lease on accommodation that they are not happy with, or without having viewed the property. Young people should also be able to afford to stay in their homes even if they come off benefits.

Local authorities should be creative about housing young people, and should take into consideration requests for house shares or being able to move across local authorities by setting up a swapping system. This is particularly important for those who have grown up out of their local authority area and want to stay where they have support and in familiar surroundings. This move should be planned for early, and built into the pathway plan so that local authorities can use this information to know when care leavers will be requiring housing to ensure that they have sufficient housing available.

"In my supported lodgings the key worker always sees the best in me."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ *Any questions?! Who Cares?* Issue 110, Spring 2015, pp.12-13.

¹¹⁶ *Nothing's Gonna Stop Me! Who Cares?* Issue 104, Autumn 2013, p.19.

Getting leaving care right isn't just about a house, making sure a care leaver can cook and clean and ensuring that they move out at the right time. Care leavers are no less likely to need support after they have left care than when they are in care. In fact, they may well need more support because of the additional stress of leaving care and fracturing of relationships. Studies show that those young people who have more gradual, extended and supported transitions from care have better outcomes than those who leave care early.¹¹⁷ The support that they had in care, and who provides it, should continue to be the same, however supported their placement continues to be. This will ensure that young people, when they finally leave care and live in their own house, are able to do so successfully, through continued support and relationships.

Well supported and confident throughout leaving care

Leaving home, dealing with the pressures of independence, of returning home, reuniting with family and friends, dealing with life as a care leaver, not a child in care can be stressful. There should be emotional support as well as financial and practical support to ensure that care leavers are able to deal with the challenges that they face. They may need priority access to mental health services or a friendly shoulder to cry on. They may just need to know support is there, but this crucial element of support shouldn't be neglected in pathway plans, or in the offer of support from local authorities.

Relationships are key for building interdependence. Young people will need a support network, at first one that comes ready made, so that they can in time build their own network. Young people are supported through leaving care by a personal advisor who can support them consistently up to the age of 25. PAs should be well trained, both in how to work with care leavers, but also in how to support and signpost to additional support, advice and expertise, where their own knowledge might need to be reinforced by subject-specific experts. The challenges of the role should be reflected in the salary and it should be considered possible to have a career, which would include good and regular training, supporting adolescents to leave care. Social workers who want to take on this highly important role should not have to take a pay cut in order to do so. Just as the role should be appropriately remunerated, it should also be respected and valued, by professionals and young people alike. In order for this to happen, there should be rigorous training and continuing professional development. It shouldn't be down to the luck of the draw as to whether a young person gets high quality support from their personal advisor, or even gets one at all. PAs need time to spend with each individual young person they support in order to develop a relationship with them and to understand their needs, strengths and weaknesses.

¹¹⁷ Munro R E, et al., (2011), cited in Stein M, *Corporate parenting from care to adulthood: a research perspective*, York: The University of York, 2012.

"My personal adviser connected with me, got information about me, helped me and inspired me. He sent me a card on my birthday and would email me things he thought I'd be interested in."¹¹⁸

Children in care will have been cared for by a primary carer. They will often have been cared for by more than one primary carer. They will have developed different relationships with each of these carers, but some will want to carry those relationships into adulthood. Carers should be supported to maintain those relationships. This can be in fairly simple ways such as, by being invited for dinner or being at the end of the phone to provide advice on how to pay bills, how to change a light bulb or what to do when the washing machine floods the kitchen. Caring doesn't stop at 18, and this care should be supported to continue. No foster carer or key worker in a children's home should be made to feel that they cannot continue to care about a care leaver. Young people need to be supported to understand how to make and sustain positive relationships and encouraged to do so. Professionals and carers should be supported and confident enough to develop and maintain these relationships. It may be that a former foster carer invites a care leaver back for dinner or goes shopping once a month. Professionals may find it harder to maintain these relationships, but managers and other senior staff in local authorities should be supporting and encouraging these relationships to continue by facilitating safe and responsible contact opportunities, through text or email and sending birthday, Christmas and good luck cards, or popping by for a coffee if they're near where the young person lives. They should be supported to notice when a young person needs help, and there should not be the assumption that young people themselves will ask for help, or even know themselves that they're struggling. Of course, this only works if professionals are able to properly support the children and young people that they care for, build those relationships and feel that their current workload facilitates their ability to continue relationships with those they used to care for.

Relationships are key for young people, both as they leave care, but also once they are no longer supported by their local authority. By learning how to develop and maintain relationships, these skills become transferable and young people will feel more equipped for developing their own additional relationships as they grow older. Personal advisors, carers, and indeed other professionals should encourage and support young people to grow their own networks, by helping young people to work out what they enjoy and finding opportunities for the development of hobbies and joining of groups. Professionals should be sensitive to the risk of care leavers feeling abandoned and ensure that they help to avoid this happening.

It is crucial that, in addition to personal support with independent living and building relationships, care leavers are able to quickly and easily access additional support like mental

¹¹⁸ Young person at a The Who Cares? Trust training session for social work students on 9th December 2013.

health services to help build resilience and deal with issues that arise. As humans, as young adults, and as care leavers things will happen and challenges will arise. They might get ill; old traumas resurface; loneliness might threaten to engulf them. Their particular vulnerabilities should be taken into consideration, and where a young person has had involvement with CAMHS, for example to work through issues arising from prior abuse or trauma, this should be encouraged and supported to continue, either through referral to adult services or by another similar arrangement. Personal Advisors should understand the emotional needs of care leavers, either to support them personally, or ensure that they get the help that they need from other services. Similarly, their particular needs should be recognised by all local and central government agencies to ensure as smooth a transition as possible to adulthood. Central and local government departments and services should be 'care-proofed' to ensure that all policies and people who work there are able to adapt to and be flexible to their needs.¹¹⁹ Care-proofing requires people to check all policies against the needs of care leavers to ensure that being a care leaver doesn't put them at a disadvantage.

“When you leave care they think financial support is enough. I was so independent from a young age I was OK. What about emotionally and mentally, for some? There's not enough support to check you're OK. If you're OK on the outside then you get left – they are concerned with the surface, not much else.”¹²⁰

Well supported and confident as needs change over time

Even with a suitable house and good support networks, care leavers may well still struggle. The care system can shelter a young person and narrow their options. With this in mind, care leavers should be offered opportunities to learn about different career paths from experts, either in different professions or in careers advice. Dealing with other issues can also limit a care leaver's options, for example being a young parent or deciding to take on the care of younger siblings may restrict opportunities and make additional study a challenge.

Together with this information about potential careers, young people need to understand the different routes that they can travel to reach their goal. They shouldn't feel obligated to travel a specific route in order to get a higher level of support, but rather know that they will be well supported whether they go to university, start an apprenticeship, re-take their GCSEs or start their own business. They need to know the support that can be offered to help them overcome the barriers they may encounter, whether it is not being able to afford to live independently and

¹¹⁹ These principles are reflected in Access All Areas.

¹²⁰ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, The Care Inquiry: London, 2013, p.19.

take on an apprenticeship, not yet having the correct grades to go to university, or not being able to afford a babysitter so they can attend interviews. Parents would help their own children to overcome these barriers, either by letting them move back in while they complete an apprenticeship, supporting them to re-enrol to get the grades they need, or being that babysitter. Corporate parents could do the same, by helping with the rent, supporting them to re-enrol in college or subsidising or paying for childcare. Having a role that is responsible for the strategic oversight of the education of care leavers would help to support the local authority in delivering its duty to former relevant children aged between 18 and 25.

Support drops away at 25 and care leavers really are meant to stand on their own two feet. In return for this complete withdrawal of support, which is in contrast to many reasonable parents, it is important that the local authority does everything it can to ensure that care leavers are as well prepared as they can be.

“Services shouldn’t stop when you are 25. I’m scared to turn 25, who can I turn to then?”¹²¹

Leaving care is an important phase in someone’s life. It cannot be rushed, forced, or treated lightly. There needs to be the opportunity to make mistakes, be picked up again, try things out and learn about being an adult. If we are expecting young people to take on adult responsibilities sooner than other young people, they should be given the best support and choices available. For these young people, their parents are the state. These parental responsibilities should not stop once a child turns 18. They don’t for most young people; why should that be different for care leavers?

¹²¹ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, The Care Inquiry: London, 2013, p.20.



Children and young people must be cared about and supported by the system and those who work in it. They must be fully informed about their options and choices.

Why is this important?

When a child is taken into care, the care system is meant to replicate or provide for that child the love, care, and family life that their own family is, temporarily or otherwise, unable to provide. Where appropriate, the system must facilitate the continued love and care of children by their immediate and wider family and friends. Where a child does not want a family life replicated, the care system should still provide love and care, and a safe place to live. It is the system's responsibility to ensure that care is given in the right way, ensuring that this care results in children being safe and warm, happy and achieving and able to learn how to be adults. The system is responsible for ensuring that this care, whether delegated to carers, professionals, or elected members results in children having a childhood that any child would be happy to have.

The care system is not an end in itself; it is the system which supports young people as they journey towards adulthood and provide the safety and care that the state has judged that they are not able to receive by remaining with their families. It is the thing that encompasses a child's

life. It is bigger than their placement; their education and their leaving care support. Systems are complex; they can be sets of things working together as part of a greater network or sets of principles or procedures for how things are done. They are not care givers in themselves, but facilitate love and care by giving the people that work within the system the time, freedom and flexibility to do so. For children in care those who care for them, who look after them and protect them are the embodiment of the system.

When the people within that caring system are unable to provide that care, the system is no longer fulfilling its primary function; it is broken. The people who make up the system are not staying long in their jobs, they are on temporary contracts and do not stay long enough to develop meaningful relationships with those they care for. Their hours are inflexible and the expectations of their roles often too high, with professionals often expected to complete large amounts of paperwork in addition to their main caring roles. When those who want to care, those who intend to care are unable to do so because their training, support and job do not allow them to do so, those who are affected by this are the very children that the state has chosen to bring under its special protection.

“As the collective corporate parents of these children, it is our responsibility to ensure they get the start in life they deserve.”¹²²

The system when a child first comes into care

When a child enters care, they have been moved from the familiar to the unfamiliar. They come across new people, people that they live with, see regularly, or see once every so often. They may feel abandoned by the previous adults in their life, or resentful of their new carers. If a child is returning to care for a second time, their feelings of abandonment may be even stronger. A child will have to learn new rules and new names. Their new carers may keep the tomato ketchup in the fridge not the cupboard, they may have brown not white bread, or watch rugby not football. These can be the biggest changes in the world to a child who has been moved from all they know and care about. Trust and care, and love, doesn't happen overnight, but it needs to be developed, grown and earned. This can only happen through time, effort and patience.

When a child lives at home with their parents, they know who can help them. They know who buys them new clothes, who takes them to the doctors, who takes them to school. Of course, for some children before they enter care, it may be that no one takes them to the doctors, no one takes them to school and no one buys them new clothes. But they are likely to be secure in the knowledge that it won't happen. When a child enters care, that all changes. Different people are responsible for different things, for deciding about school trips, buying new clothes and pocket money. Things have to happen that didn't have to happen before, like reviews, meetings about

¹²² Tim Loughton to the Annual Leaving Care Conference, 28th October 2010.

reviews and paperwork. Suddenly children in care councils exist, people start talking about pledges and participation officers are new people to meet. This new world can be scary. It can be a maze of information. Lots of things must happen. Lots of things should happen. However, it's hard to know what must and should happen without being told about it all in the first place.

*"It's scary. I don't know who to go to if something goes wrong."*¹²³

The system throughout a child's time in care

As children settle down into care, the people they live with and who work with them are their caregivers. Feeling cared for is vital for children to feel safe and secure and grow into confident and happy young adults. Children must feel that they are listened to and properly heard. They need to feel that adults are actively listening to them, rather than multitasking or focusing on the next thing on their list. Children who have experienced loss or fragmented relationships in their childhood prior to care will need continued support elsewhere, and will look to those adults involved in their lives, many of whom will be local authority professionals. For many, where the relationships between their carers and local authority professionals also fragment, this will reinforce their feeling of loss and abandonment, which will in turn affect their ability to build new relationships in the future.

*"Social workers should not make the young person feel like a burden and that they are not important and are just another case."*¹²⁴

As children grow up, they have to make more and more decisions. They will be faced with decisions about subjects to study, contact with drugs and alcohol and relationships. Children in care will face other, additional, decisions on issues like contact, placement moves and leaving care options. Feeling supported will lead to better decisions as well as helping children and young people feel more stable in their lives. Feeling supported and having good relationships with other adults gives them someone to talk things through with. It can help young people feel safe and want to make the right choices, confident that if things go wrong, someone is there to help. Children and young people who have a strong relationship with their social worker find it easier to settle into a permanent home.¹²⁵ Being fully informed also requires strong relationships. Children and young people value honesty and honesty requires good relationships, trust and often a great deal of courage, on both sides.

¹²³ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust's participation group as part of the response to the Department for Education's 2013 consultation on Improving safeguarding for looked after children: consultation on changes to the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010

¹²⁴ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, London: The Care Inquiry, 2013, p.8.

¹²⁵ Ibid. p.5

If the system is to care well for its children, children need to be involved in decisions about how the system works. Just as a good family listens to each and every member's views when making decisions about how the family is run, the system should be listening to those it cares for about operational decisions. All children have a right to be involved in decisions about their lives, both at a system and individual level¹²⁶ and children and young people in care are legally required to be involved in their care to a greater extent than those who are not. The longer a child spends in care, the need for reliable and accessible information changes. It's no longer about the need to understand a new system and understand what is happening, but rather is about understanding who is responsible for supporting them through their childhood and what support different people can, must or should offer. This information should be provided in the way that they choose; otherwise they may be unable to understand it.

“My foster carers are really proactive. They involve themselves. If someone is making a decision about me they'd say “you need to ask us”. They definitely didn't get overshadowed.”¹²⁷

Children living in care will get different levels of support from their carers and professionals because those who care for and work with them will have different levels of knowledge. Different people's skills lie in different areas, some people will know the law inside out, while others may be excellent problems solvers, listeners or game inventors. That's OK, as long as these strengths and weaknesses are recognised and support put in place to ensure that they are not barriers. As placements become more stable, support may drop off and information not be passed on. In contrast, some children's ability to access, understand and process information will be impaired by placement moves, breakdowns or other traumatic times in their lives. The one consistent factor in their lives when they are in care is their corporate parent, who has the skills and the capacity to pass on information to those in their care.

They need to know what their corporate parents should be doing, who to talk to when they have a problem and what support their corporate parents will provide when they are young adults. But they also need information as all children and young people do growing up. In some cases, the information a child needs to know will be information about their legal rights and entitlements, like their right to an advocate or their social worker seeing them alone. In other cases, it will be an understanding about who they have to ask for permission for a school trip, who will be involved in deciding about which secondary school they are going to go to, and whether or not they can get a pet. They also need to be able to know about how to choose their

¹²⁶ These rights are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1989 Children Act. See in particular Articles 9(2) and 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Sections 1(3) and 22(4) of the Children Act 1989.

¹²⁷ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust's participation group as part of the response to the Department for Education's 2013 consultation on looked after children: improving permanence.

GCSE subjects, their post-16 options, how to open a bank account, how to work a washing machine and how to keep themselves safe, and the system needs to make sure that they do.

No child lives solely in their immediate family, and particularly as they grow up, they are often supported by their extended family. Similarly, children in care and care leavers will not live solely in the shelter of the care system and will come into contact with other systems; housing, benefits, health, and in some cases the criminal justice system. These systems are often inflexible and don't take into account the fact that children in care might not have a permanent address, identity documents or ready money for deposits. Just as extended family members understand and support children in their family, the people who work within wider systems need to understand and be flexible enough to be able to meet their needs.

The system as needs change over time

As they grow up and become adults, and care leavers, they will need to know different things, from their entitlements as a care leaver, to things like how to pay council tax, how to wire a plug and other grown up things that no one thinks about until they are dealing with those experiences.

This is about more than needing to know and it's more than just rights. It's about more than it being sensible, or logical, or even because it leads to better outcomes. This is about the state removing a child from the care of their parents because it has judged the level of care that they are providing to be insufficient and taking on the caring role itself. It is therefore morally required to provide the highest level of care and support possible.

“Three of my care workers are leaving – I am not very happy.”¹²⁸

Are children and young people cared about, supported and informed by the system at the moment?

When children come into care for the first time, they are often put into temporary care before being moved on to a more permanent placement. This can be a particularly big problem for very young children who form attachments to even the most temporary of carer,¹²⁹ which can go on to impact on their ability to form good attachments with other carers and professionals. Poor attachment can spill over and affect the ability to form personal relationships that may be unrelated to care.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, London: The Care Inquiry, 2013, p.6.

¹²⁹ Brown R, and Ward H, *Decision making within a child's timeframe. Working paper 16*, London: Department for Education, 2013, p.89 [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/200471/Decision-making_within_a_child_s_timeframe.pdf (17/2/15)].

¹³⁰ Trickett P K and Negriff, S., *Child Maltreatment and Social Relationships*, in Underwood M K and Rosen L H (eds.) *Social Development, Relationships in Infancy, Childhood and Adolescence*, New York: Guildford Press, 2011.

Turnover of professionals

When children do come into care and begin to meet with professionals, they find that those who are meant to care for them may vary and change. Local authority social work as a profession has a short working life span, with just 7.7 years for women and 8 years for men, with reasons for leaving including stress, high caseloads and low levels of support.¹³¹ More than half of local authorities have a turnover rate of 10% and one in ten has a rate of 20%. Sickness leave is 60% higher than the national average.¹³² This is in part due to poor training (many potential employers are reluctant to take on newly qualified social workers, due to a lack of experience. Employers generally ask for a minimum of two years' experience post qualification)¹³³ but also due to an increase in administration and rising caseloads. Currently, professionals do not have the time to spend with those they are meant to care for.¹³⁴ Many young people know that this is because their social workers have high caseloads, but this means they feel that they are a burden on their social workers.¹³⁵ There is currently no guidance on the recommended number of cases a social worker or personal adviser should hold. Caseload management can be complex, with a number of factors that would affect the number of cases a social worker would hold.

"In my first placement, it would have been great to have known it's not forever, you'll be moved on. They never told me that."¹³⁶

Caseloads

In 2010, 10% of children's social workers had more than 40 cases and almost 90% of social workers said that high caseloads are affecting their ability to practise well.¹³⁷ In 2013, 73% of social workers said that their caseloads had gone up in the past year.¹³⁸ The Laming Report recommended that national guidelines were created to set maximum caseloads for children in need and child protection cases;¹³⁹ however this was not taken forward. In 2013, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers called for local authorities to set local realistic and manageable caseloads. A further barrier to spending time with children and

¹³¹ Holmes E, Miscampbell G, and Robin B, *Reforming Social Work, Improving social worker recruitment, training and retention*, London: Policy Exchange, 2013, p.7 [accessed via <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/reforming%20social%20work.pdf> (18/2/15)].

¹³² *ibid.*

¹³³ *ibid.* p.6

¹³⁴ All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, *The Entitlements Inquiry report with recommendations*, London: All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children & Care Leavers, 2013, pp.47-48.

¹³⁵ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, The Care Inquiry: London, 2013, p.19.

¹³⁶ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust's participation group as part of the response to the Department for Education's 2013 consultation on looked after children: improving permanence.

¹³⁷ Smith R, *One in six social workers have more than 40 cases*, Community Care, September 2010 (accessed via http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2010/09/07/one-in-six-social-workers-have-more-than-40-cases/#.UyF_mfl_v_E (16/4/14)).

¹³⁸ McGregor K, *Social workers more likely to turn to food than to managers as way of coping with stress*, Community Care, December 2013, [accessed via http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2013/12/02/social-workers-more-likely-to-turn-to-food-than-managers-to-cope-with-stress/#.UyGCn_l_v_E (16/4/14)].

¹³⁹ Laming, The Lord, *The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report*, London: The Stationery Office, 2009, p. 50 [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/328117/The_Protection_of_Children_in_England.pdf (17/2/15)].

young people is that social workers and personal advisers work the majority of their hours when children are at school, which means that the time outside of school hours when they could catch up with their young people is limited, and often taken up with administration. We hear of social workers starting and leaving before young people get to meet them. Imagine a child being taken into care and the person who they are told is responsible for their care is on sick leave, then not available when they call, and then moves on because their work is too stressful. Imagine the guilt, the confusion, the stress, and the things that get missed.

Matching

Statutory guidance for personal advisers says that ‘young people will have views about the kinds of qualities that they will expect from their PA and these should be taken into account when matching an individual care leaver to a PA.’¹⁴⁰ This should help young people to be matched with someone who can meet their needs and provide valuable support as they leave care and begin their adult life. However, the same requirement doesn’t exist for social workers and children in care. Currently, young people say that their social workers change too often, that there is a lack of consistency and they aren’t supported to keep in touch with previous workers, meaning that they lose good relationships.¹⁴¹

Involving children in decision-making

The right of children and young people to be involved in decision-making is enshrined in the 1989 Children Act. Courts, local authorities, the police and children’s homes are required to ensure the wishes and feelings of children are given due consideration in decisions about them. Accompanying guidance is equally strong – clearly stating that ‘Children should feel that they are active participants and engaged in the process when adults are trying to solve problems and make decisions about them.’¹⁴² However, this is generally interpreted to be a right on an individual basis and not about broader decisions about fulfilling duties to all children in care.

There have been a number of government initiatives to increase expectations and participation, including the development of a national Charter for Care Leavers that outlines the range of support that signatory local authorities promise to provide. Tim Loughton MP, the minister responsible for looked after children and care leavers from 2010 – 2012 held regular meetings with groups of looked after children and care leavers, something continued by his successor Edward Timpson MP.

¹⁴⁰ Department for Education, *The Children Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations, Volume 3: Planning Transitions to Adulthood for Care Leavers*, London: Department for Education, 2015, p.25 [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/397649/CA1989_Transitions_guidance.pdf (17/2/15)].

¹⁴¹ The Care Inquiry, *Making not breaking, findings and recommendations of The Care Inquiry*, London: The Care Inquiry, 2013, p.5; The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, The Care Inquiry: London, 2013, p.7.

¹⁴² HM Government, *The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review*, London: HM Government, 2010, p.4.

In 2007 the Labour Government outlined their expectation that every local authority should set up a children in care council¹⁴³ and regional children in care council meetings were funded between 2010 and 2012. Some children in care councils have made significant changes for looked after children and care leavers, however, while children in care councils exist in most local authorities across England, the work they do varies between them and some struggle to have enough funding even to undertake activities.¹⁴⁴ Awareness of children in care councils is also low among looked after children: 53% said that they did not know about one in their area¹⁴⁵ and only 15% of workers think that all the looked after children in their local authority got information about it.¹⁴⁶ Some children in care councils across England have done fantastic work, but they are not consistent in their role, their power or how representative they are. Set up by local authorities, children in care councils have as much or as little power as local authorities want to confer on them.

"I'm always encouraged to talk at children in care council meetings about the changes we want to make."¹⁴⁷

Information, rights and entitlements

Providing information to children and young people and facilitating their participation requires time and flexibility. Children are all different and will want and need to receive information in different ways. Young children, children with special educational needs, additional communication needs and those for whom English is not their first language are groups that are particularly vulnerable to missing out on information because it is not communicated in the most appropriate ways. Equally, their participation will require additional skills, resources and time. The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers reported in 2013 that only 29% of children in care and 17% of care leavers felt that they had all the information that they need about their rights and entitlements.¹⁴⁸

"I don't even know what my rights are sometimes, so how can I stand up for them?"¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ Department for Education and Skills, *Care Matters: Time for Change*, London: Department for Education and Skills, 2007, p.7.

¹⁴⁴ A National Voice, *CICC Mapping Project 2010-11*. Manchester: A National Voice, 2011, p.7 [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/190631/cicc_mapping_project_november_2011.pdf (18/2/15)].

¹⁴⁵ Children's Rights Director for England, *Children's Care Monitor 2013/14*, London: Ofsted, 2014, p.64.

¹⁴⁶ A National Voice, *CICC Mapping Project 2010-11*. Manchester: A National Voice, 2011, p.17.

¹⁴⁷ *Any questions?! Who Cares?* Issue 110, Spring 2015, p.12.

¹⁴⁸ All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, *The Entitlements Inquiry report with recommendations*, London: All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children & Care Leavers, 2013, p.11.

¹⁴⁹ *Fight for Your Rights, Who Cares?* Issue 98, Spring 2012, p.15.

Care Leaver Strategy, and the wider corporate family

In 2013, the Care Leaver Strategy was launched, which set out how different government departments would support care leavers to live independently, and in 2014 the one year on progress update outlined what had been done. Despite this, the systems that those departments have responsibility for - systems that care leavers regularly come into contact with, those corporate aunts and uncles - still remain firmly on the periphery of the corporate family.

What should children and young people's experiences of the system be?

Adults set up systems and design them to work for themselves. They are designed to fit into a working day and an adult world. The care system is no different, designed by adults to fit into their world, except those at the heart of it aren't adults. The system therefore needs to work for children, and allow them to be children within it, rather than worrying at five to five on a Friday that they can't contact their social worker over the weekend, or not knowing who to call about new school shoes, sleepovers or worries about their siblings.

In order for professionals within the system to care, the system needs to allow them to do it, by being flexible, supportive and trusting. Professionals need to be aided by the system in which they work to be able to do their jobs well and to have a good work-life balance. This involves good training, with high quality statutory placements available to all trainee social workers. When social workers do start work they should feel, and be, well supported, with good supervision and caseload management. They should feel confident about their knowledge and able to give good, accurate information to the children and young people that they work with. They should want to go to work and feel supported to manage the stress that comes with the complex work of children's social work. There will always be challenges, but social workers should be supported by those they work for to manage and overcome them, with specialist support if necessary. Sometimes supervision alone isn't enough, and sometimes the quality of supervision provided isn't sufficient.

They should be well-trained in order to be able to provide support to young people and be able to always consider the child's perspective. They should be challenged to consider this perspective, both in their practice and in supervision. They should feel confident that they have sufficient training of a high enough quality, as well as able to take and make appropriate challenge about decisions in supervision. Research suggests that looked after children and professionals understand the act of listening differently. Young people require those listening to act upon what they have told them in order for them to feel listened to, while many professionals believe that the act of respectful listening without action is enough.¹⁵⁰ If young

¹⁵⁰ Mcleod A, 'Respect or empowerment? Alternative understandings of 'listening' in childcare social work,' *Adoption & Fostering*, 30(4), 2006, pp.4 -52

people are to feel truly supported, this difference needs to be rectified and it is up to professionals to make that first step.

“Young people should be listened to because it’s their lives; no-one knows it better than they do”.¹⁵¹

Cared for, supported and informed by the system when a child first comes into care

When a child first comes into care, as well as being well matched to their social worker, they shouldn’t be matched with professionals who are working their notice. A child should not begin their care experience with professionals who may, through no fault of their own, give the impression of impermanence or reinforce poor attachment. Every effort should be made to create stability in relationships throughout a child in care’s childhood, but particularly during the first few months of care. There is so much information to give, so much trust to build, so much support to offer, and often so much to heal, that strong relationships and consistency is crucial. Children need to know what is happening to them and why, as well as having access to information to enable them to understand and deal with their past and future. Only with appropriate, accessible information, and the emotional support alongside it, will young people be able to understand what is happening and participate in decision-making about their lives.

Cared for, supported and informed by the system throughout a child’s time in care

As children spend longer in care, children will often develop trust and relationships with individual professionals rather than services¹⁵² and this should be taken into consideration, particularly at points where a child may move between services, schools or placements and the initial reaction is to include a change in professional. Children and young people say that they want social workers who don’t change very often, have time to spend with them and who understand them.¹⁵³ Young people want the adults who work with them to be honest with them, not sugar-coat the truth. In order to be able to do that, professionals need to know the young people they work with well so they know how to do this in a sensitive and appropriate way. Children understand that adults’ lives change, that they will want new jobs, a family or to live somewhere else. It’s unreasonable and unrealistic to think otherwise, so where at all possible, children and those who work with them should be supported to stick together and stay in touch, whether it’s by email, popping by for a quick visit or sending cards and letters.

¹⁵¹ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust’s participation group’s as part of the response to Ofsted’s 2013 consultation on the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.

¹⁵² Mainey et al., (2009), cited in Oliver C, *Children’s views and experiences of their contact with social workers: A focused review of the evidence*, Children’s Workforce Development Unit, 2010, p.7.

¹⁵³ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, The Care Inquiry: London, 2013, p.7.

“When I was 13 – 14 years old I gave up [explaining my personal history and opinions] because I expected new social workers.”¹⁵⁴

Professionals should also be supported and free to build relationships. They should be supported to care, and to show that they care. It shouldn't be that the only contact children and young people have with those they work with is because there is a problem or a statutory review. They should see them because it is school sports day and they want to go and cheer them on. It should be possible to meet up for a coffee, to go to the park or to go and watch a football match. They should be able to respond to crises or emergencies of any scale immediately. They should be able to be there when a child is in hospital, but also when a child is feeling sad, scared or lonely, when a child is celebrating, has a birthday or just for an hour of fun, because that is what you do when you care for someone. Fundamentally, the system needs to be flexible enough to enable those it employs to care for every child individually.

‘The field of practice is not a static, passive recipient of expert knowledge. Because the situation itself ‘talks back’, resists and constrains the practitioner’s every move, effective practice is not so much a matter of having the right expert knowledge as of accommodating social work knowledge and expertise to the demands of the context with great flexibility.’¹⁵⁵

Children and young people have contact with many professionals throughout their time in care. Some they see all but briefly, others stay in their lives for a long time. Some they get on well with, while others they may not get on with at all. It is unrealistic for children and young people to feel a close connection with every professional they work with, but it is not unrealistic or unreasonable for them to feel personally supported by at least one professional in addition to their main carer. For this to happen, children and young people should be well matched with the professionals who they will see the most and should be well supported if these professionals leave or if they themselves leave, either through a placement change or leaving care.

¹⁵⁴ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, London: The Care Inquiry, 2013, p.6.

¹⁵⁵ Turner F, (2005), cited in Munro E, *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system*, London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2011, p.93 [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175391/Munro-Review.pdf (18/2/15)].

“I asked for a black social worker and first got a white woman, and then an old black woman. I wanted someone younger. I have to be seen with this person.”¹⁵⁶

Cared for, supported and informed by the system as needs change over time

As children grow up in care, they will be given opportunities to give their opinions about their own care, but also about wider issues to do with care. They may get involved in the children in care council or with charities or other organisations that bring the experiences and expertise of children in care together. Meaningful participation requires well-trained staff to have the time to engage with children and young people and to seek their views and opinions about both their individual care and systemic change. Age or experience of care shouldn't be a barrier: children of four or children who have a disability have the same valid experiences, opinions and feelings as other children and young people, but the way that professionals engage with them may differ. This means that professionals themselves need to be able to use a variety of communication techniques in their own practice.

Children and young people are the experts on their own feelings and wishes and should be consulted by those producing information for them about how this should happen and what this should look like. Children themselves know exactly what is child-friendly, and individual children will have different ideas of what makes something 'friendly' to them – each child will like to receive information in different ways and it may not always be in the most obvious way to adults. Participation should be supported and promoted by all staff, from Directors of Children's Services and councillors to frontline staff themselves. A culture of participation needs to extend to staff who do not necessarily engage with looked after children and care leavers on a daily basis. They need to understand the value and need to facilitate meaningful participation and time for consultation must be built into planning and processes.

“Young people can't do it alone with the current information available – it's too complicated.”¹⁵⁷

As a child gets older and comes into contact with members of the wider corporate family, like housing and health services, often with less support from carers and social workers, they should be able to be confident that those who they see from within these organisations are sympathetic and knowledgeable about children in care and care leavers, whether this is through flexibility in where housing is offered when a young person needs somewhere to live, support or priority in

¹⁵⁶ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, London: The Care Inquiry, 2013, p.7.

¹⁵⁷ All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, *The Entitlements Inquiry, report with recommendations*, London: All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children & Care Leavers, 2013, p.35.

accessing mental health services or extra support to write a CV at the job centre. Care permeates beyond the care system, from childhood, through school and into adulthood, and this should be taken into account by services beyond the care system, and even beyond the age of 25. Families give helping hands to its members, through jobs in the family business, to discounts, to cups of tea in a crisis. Other services should see themselves as extended corporate family members and treat children in care and care leavers as favourite nieces and nephews.



If things don't go right, problems must be dealt with robustly and in a timely way with the child or young person at the heart.

Sometimes things in life go wrong. Sometimes in the care system, in a placement, in school, people do things wrong. What must or should happen doesn't. The system fails. Mistakes are made, meetings don't happen, children don't get the things they're entitled to. Sometimes things just don't go right, despite everyone's best efforts, accidents happen and mobile phones get broken, a child might find maths really hard, and sometimes children fight with their carers and siblings because they've had a bad day at school, or for no reason at all.

"Young people in care shouldn't have to chase people to get what they are supposed to have. If your parents didn't give you what you're entitled to then you would be put in care. Basic support should be equal everywhere."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Young person at the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, April 2012, summary minutes available: http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/data/files/APPG_Minutes_april_20122.pdf

When we talk about these things happening for children in care, this can be because things are not going right in a young person's personal life, but also because the system itself goes wrong and fails to provide them with the support that they need. This could be decisions not being made in the right way, not being able to access mental health support or not being able to visit siblings that they don't live with. When things go really wrong, children and young people can end up homeless, be put in dangerous situations, and at the very worst, may die. We know this doesn't happen deliberately. However, where a child has been removed from their parents' care for their own safety, this is unacceptable. No child should be taken from a dangerous situation, only to be placed at further risk.

Children in care and care leavers often lack the safety net that their friends living with their birth parents have. Children who live with their birth families have clear avenues of redress when things go wrong. They can complain to their parents if they don't like the shoes they have for school or something they own breaks or they are struggling with things as they grow up, and most of them will have a sense that there are other people who can help them if they are in trouble or if things are going badly wrong in their families. Where this fails, or where their safety is compromised, they are protected by the state. Where a child is cared for by a system that is the safety net of other children, it can be difficult for them to understand who to talk to when things go wrong. Children who are cared for by the state themselves need a safety net, a way to complain, and for things to change when they do. When you're in the safety net – what happens when that safety net breaks?

Why is it important that when the system fails, it's dealt with robustly?

The care system can provide a safe, secure and positive home for children and young people. Those working in the system regularly do the right thing, provide good care and go the extra mile for those they look after. However, mistakes happen and things don't always get done. When this happens, there should be a way of putting things right. Sometimes it's not even about putting it right (although it often is), but acknowledging that something has gone wrong, and that that wasn't ok. When things don't go right, it's important to learn from the mistakes and make sure that things don't go wrong for anyone else.

Dealing with failure when a child first comes into care

When a child enters care, they have to put their trust in a system that they may know nothing about. They have to trust in strangers to do the best for them. They have to trust that things will happen when and how they're meant to. They're unlikely to know what should be happening and what is right, and who to tell if things aren't OK. Children enter care because the state believes that they will be safer there than staying with their parents, but it is not automatically a safe place to be. For children who are new to care, their experiences at the very start will shape their perception of care. Things going wrong early on, or things going wrong and not being

sorted, sets a child up to believe that care is not a good place to be, that they may be no safer or happier than when they were living with their parents. It sets children up to distrust a system that should be there to protect and make them happy. It impacts on their ability to form or sustain relationships. It teaches them early on to be sceptical, to expect broken promises and may well make them think that they are not worth good experiences, or things being fixed.

Dealing with failure throughout a child's time in care

The longer a child spends in care, the more things can go wrong. Returns home can go wrong; placements can be disrupted; reviews can be missed; health checks forgotten about; school trips missed because the right person didn't sign the forms. Children can fall through gaps as social workers change. They shouldn't, but as time goes on there is more opportunity for mistakes. Children in care are vulnerable, have faced problems in their life prior to care and while in care are likely to regularly face changes in their life. Therefore, problems must be dealt with in a timely and robust way. They cannot be allowed to be swept under the carpet, but rather must be put right without unnecessary delay. Even a short amount of time to adults can seem like forever to children. While two months for adults is the short amount of time between Halloween and Christmas, two months to children is longer than the summer holidays or 61 sleeps 'til Santa, both of which stretch out forever. It is vital to notice, address and fix problems as quickly as possible. Where problems require extensive time to fix, children can feel forgotten about if they are not kept up to date with progress.

"I've only been to one review meeting. I've nearly been in care for two years."¹⁵⁹

If things go wrong, the focus should be on making things better, rather than appropriating blame. It's not about identifying individuals who have done something wrong. This is both unfair and fails to secure real change for the future. However, individuals have a responsibility and a duty of care to looked after children and young people and care leavers and where individuals have deliberately harmed a child, put a child in danger or abused their position of trust, this must be addressed.

As children grow up through care, they become experts in their own experience but can also become experts in care. Hopefully they learn the system, they know what should happen and when. They can often be best placed to identify good and bad practice. Some young people want to give back to a system that has cared for them, and to help children who are growing up under similar circumstances to have the very best childhood possible.

¹⁵⁹ *Your Reviews Your Views! Who Cares?* Issue 106, Spring 2014, p.20.

Dealing with failure as needs change over time

When children leave care and become care leavers, they are afforded less protection than when they were under state care. They no longer have to have a social worker in charge of their care, and are no longer cared for by foster carers or key workers. They no longer have an IRO to check that things are happening for them. They no longer have a virtual school head who is required to keep an eye on their educational progress. And yet many won't have parents to help them out, to give advice and to check things are going ok. They are entitled to many things from their local authority as care leavers, and yet no one to check they're getting it. As a new care leaver, without the right support and information, young people go back to the same situation as children newly arrived in care; unsure of their rights and entitlements and faced with big, life changing decisions. There are bursaries they are entitled to, support, help with interviews and clothes. There will be some young people who the system lets down, and this can have a huge impact on care leavers' lives. Rent might not be paid, leading to homelessness. Higher education bursaries not paid leading to dropping out of university. As with children in care, when things go wrong, the stakes are high and the risks can be great. This means that when things facilitated by the system go wrong, the system must fix it.

When the system fails, is it dealt with robustly at the moment?

The following people and agencies have key responsibilities to ensure that things don't go wrong for children in care, and if they do, that things change: independent reviewing officers (IROs), advocates, social workers and personal advisers, Ofsted, corporate parenting panels. They also have a responsibility to make sure that children and young people are learning the appropriate skills, building resilience and are well supported so they are able to make positive choices, manage crises and build a support network. They are there to listen to children and young people and to hear their voices, views and opinions.

Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs)

There are a number of measures in place that are meant to protect children in care from systemic failure. IROs were introduced in response to legal challenge that arrangements were not sufficiently robust to protect the rights of children and young people. They have the power to escalate concerns about individual cases to Cafcass and to seek independent legal support. Despite this, there were only 104 instances of IROs contacting Cafcass between April 2010 and October 2012.¹⁶⁰ IROs in poorer performing local authorities were more likely to contact Cafcass and a 2013 report suggested that this meant that 'IROs in poorer performing authorities are struggling to resolve their concerns using other, less formal, means.'¹⁶¹ Half of IROs had

¹⁶⁰ Jellic H et al., *The role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England. Findings from a national survey*. London: National Children's Bureau, 2013, p.13 [accessed via http://ncb.org.uk/media/1024503/iros_survey_findings_final_08_aug_13.pdf (18/2/15)].

¹⁶¹ Ibid. p.60.

accessed their own local authority's legal advice, and their use of independent advice was uncommon.¹⁶²

Research has shown that the average caseload for IROs in England is 75 (with the average in metropolitan authorities being as high as 96),¹⁶³ while the IRO Handbook states that the suggested caseload for IROs is between 50 and 70 cases.¹⁶⁴ This can lead to difficulties with workload; only half of IROs report (always or often) being able to monitor cases more generally, with some IROs rarely or never monitoring cases.¹⁶⁵ In addition, around a third of IROs said they were not (always or often) able to consult with children and read the relevant paperwork as part of the review process.¹⁶⁶ Ofsted also found that there was a lack of consultation with young people about the quality of the IRO service.¹⁶⁷ This evidence suggests that the IRO Handbook, while it had good intentions, sets tasks for IROs and local authorities that are not realistic.

*"I don't get support in my meetings, everyone disagrees with everything I say so I don't say anything anymore."*¹⁶⁸

In addition, awareness of the role and function of IROs is not consistent among looked after children. The Children's Care Monitor¹⁶⁹ consistently finds that one in five children don't know what an IRO is.¹⁷⁰ IROs should talk to children and young people about their review meetings and all major decisions should be made in review meetings. It is therefore worrying that 17% of looked after children say that none of the big decisions about their lives take place in review meetings.¹⁷¹ Some young people say that they don't know how to get in touch with their IRO, as well as reporting that they don't think that their IRO is independent enough.¹⁷² Children and

¹⁶² Jellic H et al., *The role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England, Final report*, London: National Children's Bureau, 2014, p. 71 [accessed via http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/1124381/ncb_the_role_of_independent_reviewing_officers_in_england_-_final2.pdf (19/2/15)]

¹⁶³ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Department for Children, Schools and Families, *The IRO Handbook, Statutory guidance for independent reviewing officers and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for looked after children*, London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010, p.50, [accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/337568/iro_statutory_guidance_iros_and_las_march_2010_taggged.pdf (19/2/15)]

¹⁶⁵ 14% of IROs did not regularly complete any of the four tasks identified as being key ways of monitoring cases between reviews. From Jellic H., et al., *The role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England. Findings from a national survey*. London: National Children's Bureau, 2013, p. 35.

¹⁶⁶ Jellic H et al., *The role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England. Findings from a national survey*. London: National Children's Bureau, 2013, p.32.

¹⁶⁷ Ofsted, *Independent reviewing officers: taking up the challenge?* Manchester: Ofsted, 2013, p. 27 [accessed via <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/17791/1/Independent%20reviewing%20officers%20taking%20up%20the%20challenge.pdf> (19/2/15)]

¹⁶⁸ Young person at Who Cares? magazine workshop.

¹⁶⁹ Care Monitor was published by Ofsted and written by the Children's Rights Director for England. The final edition written by the Children's Rights Director for England was published in 2014. The Children's Commissioner for England has taken on responsibility for continuing the publication of this document.

¹⁷⁰ Children's Rights Director for England, *Children's Care Monitor 2013/14*, London: Ofsted, 2014, p.61 [accessed via http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_803 (19/2/15)]

¹⁷¹ Children's Rights Director for England, *Children on Independent Reviewing Officers*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2011, p.15. [accessed via <http://www.nfa.co.uk/assets/Uploads/News/Ofsted-publishes-report-of-childrens-views.pdf>] (19/2/15)]

¹⁷² Over a quarter of young people who say they have an IRO aren't sure or don't know how to get in touch with them and nearly a third don't think that their IRO is independent enough, from Children's Rights Director for England, *Children's Care Monitor 2013/14*, London: Ofsted, 2014, pp. 61-61.

young people consistently tell us that this means that they do not feel properly listened to. While IROs are responsible for overseeing the plans of looked after children, they are not required to review pathway plans for care leavers (the process should be conducted between personal advisers and each young person). There is not a requirement for an independent person to review the content or progress of pathway plans, which leaves them open to variation, inadequacy and even not being written.

Advocates

In addition to IROs listening to children's voices, advocates are there to listen, hear and help children and young people speak. This may be that they speak for them at meetings using their words, but also help them to formulate the words to speak for themselves. Advocacy is seen as having 'an important role to play in ensuring children's voices are heard and their voices are protected, especially where they intend to make a complaint.'¹⁷³ Where children have contact with advocacy services, they generally have very positive experiences; however many question the true independence of in-house advocacy. While it is important that advocates know the local authority that they work in, and its policies and procedures, agencies have to tender for advocacy provision and some advocates can be directly employed by the local authority. In addition, very few children have heard of advocacy and don't know how to get in touch with advocates.¹⁷⁴ How advocacy is commissioned varies across all local authorities and where advocates work alone or in small teams, they can feel isolated, stressed and have inadequate resources, and can also lack the skills to be inclusive of all young people's needs¹⁷⁵ (for example advocacy for children who have additional communication needs, very young children and refugees will all require different skills).

*"My borough has internal advocates and it is not effective as everyone knows each other and things get left."*¹⁷⁶

However, there are a number of barriers that young people face to accessing advocacy, including knowing who is responsible for their care – they may know they live in the county of Lincolnshire but could be cared for by one of three local authorities, all of which may have separate advocacy services; and advocacy services having limited office hours and young people having to rely on

¹⁷³ Department for Children, Families and Schools, *Care Matters: Time to Deliver for Children in Care*, London: HM Government, ADCS, LGA, 2008, p.8 [accessed via <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8109/1/DCSF-00279-2008.pdf> (19/2/15)].

¹⁷⁴ Children's Rights Director for England, *Children's Views on Advocacy*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2008, p.6 [accessed via http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8182/8/A9RD399_Redacted.pdf (16/2/15)].

¹⁷⁵ Stein M, *Quality Matters in Children's Services*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2009, p.106.

¹⁷⁶ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, The Care Inquiry: London, 2013, p.9.

access to a telephone or enough credit in order to make a phone call.¹⁷⁷ Access to advocacy for young people is often left down to luck.

Councillors

Of course it's not just down to the professionals to listen, hear and act on children's views and give them a platform from which to speak. There are examples of excellent and energetic councillors who take their corporate parenting responsibilities extremely seriously. However, not every local authority has a dedicated corporate parenting board and some children in care councils report struggling to meet their lead member. The manager of the independent reviewing officers in each local authority should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting board.¹⁷⁸ However, Ofsted found that 'The quality of IRO annual reports, where they existed, was not consistently good enough. Nearly all reports that were produced were not accessible to children, young people, carers and families, or to the wider public.'¹⁷⁹ This is worrying as these reports should form a key part of the evidence which local councillors use to understand whether failings in individual cases are caused by bad practice or wider systemic issues.

Ofsted

In the 2013 inspection framework Ofsted focuses on the quality of care, the outcomes of care and the structures that are in place to inspect services and address systemic failures, but does not make a specific judgement on how well local authorities listen to children and young people in their care. Steps have been taken to include more direct contact between young people and inspectors; however the current framework does not require inspectors to have direct conversations with young people in care. There has been no systematic attempt to include young people in the delivery of inspection, despite pathfinder programmes like Leading Improvements for Looked After Children (LILAC).¹⁸⁰

What should children and young people's experiences be if the system fails?

In order to make things right, to respond robustly, and in a person-centred way, the system needs to recognise that things can and do go wrong and be prepared to fix them. It is also about understanding more about the experiences of children and young people in care, to learn what works well and to be able to act to ensure change happens on an individual level, but also looking at how it may be wider systemic problems that have caused the problem to begin with.

¹⁷⁷ Brady L, *Where is my advocate?, A scoping report on advocacy services for children and young people in England*, London: Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2011, p. 40 [accessed via http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_513 (18/2/15)].

¹⁷⁸ Department for Children, Schools and Families, *The IRO Handbook, Statutory guidance for independent reviewing officers and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for looked after children*, London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010, p.48.

¹⁷⁹ Ofsted, *Independent reviewing officers: taking up the challenge?* Manchester: Ofsted, 2013, p.6.

¹⁸⁰ LILAC was a three year project which A National Voice ran until August 2012. Through using peer inspectors, LILAC assessed whether local authorities made sure looked after children and young people were involved in decisions relating to both their individual care and the policies and practices of the services that look after them.

Dealing with problems in a person-centred way is important because only then will you know what resolution the young person wants, or expects. Without understanding what will make things better, it is difficult to achieve satisfaction for both parties. Where problems are more systemic, young people are important because they are the reason for whom the system exists.

Dealing with failure robustly when a child first comes into care

When a child enters care, they should know who they can talk to about things that are happening and whether those are right or wrong. They should know who they can tell if they don't feel safe or if they're scared. Where possible children should be well matched to primary professionals and they should be consistent in their lives, not just for the benefits of information sharing and support but also so that they feel comfortable and able to talk about problems. They should be given information about what should happen, and if they want to, they should be given the opportunity to talk to other children in care soon after they arrive in care so that they can share experiences and understand that they are not alone.

“We didn't get much information. At the time it didn't matter, but looking back, if we'd have gone into foster care without knowing our rights, we wouldn't have known who to turn to.”¹⁸¹

Dealing with failure robustly throughout a child's time in care

All children in care, and care leavers should know about and be able to have access to someone powerful to speak to. 71% of children in care think that their IRO is powerful enough to resolve their problems,¹⁸² but that means for some children that isn't enough. Therefore, IROs should feel confident and able to challenge the local authority that they work for, without it causing a problem for either the child, or the IRO's job. In addition, all children in care (and care leavers) should have access to advocacy that is independent from their local authority. All children should have access to high quality advocacy, advocates should be available for children who have additional communication needs, for very young children and for children who are living in secure placements. All children should be given the help to be listened to and heard. Problems rarely happen during working hours, and young people should be able to send or leave messages for those who are there to support them when they have problems whenever they occur. Advocates can also resolve issues in a much less formal way, and can often sort out issues before they escalate and become formal complaints. Formal complaints procedures can often be inaccessible to young people.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ The Care Inquiry, *The views and recommendations of children and young people involved in the Care Inquiry*, The Care Inquiry: London, 2013, p.9.

¹⁸² Children's Rights Director for England, *Children's Care Monitor 2013/14*, London: Ofsted, 2014, p.62.

¹⁸³ Office of the Children's Rights Director for England, *Memorandum submitted by the Office of the Children's Rights Director for England (OCRD) to the Joint Committee on Human Rights Children's Rights Inquiry*, 2009 [accessed via

“They [IROs] try to make your dreams and wishes come true... I think my IRO is the best. Just talk to them and it helps solve everything, especially if your social worker is always busy.”¹⁸⁴

When things go wrong with the system, no matter at what stage of care children are at, it is important that they are fully involved, whether they themselves have made a complaint, or whether it is a routine inspection. It is important that young people themselves know how they can trigger and be involved in different accountability processes. If they make a complaint, the process should be clear and accessible to them, both in language and format of process. They should be able to be supported by an independent adult if they choose, and they should be involved in any resolution that happens. They should also know who to go to if they don't get taken seriously and their complaint isn't resolved.

On a larger scale, it is not just the individual complaint procedure that children and young people should be a part of. They should also be involved in inspections and visits, for example regulation 33¹⁸⁵ visits and Ofsted inspections, not just as interviewees that adults talk to, but as peer inspectors. Adults see things as adults; they can no longer see the perspective of a child without filtering it through an adult lens.¹⁸⁶ Children and young people ask questions in different ways, they are the insiders to a world that cannot be fully accessed by adults and their priorities are different.¹⁸⁷ The insight and knowledge that they can offer to their world is invaluable, and it should be collected. Children and young people should be able to participate in inspections in a number of ways. They might not feel comfortable talking to a stranger about the good and bad things about their home, but may prefer to leave anonymous messages, send an email or text or draw a picture. It is important that there are many ways for young people to feed back to everyone who comes to check up on them. This is particularly important for young children and those with communication difficulties. There should also be plenty of time planned in to inspections to ensure that young people can contribute.

Dealing with failure robustly as needs change over time

When a care leaver loses the oversight of their IRO, the importance of advocacy is increased. All care leavers should have access to independent advocacy and where possible, should be able to return to speak to the same advocate if another problem arises. Young care leavers can also lend their expertise to younger children in care, offering mentoring, support, or advice on things that

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt200809/jtselect/jtrights/157/157we39.htm> (19/2/15)]; Stein M, *Quality Matters in Children's Services: Messages from Research*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2009, p. 106

¹⁸⁴ Children's Rights Director for England, *Children on Independent Reviewing Officers*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2011, p.10

¹⁸⁵ Local authorities that own, manage and run their own children's homes are required to appoint or identify personnel to undertake monthly visits to each home.

¹⁸⁶ Rixon A, 'Learning together', in Foley P & Rixon A (eds.), *Changing children's services working and learning together*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2014, p. 207

¹⁸⁷ Kellet M (2005), cited in *ibid.* p.208.

children in care isn't going right. They can also offer valuable insight as inspectors of services, paired with formal inspectors. They can be an extra pair of eyes, picking up on things that older adults may not deem important.

“They should introduce peer inspection of placements.”¹⁸⁸

Above all, the process of listening, hearing and acting to fix problems must not be tokenistic, professionals need to respect the rights of children to have their views, wishes and feelings listened to and value their contributions.

Why is it important the problems are dealt with robustly when life gets tough for individual children and young people?

Children and young people also make mistakes. They make poor choices, take high level risks and can resist advice. Childhood is when children learn about decision-making, choices and risk taking. This is an important part of developing into an adult and should be allowed to happen in a supportive way. They learn the skills to be adults. As they grow up, they will make mistakes as they learn.

When life gets tough when a child first comes into care

When children first come into care life can get tough in a number of ways. They may have contact with family members that they want to have, but that they find really difficult. Their education might be affected by the move. They may make poor choices that are affected by prior experiences; they may fail to make attachments to carers, resulting in placement breakdown. Children who enter care because they are at risk of child sexual exploitation may still be at risk and may find themselves drawn back into that world. Children may be bullied at school, teased about being a child in care. All these problems will have an impact on a child's development and may have an impact on their experience of care, as they may find it affects their placement, relationship with carers or with friends and family.

“[My IRO] listens to what I want and makes sure that the people around me are doing their job right.”¹⁸⁹

When life gets tough throughout a child's time in care

As they grow up children face problems and challenges. These can be compounded by their experience of care and every day teenage challenges can be made tougher, set against a backdrop of care and pre-care experiences. There is still the risk of placement breakdown, but also of other problems. Children in care will still face adolescence like any other child. Young girls

¹⁸⁸ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust's participation group as part of the response to the Department for Education's 2013 consultation on looked after children: improving permanence.

¹⁸⁹ Children's Rights Director for England, *Children's Care Monitor 2013/14*, London: Ofsted, 2014, p.61.

particularly will often face challenges of body image and may find that they are more vulnerable to anorexia, bulimia or self-harm. Abuse can affect the development of healthy sexual relationships and as they grow up, can be at risk of further abuse in relationships.¹⁹⁰

When life gets tough as needs change over time

As circumstances will force children in care to make adult decisions and demonstrate adult skills earlier than other young people and with less support, they are likely to struggle more than other young people. When a child lives with his or her parents, it is likely to be their parents who help them back on their feet, to learn from their mistakes and to give them second chances. When a care experienced young person puts their tenancy at risk, budgets poorly, or thinks they have chosen the wrong course, it is unlikely they have done it on purpose. Rather, it may be due to lack of support, a lack of example as they are growing up, or just adolescent or human mistakes or being placed in an untenable position by the local authority. The second chances that then follow may not be limitless; it may be difficult to continually bail out young people where mistakes have been made deliberately and repeatedly and for no reason (for skipping college in order to work extra shifts because you don't have enough money for food and repeatedly losing your tenancy because you are continually having parties). However, part of growing up is being helped to take ownership of your mistakes, learn from them, and then (hopefully) not repeat them. It is here that any good parent would step in to support a child to do that. Being a corporate parent should be no different. They should be there to support, taking into account the young person's history, and supporting them to work through and learn from their mistakes.

Are problems dealt with robustly when life gets tough for individual children and young people?

Mental health support

When things go wrong in placements or with contact, children and young people tell us that often no one helps them work through the problems, they are just moved on, or contact stopped. Some looked after children and young people told Young Minds in 2012 that they often had to wait a long time to access CAMHS, and many children had a negative perception of receiving mental health services.¹⁹¹ With just half of all looked after children having emotional and behavioural health that is considered normal, access to a range of mental health services which include play and art therapy is crucial. We hear from young people that they may be offered six sessions of counselling or therapy, but after those six sessions the support stops. Six

¹⁹⁰ Trickett P K and Negriiff S, 'Child Maltreatment and Social Relationships', in Underwood, M K, and Rosen L H (eds.), *Social Development, Relationships in Infancy, Childhood and Adolescence*, New York: Guildford Press, 2011.

¹⁹¹ Young Minds, *Improving the mental health of looked after young people*, London: Young Minds, 2012, p.3 [accessed via http://www.youngminds.org.uk/assets/0000/1440/6544_ART_FINAL_SPREADS.pdf (16/2/15)].

sessions is just enough time to build up trust, and to begin to explore problems. It is not enough time to provide adequate support to complicated problems and vulnerable young people.

Learning from mistakes and second chances

There is not enough being done to support young people who make mistakes and to help them move on and learn from them. Currently, the system recognises that young people need support and care until 18. At that age, a chunk of support falls away, which leaves care leavers vulnerable when they make mistakes. Children are currently not supported during their time in care to make decisions in childhood, leaving them feeling ill-equipped and therefore struggle to make decisions for themselves,¹⁹² which increases the likelihood of them making serious mistakes. Young people who make mistakes have to rely on the goodwill of their authorities, and the strength of their advocates or personal advisers to get them additional support when things go wrong. Professionals and former carers are unable to react to mistakes made by those they have cared for because practice is not allowed to be creative and flexible.

“If you can’t come back to your foster placement or children’s home if [your] trainer flat doesn’t work out; at least there should be support to help you.”¹⁹³

These issues were clearly articulated in the Munro Review of Child Protection, but the lessons from this review have not been applied to looked-after children and care leavers. While the Munro Review called for less reliance on managerial target-driven approaches in child protection,¹⁹⁴ for the care system we have seen the introduction of adoption scorecards.¹⁹⁵ Where the review called for more trust in professionals, in the care system we have seen more guidance and standards being issued.¹⁹⁶

Children in care who do not achieve their GCSEs but still have the ambition to attend university are told that they cannot retake their exams,¹⁹⁷ and where placements become difficult, children say that they are moved on instead of issues being worked through. Care leavers are not permitted to return to state care and are highly unlikely to be able to return to their former carer once they have made the decision to live independently. However, when faced with problems with accommodation they are forced to repeatedly complain, and risk becoming labelled as a

¹⁹² Leeson C, ‘Child participation in decision-making’, *Child and Family Social Work*, (12), 2007, pp. 268-277.

¹⁹³ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust’s participation group as part of the response to the Department for Education’s 2013 consultation on Improving safeguarding for looked after children: consultation on changes to the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010

¹⁹⁴ Munro E, *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system*, London: Department for Education, 2011, p.10.

¹⁹⁵ Adoption Scorecards are published by the Department for Education to review progress of local authorities in improving performance against key adoption indicators: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards> (20/2/15).

¹⁹⁶ For example, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, *QS31 Quality standard for the health and wellbeing of looked-after children and young people*, London: NICE, 2013 [accessed via <http://publications.nice.org.uk/quality-standard-for-the-health-and-wellbeing-of-looked-after-children-and-young-people-qs31> (19/2/15)].

¹⁹⁷ Young person at the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, April 2014.

nuisance and threatened with having to take on responsibility for their own tenancy.¹⁹⁸ Often the problems care leavers face do not require elaborate or expensive solutions, but require individual and bespoke support that the system is not flexible to provide.

What should children and young people's experiences be when life gets tough?

When life gets tough when a child first comes into care

When children and young people make mistakes, the system needs to be flexible and allow them multiple chances. When something goes wrong, the automatic response shouldn't be that the situation is irretrievably broken. When their placement is at risk of breaking down, the reaction should not be to remove the child from their placement, but rather extra support provided to the child and carers to try to resolve problems and make the situation right. Carers should be confident enough, and trained and well prepared to feel confident to overcome obstacles that they may face. Carers rarely *want* to let children down. They should be supported to ensure that this doesn't happen.

When life gets tough throughout a child's time in care

When other things go wrong for children in care: poor exam results; difficult contact; difficulties at school, the system should respond to resolve them. The response should not be to give up and not re-take the course; stop contact; move school, but it should be, with the child, work out what the solution is. They will often know what is going wrong and will have ideas about how to solve it. Giving up when things go wrong sends the wrong message. It is not a message that a parent would want to pass on to their children, so why would the state want to give that message to those it cares for? To facilitate working through problems, there needs to be freedom to come up with creative and flexible solutions and there needs to be trust that professionals and carers are able to make those decisions.¹⁹⁹ These decisions and ability to work through problems will need to be supported by strong relationships between adult and child and carer and professionals.

"I was made to feel like I couldn't complain about my flat. It needs to be possible to move if it's not safe."²⁰⁰

When children need help from external agencies, they should be able to get it. They shouldn't have to ask, and if they do, they shouldn't need to ask more than once. Children and their carers shouldn't have to fight for extra support, or miss out on support because they live in a different

¹⁹⁸ Young person in an interview to The Who Cares? Trust as part of our work to develop our submission to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into 16 plus care options.

¹⁹⁹ "A sensible approach is not striving to avoid all risk ... [it aims] in particular to achieve the vital good of [...] personal happiness. What good is making someone safer if it merely makes them miserable?" Justice Munby in Department of Health (2010) cited in Gaylard, D 'Safeguarding and personalization' in Gardner A, *Personalisation in Social Work*, London: Sage, 2014, p.108.

²⁰⁰ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust's participation group's as part of the response to Ofsted's 2013 consultation on the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.

local authority to the one that they're looked after by. Children shouldn't have to wait for mental health support; they should get it straight away. There shouldn't be a limit on the support they get, it should be recognised that children who have been through trauma need to build trust and that should be encouraged.²⁰¹ There should be a variety of therapies available, there should be equal value placed on art and play therapies as well as more traditional support. Children and young people should be involved in the design of mental health services so that they are not scary or intimidating places and children do not feel stigmatised if they need to access them.²⁰² Asking for help should be celebrated as an act of strength, not hidden as shameful and weak. This support should extend to young people who are going through the leaving care process; adolescence continues beyond 18, and any underlying trauma from childhood does not vanish upon leaving care and can often be revisited during the leaving care process.

“Emotional support should be unlimited, not stopped at 21. Emotions can reoccur.”²⁰³

When life gets tough as needs change over time

When things go wrong for care leavers, it is just as important that their corporate parent is able to support them. They need to be able to go back and say that they're struggling and ask for help. No good parent would turn their child away from their doorstep when things go wrong the first time that they have left home. No one knows where their limits are until they are forced to try and no one is resilient all of the time. With care leavers often forced to test their limits before others and often less emotionally equipped than their friends and with less ongoing support, a combination of youth, inexperience and lack of support makes it even more likely that they will make mistakes. Care leavers making the transition to independent living may also relive feelings of loss and rejection that are stirred by prior experiences. With the consequences of failure to live independently so severe, it is even more critical that a care leaver has their corporate parent to fall back on.

Care leavers should be able to return to their local authority and ask for help and the local authority act as a good parent would in a crisis. They should be able to open the door and welcome them home. It may be that this welcome home requires a return to care, somewhere else to live or just someone with more experience to help work through the problem. It might be that they need to use their 'parental influence' to speed up referral processes for mental health support, housing, or other services. Local authorities need to be able to have the capacity and capability to do this, and work with each individual young person to work through problems and

²⁰¹ Young Minds, *Improving the mental health of looked after young people*, London: Young Minds, 2012.

²⁰² Ibid. p.2-3.

²⁰³ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust's participation group's as part of the response to Ofsted's 2013 consultation on the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.

come up with the best solution for them. There has to be a point where even a good parent says that they cannot keep bailing their children out, or housing them when things go wrong. But it is unlikely that it will get that far if appropriate support is put in place once a mistake has been made. In the long term, ideally, the care system would provide a service that would ensure children and young people rarely make such poor decisions and need repeated levels of expensive support.

Children and young people should have the very best childhood that they can. They should also have carers who facilitate this. Carers who will do everything in their power not to cause problems, but also to fix those that do arise. Carers who pick children up when they fall and dust them off and set them off again.



Final thoughts

*"We don't have to go to our rooms and wait until our mum and dad have stopped fighting. And it's more fun and active."*²⁰⁴

The principles of care will apply to a large number of children, all of whom will be in care for different reasons. They will have different stories, different histories, different hopes and fears. These principles should be applied flexibly to reflect each individual and ensure that their experience of care, and their childhood, is positive and happy, full of love and laughter, caring professionals, holidays, feeling listened to, and having friends home to play. They should leave care feeling that they have had a childhood, not a care experience.

We have set out the change that we want to see, the experiences we want children to have. Some children in care do have childhoods and experiences of care that are like those we describe as wanting for all children. But not all do and that is not good enough. We must

²⁰⁴ "They're funny and loving", Who Cares? Junior, Issue 17, Summer 2013, p.4.

celebrate the good and change the bad. We must challenge poor practice and share where things are going well.

We chose our chapters based on five foundations that we believe are vital for children in care and care leavers. Some children will be cared for by the wider corporate family: the health system, the criminal justice system, the benefits system and these principles of care apply to them too. However, we do believe that if the five areas that we cover throughout this document get it right, the other systems will fall into place.

Above all, we have tried to ensure that no one forgets that at the heart of the care system are children. Children who are vulnerable, who are likely to have had traumatic experiences leading up to entering care. But they are also children who are scared of monsters under the bed and who dream of playing football for England and flying to space in a rocket. We must not crush their ambition, or add to their childhood nightmares. We must fuel their dreams, and give them a stable and secure childhood on which to build happy and successful adult lives.

“I think a reasonable parent stays in your life for life.”²⁰⁵

As good, reasonable parents, as aunts and uncles, as friends, we support and encourage the children we care about to succeed.

We must do the same for every child in care.

These are our children.

These are your children.

²⁰⁵ Young person from The Who Cares? Trust’s participation group’s as part of the response to Ofsted’s 2013 consultation on the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.

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