

BECOME.

THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

Become's supplementary response to the Education Select Committee Inquiry into Children's Social Care: **Survey Findings from Care-Experienced Children and Young People**

January 2024

About Become

[Become](#) is the national charity for care-experienced children and young people. We put young people at the heart of everything we do, supporting them to get the help they need now and empowering them to bring about change in their own lives, the care system and society.

Introduction

At [Become](#), we are delighted that the Education Select Committee has decided to hold [an inquiry](#) into children's social care.

We think it is essential that the views and voices of care-experienced young people are at the heart of the Committee's inquiry. For that reason, we developed and promoted a survey for care-experienced young people aged 27 and under, to gather their views, insights and experiences in relation to the key issues covered by the Inquiry's [Terms of Reference](#).

This submission sets out the key findings from the survey Part one focuses on what young people think about the care system currently, and part two focuses on how they would like things to be in the future.

Each section begins with an infographic page that summarises what young people told us, which we then expand on in the subsequent pages, including both quantitative data and quotes from children and young people.

What we did

We launched the survey on 13th December 2023 on our website. It was open for just under six weeks, closing on 22nd January 2024.

Our survey asked about issues including sufficiency, types of care settings, the effects of care experience on different areas of life, and the importance of each of the Government's proposed reforms for improving the care system.

We promoted the survey to young people in our own participation networks, and through those of several other organisations in the sector. The survey was also promoted to Children in Care Councils, and through the Alliance for Children in Care and Care Leavers.¹

Who we heard from

In total, 37 young people responded to the survey, sharing their views, insights and experiences on a wide range of issues.

The children and young people who responded to the survey had the following characteristics:

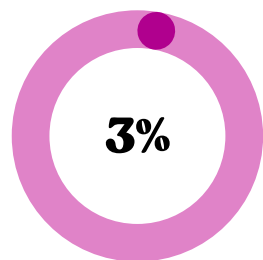
- Most were **aged between 19 and 25**, but the youngest was 13 and the eldest was 27
- **35%** identified as belonging to a **minoritised ethnic group**
- A **large majority** were **female** (78%)
- **57%** indicated that they had a **disability** or **long-term health condition**
- The **East Midlands, London** and the **North West** accounted for 57% of responses, but we received responses from children and young people in **all regions** of England

¹ Limitations: It is important to note that the respondents were self-selecting and this sample is not representative. The sample is also relatively small. These findings are intended to inform the Committee's Inquiry by supplementing other evidence and further engagement with children and young people.

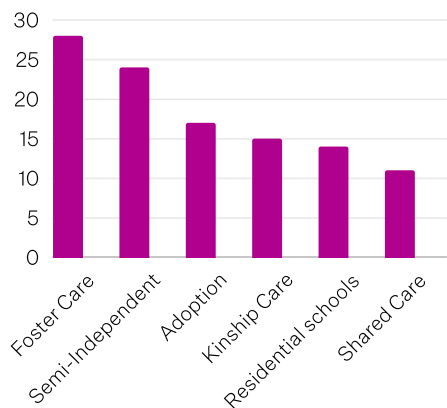
Summary: Views on the Care System

We asked care-experienced children and young people about their views on and experiences of the care system, with a particular focus on (1) whether there are enough homes of the right type, in the right place, (2) the impact of experiences of care on different aspects of young people's lives, and (3) profit in the care system. This is what we heard.

1. There are not enough homes for children of the right type...

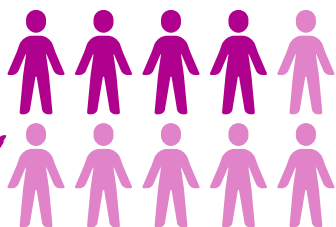


Only 3% of young people said they thought there were enough homes for children in care of the right type, in the right place.



These were the types of care settings our respondents most commonly said they'd like to see more of.

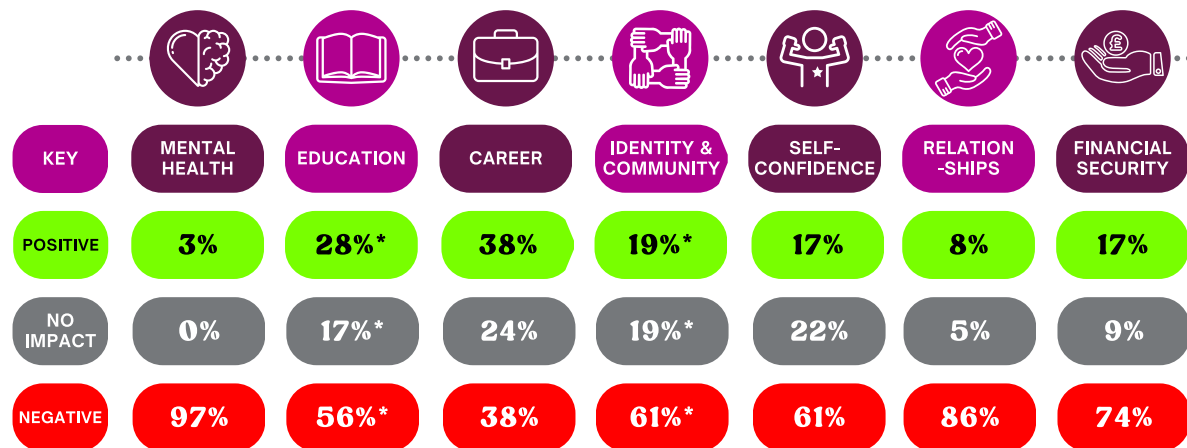
... in the right place.



More than 4 in 10 of the young people we heard from said they had experienced being moved far away, from their community and support networks, against their best interests.

2. For many, being in care has a significant negative impact on mental health, relationships and financial security.

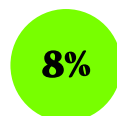
We asked care-experienced children and young people about what they felt the impact of their experiences of care had been on each of several aspects of their lives. Here is what they said.



* Percentages may not sum due to rounding.

3. There should be a limit on the amount of profit children's social care providers can make.

The children and young people we heard from were clearly opposed to the idea that providers should be allowed to make as much profit as they want.



"Providers should be allowed to make as much profit as they want"



"Providers should only be allowed to make a certain amount of profit"



"Providers should not be allowed to make any profit"



"Don't know"

Views on the Care System

1. There are not enough homes for children in care of the right type, in the right place.

1.1. We asked care-experienced children and young people:

“Do you think there are enough places for children in care to live in a home that suits them and is close to where they need to be?”

Option (select one)	%
Yes	3%
No	89%
Don't know	8%

1.2. The vast majority said ‘No’, suggesting that the children and young people we heard from did not feel sufficiency was being achieved across the care system.

1.3. We asked:

“Have you ever been moved far away from your local community and support networks during your care experience?”

Option (select one)	%
Yes, and it was the right thing for me	24%
Yes, but only for respite care	14%
Yes, but it wasn't the right thing for me	43%
No	19%

1.4. We know from our own research that 21% of children were living more than 20 miles away from home last year.² The findings from this survey highlight this as an issue, with more than four in ten (43%) saying that they had been moved far away from their local community and support networks despite this not being the right thing for them.

1.5. We also know that sufficiency challenges can result in it being difficult to find homes of the right type for children in care, but this is rarely assessed in terms of children and young people’s preferences.

² Become Charity (2023a), *Gone Too Far: Preventing children in care being moved miles from the people and places that matter to them*. Available at: <https://becomecharity.org.uk/content/uploads/2023/04/GoneTooFar-Become-policy-briefing-April-2023.pdf>

1.6. For that reason, we asked:

“Which of the following care settings would you like to see more of?”

Type of Care Setting (Tick all that apply.)	%
Foster care	76%
Semi-independent settings	65%
Adoption	46%
Kinship care	41%
Residential schools (e.g. boarding schools)	38%
Shared care ³	30%
Children's homes	27%
Other	14%
None of the above	3%

1.7. The significant range in the responses we received is likely indicative of there being a wide range of needs and preferences with respect to care settings amongst care-experienced children and young people.

1.8. One young person chose to draw attention to the importance of regulation, with this comment:

“Nothing unregulated no matter the provision, and more trauma informed care.”

1.9. In terms of both types of care settings and the location of homes, the children and young people we heard from made it clear that, in their experience, sufficiency is often not being achieved, and distant moves that are not in young people’s best interests are too common.

³ This option included the following explainer: “where children spend time living with family as well as in foster care, children’s homes and residential schools”.

2. For many, being in care has a significant negative impact on mental health, relationships and financial security.

2.1. We asked care-experienced children and young people:

“What impact do you think your care experience has had on each of the following areas?”

Option (Select one per column)	Mental health	Education	Career	Identity & community	Self-confidence	Relationships	Financial Security
Positive	3%	28%*	38%	19%*	17%	8%	17%
No impact	0%	17%*	24%	19%*	22%	3%	9%
Negative	97%	56%*	38%	61%*	61%	89%	74%
n =	37	36	34	36	36	36	35

* Percentages may not sum due to rounding.

2.2. 97% of the children and young people we heard from told us that their experiences of care had a negative impact on their mental health.

2.3. One young person said:

“When i [sic] first went into care i didn’t have any access to mental health support or how to deal with what’s going on. i didn’t have anyone explaining to me what was happening.”

2.4. 86% also told us that they felt their experiences of care had a negative impact on their relationships, and 70% reported a negative impact on their financial security.

2.5. When asked how the care system could be improved, one young person highlighted the need for:

“More support for those [care leavers] on universal credit, more food grants, and grants for basic essentials.”

2.6. Of all of the options for the question above, children and young people were most positive about the impacts on their career and their education, although opinion was significantly split in both of these areas, with 35% and 54% reporting negative impacts, respectively.

3. There should be a limit on the amount of profit children’s social care providers can make.

3.1. There has been recent and significant news coverage about the high levels of profit being made by some children’s social care providers.⁴

3.2. To understand how care-experienced children and young people feel about profit-making in the care system, we asked:

“Which of these statements do you agree with most?”

“Children’s social care providers...

Option (Select one.)	%
“... should be allowed to make <u>as much profit as they want</u> ”	8%
“... should only be allowed to make <u>a certain amount of profit</u> ”	49%
“... should <u>not be allowed to make any profit</u> ”	38%
Don’t know ⁵	5%

3.3. Of the 37 children and young people we heard from, only three said they thought providers should be allowed to make as much profit as they want.

3.4. The rest of our respondents were divided between not allowing profit at all, and allowing only “a certain amount of profit”.

3.5. One young person said:

“Instead of incentivising private firms to provide better care, all it [profit] does is incentivises them to provide placements with larger margins.”

3.6. Another was in favour of compulsory profit re-investment, and said the care system could be improved by:

“Making sure that financial support isn’t given to private care homes and that their profits are instead being reinvested into this infrastructure/training [for the care of disabled children], by changing policy to make it compulsory.”

⁴ Savage, M. (2023), “Biggest independent children’s care providers in England made £300m profit last year”, *The Guardian*, 28th October. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/oct/28/biggest-independent-childrens-care-providers-england-made-300m-profit-last-year>

⁵ This question included a guidance note which read: “Many children’s social care providers, such as children’s homes and fostering agencies, are not run by the Government. Some companies make profit from providing care to children. This means that the money these companies are paid is more than the money they spend on providing these services. This is the profit, which is available to owners and investors to keep or use as they like. Some people and groups are worried that some of these providers are making too much profit.”

Summary: The Changes Care-Experienced Young People want to See to the Care System

We asked care-experienced children and young people how they wanted the care system to look in the future, with a focus on which of the proposed reforms to the system care-experienced children and young people would most like to see.

4. Moves should be centred around stability

From a list of options, we asked young people to choose the most important things to consider when a child in care has to move.



5. Families need access to holistic early support, without fear or stigma

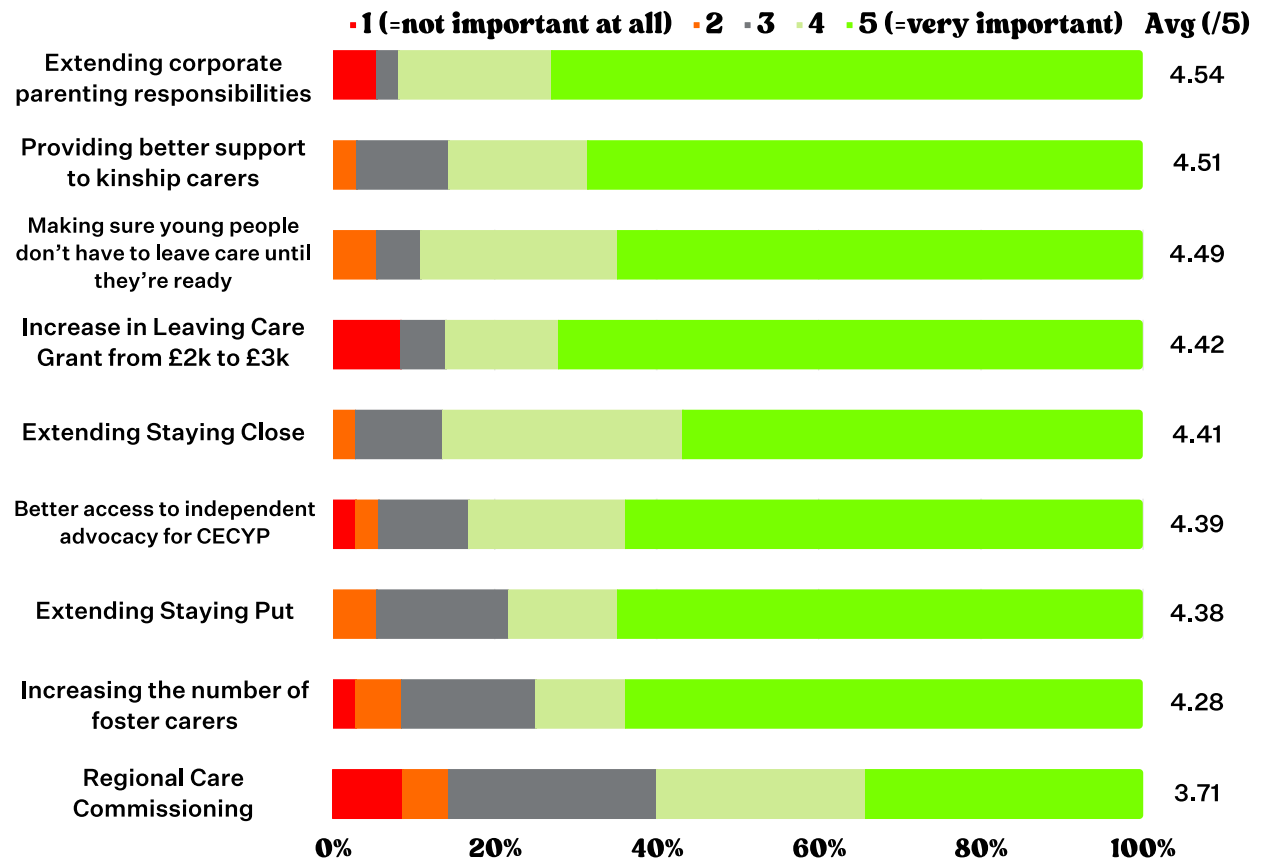
Young people told us that there should be a better, more holistic web of support available to families, but that children and parents' fear of stigma and separation acts as a barrier to existing support.



6. What do care-experienced young people think of the Government's proposed changes?

We asked young people to rate the importance of each of the Government's plans to improve the care system from 1 to 5.

They are presented below in order of highest to lowest importance, as rated by the children and young people we heard from.



The Changes Care-Experienced Young People want to See to the Care System

4. Moves should be centred around stability

4.1. We asked:

“When a child in care has to move, what are the most important things for those making the decisions to consider?”

Type of Care Setting (Tick all that apply.)	%
Making sure the placement is a good match so they don't have to move again	97%
Their views and wishes about the move	92%
Helping them to stay in touch with the people that matter most to them	84%
Making sure they can keep living with their siblings (if they have any)	81%
Making sure the place they move to allows them to stay connected with their cultural or religious heritage	76%
Making sure they can continue their hobbies or interests	70%
Making sure they stay close to their local community and support networks	68%
Making sure they don't have to move schools	62%
The cost of the placement	8%
None of the above	3%

4.2. 97% of the children and young people we heard from prioritised making sure the placement is a good match, to ensure they don't have to move again.

4.3. We know from our close work with care-experienced children and young people that instability, such as frequent placement moves, or disruption to familiar fixtures like places, people and support networks, can have incredibly damaging long-term effects.

4.4. Conversely, just 8% of the children and young people we heard from felt that cost is one of the more important things to consider when moving a child in care.

4.5. One young person said:

“[the] financial value of one single placement is not a sustainable decision-making factor.”

4.6. Another said:

“The cost of the placement shouldn't be a burden to the child.”

5. Families need access to holistic early support, without fear or stigma

5.1. We asked:

“How could early help for families be improved to keep children living with their families?”

5.2. Many of the children and young people we heard from felt there should be better family support infrastructure including financial support; housing support; and targeted support for mental health conditions and disabilities within the family.

5.3. One young person said:

“Family therapy should be more accessible”

5.4. Another said that, currently:

“[the system makes] life changing decisions that could have been avoided with better support for parents such as financial or housing support.”

5.5. There were several comments from care-experienced children and young people about the stigma associated with the care system, feelings of a lack of professional understanding and the need for the adoption of more personalised approaches. Many of these comments reference known fears or apprehensions of struggling parents to seek help, for fear of not receiving the support they need, but rather, losing their child(ren) to the system.⁶

5.6. One young person said:

"Parents need to feel safe enough to ask for help without fear of losing their child. Children need to feel safe enough to ask for help without fear of losing their parents."

5.5. This comes alongside feelings of shame or guilt attached to seeking help as a result of the stigma and negative stereotypes around being in touch with children's services.

⁶ The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2022) *Final Report*, p. 61. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/640a17f28fa8f5560820da4b/Independent_review_of_children_s_social_care_-_Final_report.pdf

6. What do care-experienced young people think of the Government's proposed changes?

6.1. To understand how care-experienced children and young people feel about different proposals for improving the care system, we provided a list of proposals (see the table below) and asked:

“From 1 to 5, how important do you think each of these would be [for improving the care system in the future]?” (1 = not important at all; 5 = very important)

6.2. The proposals we asked about included a mix, in no particular order, of (a) current Government plans and (b) other proposals not currently planned or proposed by Government. We have separated these in the two tables below.

(a) Government Plans

Government plans to improve the care system	Average rating out of 5	Consensus index (Higher number = stronger consensus)
Giving public sector organisations (like the NHS, schools and universities) more responsibilities to provide support to care-experienced young people	4.54	11.28
Providing better support for kinship carers	4.51	9.80
Making sure young people don't have to leave care until they are ready	4.49	9.89
Increase in Leaving Care Grant from £2,000 to £3,000	4.42	10.66
Making it possible for more young people in children's homes to keep being supported by staff (Staying Close)	4.41	8.73
Better access to independent advocacy for care-experienced children and young people	4.39	9.18
Making it possible for more children to continue living with foster carers until they are 23 (Staying Put)	4.38	9.58
Increasing the number of foster carers	4.28	9.04
Making plans about the number and type of places that are needed for children in care regionally (e.g. across the North West) instead of locally (e.g. a single local authority like Manchester City Council)	3.71	4.30

6.3. Care-experienced children and young people were quite strongly in support of extending corporate parenting responsibilities to more public bodies, and with significant consensus.

6.4. Respondents were significantly less supportive of regional care commissioning (with an average of 3.71), though this may be due in part to it being difficult to understand the nature and likely effects of this proposal.

(b) Other Proposals

Proposal to improve the care system	Average rating (out of 5)	Consensus index (Higher number = stronger consensus)
Better transition planning for care leavers	4.76	13.28
Getting better help for your mental health when you need it	4.68	11.84
More financial support (e.g. grants, bursaries, allowances)	4.65	11.74
Support for young care leavers to find a place to live that meets their needs	4.62	11.41
Ongoing support with education, skills and training	4.62	11.41
Supporting young people leaving care to fully understand their rights and entitlements	4.61	10.99
Advice and support to help with managing money	4.46	9.40
Help to build a strong support network	4.28	7.98
Having more dedicated time with their Personal Adviser	4.00	5.85

6.2. Of the other proposals we asked about, care-experienced children and young people were most supportive of improving transition planning for care leavers. This was closely followed by improving support for mental health, housing, and education, skills and training.

6.3. From our work, we know that care-experienced children and young people face many challenges in understanding their rights and entitlements. It is no surprise that our survey respondents were strongly supportive of plans to improve support in this area.

6.4. These proposals do not currently feature in Government plans and yet, in many cases, the care-experienced children and young people we heard from said they felt these proposals were very important for improving the care system.

7. Making support better for disabled children in care

7.1. We asked children and young people this optional, free text question:

“How can we make support better for disabled children in care?”

7.2. 13 young people responded with changes they would like to see.

7.3. We heard from children and young people that there should be proactive educational opportunities and/or training for professionals to ensure that disabled children in care receive quality care tailored to their individual needs.

7.4. It is particularly important to take into account the holistic needs of disabled children when considering moves and placements. Young people wanted to see more financial support for carers and more in-house accessible and adaptable homes that are able to meet the needs of disabled children.

7.5. One young person said the system must:

“Ensure that the child's health is prioritised and that their healthcare isn't disrupted by placement breakdowns.”

7.6. Additionally, it was emphasised that disabled care-leavers may need more financial support than their non-disabled peers. Some young people told us that they would like to see tailored ‘leaving-care packages’ provide additional support for disabled care-leavers, such as further financial and practical support for transport to appointments related to their disability, and specialised furniture.

7.7. Finally, young people called for greater consistency across local authorities regarding best practice for disabled children and young people in care.

Appendix A: Other Issues Care-Experienced Children and Young People Raised

7.8. We asked children and young people:

“Is there anything else you want to tell us about how the care system should be changed for the better?”

7.9. Other areas important to the children and young people we heard from included the following.

Identity and race

7.10. Identity and race—and, in turn, stigma and racism—were agreed areas of importance for children and young people when considering the changes they would like to see in the care system. We know from our broader work that there is a continued stigma associated with care-experience and families with social care involvement.

7.11. As these young people express:

“We need more advocacy to the public to change stereotypes and perceptions of foster kids.”

“The media paints it negatively.”

7.12. Such persistent negative narratives and stigma embedded in the discourse around the care system and those in it can have a devastating impact on care-experienced children and young people’s sense of self and identity.⁷

7.13. This issue is further compounded for children and young people of colour who are in care. Racial inequalities are amongst the most pronounced disparities in children’s social care.⁸ There are continued and concerning reports of racism that permeates the care system, which must be addressed and proactively tackled.

7.14. One young person said it was important to:

“Make sure children of colour understand their identity, language and culture and they’re not left ashamed with who they are, even if they live with white carers.”

Mental health support

7.15. Children and young people would like to see changes in the care system regarding mental health support.

⁷ Neagu, M. (2021) “Conceptualising Care in Children’s Social Services”, *British Journal of Social Work*, Vol. 51, Issue 6, pp. 2080-2096. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab060>

⁸ The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care (2022) *Final Report*, pp. 89-91. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/640a17f28fa8f5560820da4b/Independent_review_of_children_s_social_care_-_Final_report.pdf

7.16. Research shows that children in care are more than four times as likely to experience mental health problems compared to the general child population.⁹ We understand that a priority for care-experienced children and young people is improving access to high-quality and timely mental health support.

7.17. One young person said:

“All young people in care, and care leavers should have access to a mental health assessment and mental health support whether [sic] they request it or not.”

Love and celebration

7.18. Another identified area in need of improvement within the care system, for children and young people, is love and celebration of care-experienced children and young people.

7.19. One young person said:

“Love is missing from the system. While in care, [children/young people] learn how to raise themselves and hide their identity.”

7.20. This is essential for healthy development and is linked to better wellbeing and life outcomes.¹⁰ We know that care-experienced children and young people experience higher exposure to adverse long-term outcomes such as homelessness, unemployment, and criminal convictions.¹¹ It cannot be overstated how significant love, compassion and celebration is for *all* children and young people to have positive and healthy relationships; to thrive and to aspire.

7.21. One young person said they would like to see more recognition and celebration from corporate parents and government when care-experienced young people achieve significant milestones – such as completing further/higher education, given care-experienced young people are underrepresented in FE/HE:

“Young people should be recognised for their amazing achievements. Young people in care who graduate high school and university despite their challenges.”

⁹ NICE (2021), *Looked-after children and young people*. Available at: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng205>

¹⁰ UNICEF (2021) *The science of love in childhood*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/stories/science-of-love-in-childhood>

¹¹ Become Charity (2023b) *About the Care System*. Available at: <https://becomecharity.org.uk/about-the-care-system/>

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BECOME.

**THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
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