
The views and
recommendations of
children and young people
involved in the Care Inquiry



**The Care
Inquiry**

April 2013

“Finding a home is like doing a jigsaw, it’s like a puzzle; you’ve got to find the missing piece.”

“Home is feeling safe, as in I’ve got a safe haven. It doesn’t matter what happens, I can go home and I’m looked after. I enjoy going back to a place where I don’t have to look after myself any more, it’s not all on me.”

“You can live somewhere for 10 years and it not feel like home, like me.”

“The government might say adoption is best but depends on the kid.”

“Whether these children are idiosyncratic or representative, their views matter.”¹

“When one considers the depressing evidence on outcomes for looked after children in adult life, humility about our ability to know what is in the child’s best interest seems the appropriate emotion.”²

¹ Munro, E. (2001). Empowering looked after children. London: LSE Research Articles Online

² Ibid

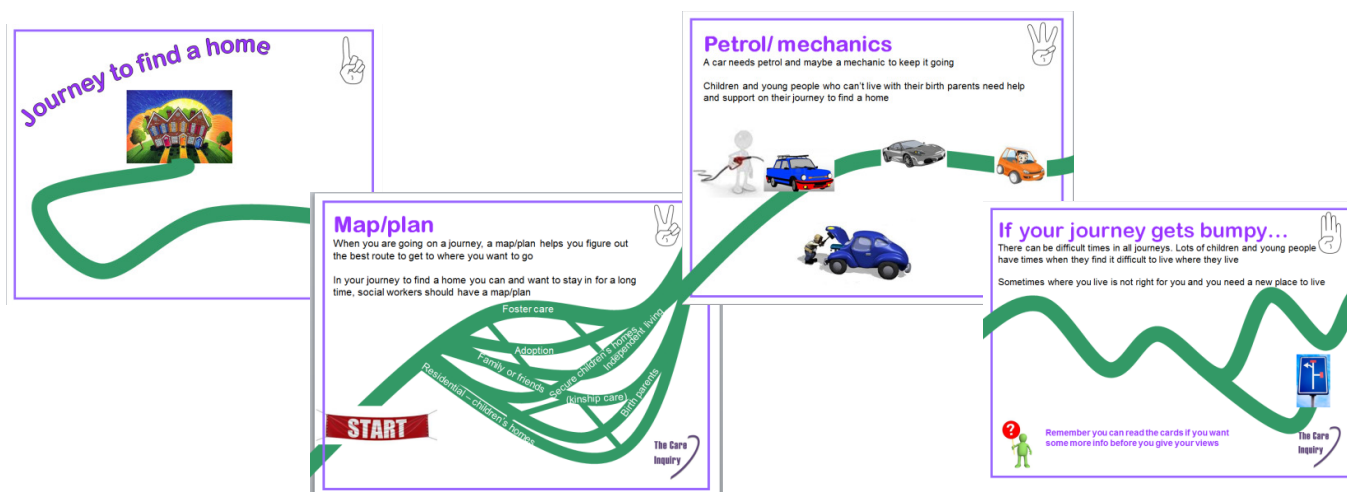
How we asked for the views of children and young people

As part of the Care Inquiry, The Who Cares? Trust consulted children and young people with experience of all different forms of care (adoption, fostering, kinship care and residential care).

Four sets of focus groups took place: at London Borough of Hounslow, The Who Cares? Trust, the Together Trust and Torbay council. In these groups, children and young people were asked to tell us what makes a place feel like home to them, and how people could help them find and maintain a home. One-to-one interviews were also conducted with a small number of young people unable to make the focus groups, some by the National Deaf Children's Society with children with hearing impairments and some by The Who Cares? Trust. We also asked for responses via an online consultation.

Across all these methodologies we used the analogy of a journey and questions covered five main areas:

1. Home - what makes a home?
2. Map - how can you have a good map / plan to find a home?
3. Petrol / mechanics - what kind of support is needed to keep you going the right way?
4. Bumpy road – what things are needed when the journey gets tough?
5. Passengers / visitors – are there particular people that you need to be with for somewhere to feel like home, or people that you want to visit on your journey?



Notes on the style of the report

The quotes included in this report are included verbatim. All quotes from young people are in *italics*.

In order to maintain confidentiality we have used the gender and age of the young person quoted. We have also included the source of the quote: focus group, interview or online consultation.

Throughout this report we use the term carer and worker. This is deliberately broad in order to reflect the different care experiences of the young people we spoke to. When reading the quotes "carer" means adoptive parent, foster carer, kinship carer or residential worker unless specified. Likewise "worker" means social worker, personal adviser, independent reviewing officer etc. unless specified.

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Different types of care, consistent messages

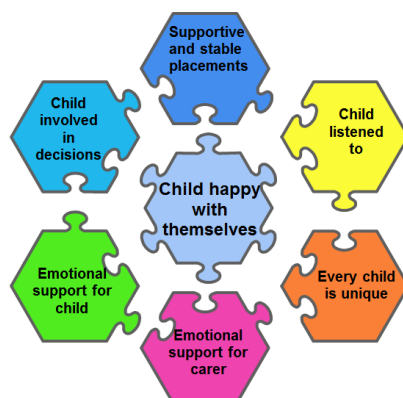
We spoke to children and young people with experiences of all different kinds of care: foster care, kinship care, residential care and adoption. There were some messages that applied to particular kinds of care, but there were also a number of consistent messages. They told us that, to find and maintain a home, they wanted:

- To be viewed and treated as an individual by carers and decision makers who take time to get to know them well, explore identity with them in all its forms and support them to understand themselves and be happy about who they are.
- To have someone whom they trust, who knows them well, who has shown them they care, who makes every effort to listen to and understand their thoughts, wishes and feelings about home and life, and who takes time to find out how they are *really* doing.
- To be given information, options and choice on decisions about them and to be involved in making decisions wherever possible.
- Wherever possible, any moves of house / home are gradual and children and young people are able to “test” them out beforehand.
- To be looked after by consistent carers who they feel they can be themselves with, who are well supported so they don’t give up on them and, where looked after by a family, with the wider family network supporting the placement.

Areas for recommendations

To support this vision young people came up with three main areas for recommendations. Some came from individuals and some from focus groups; feedback hasn’t been gathered from all different groups and individuals. They are initial thoughts / suggestions, but they are great food for thought. The following report is divided into the three sections listed below.

1. **Strengthen the relationship** between each child or young person and their social worker so that the social worker knows them well, supports them well and makes good decisions informed by and involving the child / young person as much as possible.
2. Improve how children and young people are **supported to settle** into where they live and to find a place to call home that they want to and can stay in the long term.
3. Improve how young people are supported to **understand and connect with their personal history**, if they want to.



Children and young people want stronger relationships with their social worker so that they know them well, support them well and make good decisions which are informed by them as much as possible

Children and young people told us that having a strong relationship with their social worker meant that they found it easier to find and settle into a permanent home. They want social workers who understand them, who have time for them and who do not change very often.

When things were going wrong, they wanted someone independent to speak to. To learn to trust the social worker and feel respected, young people wanted to be carefully listened to, they wanted information and choice, and they wanted to be properly supported in finding the right home for them.

“Ask children / young people where they want to live!” (young woman, 17, interview)

“If your social worker doesn’t listen it makes you feel less important.” (young person, focus group)

“A good social worker is calm ... someone who can sit and talk to you all day, not trying to throw you out and don’t give you time slots. They let you know you’re not just a case ... It’s about them accepting your situation and you for who you are.” (young man, 20, interview)

Children and young people were keen to remind professionals and decision makers that they are all different and have different wants and needs. They wanted **well-planned, gradual moves** that they were involved in and informed about throughout. They then wanted to have someone who would check if they were settling in. They said that this was the best way to try to find them a place that they could call home for a long time. To find a home that is right for them, so it is more likely to last long term, they want their social worker, as the decision maker, to spend time getting to know them as a person and to spend time carefully understanding their views and wishes. This needs to be done in a way that is appropriate to their knowledge and understanding, not their age. Different methods of understanding will be needed to gather the views of babies and very young children and those with disabilities.

“If they don’t have a good understanding of your life how can they find a good placement?” (young person, focus group)

“Pre-plan placement moves! Don’t just put a child somewhere that they can sleep temporarily. Match them to somewhere that can be called home to them.” (young person, 19, online consultation)

“Learn more about the individual ... so not to wrongly place them where they feel out of their comfort zone as a person. For example, if a young person is an outdoors person don’t move them to a city.” (young woman, 20, online consultation, entered care aged 1)

“What they wanted to achieve and what they achieved didn’t work. It wasn’t what I wanted. The first plan was for me to be able to go home, I think, but they didn’t do anything or put anything in place to help that. The second plan was to put me in foster care but I didn’t want that. They always put me with older people and I didn’t like it. The intention and what I wanted didn’t correlate so it was never going to work.” (young woman, 24, focus group)

There were lots of examples of positive and negative experiences of being involved in their journey to find a home. Children and young people felt that improvements need to be made to encourage better and more consistent practice. They therefore made the following recommendations.

MAKE SURE THAT CHILDREN HAVE THE SAME SOCIAL WORKERS FOR TWO TO THREE YEARS

“I had so many social workers I didn’t know what was going on with me. This resulted in lots of placement moves.” (young person at session 2a)

“Don’t change social workers!” (young person, focus group)

“3 of my care workers are leaving – I am not very happy.” (young man, 14, focus group)

“I’ve spent 8 years in care and only had 4 social workers so I was lucky.” (young person, focus group)

“Make sure that children have the same social worker for at least two to three years.” (young person, session 2a)

“I would say there should be a maximum of three changes – because sometimes they might end up pregnant, be too old or genuinely ill.” (young woman, 17, interview)

“Having lots of social workers is bad, you should only have 2-3.” (young person, focus group)

LONGER NOTICE PERIODS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS TO GIVE TIME FOR PROPER ENDINGS AND HANDOVERS

There is no minimum contract period for social workers, and children and young people we spoke to said when their social worker changed they did not get to say goodbye or were not introduced to the new worker.

“One left – I got a card – the next one left before I met her.” (young person, focus group)

“I had so many social workers it felt like there was no point in talking to them.” [because they would then leave and then the young person would have to explain her personal history again] (young person, focus group)

EACH YOUNG PERSON SHOULD HAVE MORE THAN ONE WORKER WHO KNOWS THEM, SO IF ONE LEAVES THEY HAVE SOME CONTINUITY

Children and young people tell us that they do not like having to tell their story over and over again each time they have a new worker. They want more consistency in knowledge about them.

“I feel social workers know everything about me and then they leave and I have another one.” (young person, focus group)

“When I was 13 – 14 years I gave up [explaining my personal history and opinions] because I expected new social workers.” (young person, focus group)

ALLOW CONTACT BETWEEN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR WORKER AFTER THEY HAVE LEFT

Children and young people said that they wanted to be able to speak to their previous workers (social worker, residential worker, personal adviser etc.) even after they've left their jobs. They said they often lost good relationships because they couldn't trace workers once they'd left.

One focus group including a number of young people with experience of residential care said that they wanted to be able to keep in touch with staff who moved on.

*“When I was 16 I got a pathways worker instead of a social worker. I'd had my social worker for a year. She was amazing and she had to stop being my social worker just because I had a pathways worker. I want both. I could trust [social worker].”
(young woman, 17, interview)*

BETTER MATCHING OF SOCIAL WORKERS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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”³. There are no similar requirements for the allocation of social workers.

One focus group talked about the importance of being well matched to your social worker. On a scale of one to ten where ten was the most important thing, one group scored the importance of matching them with a social worker as 8-9.

*“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. When I was younger ... I didn't want to be seen with the white social worker. People [children in school] would ask questions about who she was. All my family is black; it looks odd being seen with her as she is white. With the older woman, maybe communication wasn't really there either. I didn't have a good relationship with her. I don't think she knew how to interact with me.”
(young woman, 24, focus group)*

*“You want to find out what wave they're on. It's about them accepting your situation and you for who you are.”
(young man, 20, interview)*

LESS PAPERWORK AND SMALLER CASELOADS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS SO THAT THEY CAN SPEND MORE TIME WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Children and young people were very aware that one of the reasons they were given when they could not see their social worker was that they had too much to do or too many other people to see.

*“They need to reduce the paperwork. A good social worker left because there was too much paperwork and no time to meet young people.”
(young woman, 22, focus group)*

³ The Children Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations, Volume 3: Planning Transitions to Adulthood for Care Leavers, p.19. There are similar requirements for matching independent visitors.

**LESS PAPERWORK AND
SMALLER CASELOADS FOR
SOCIAL WORKERS SO THAT
THEY CAN SPEND MORE TIME
WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE (cont'd)**

“Social workers should have more time for us and not tell us they are always busy.”(young person, 17, focus group)

“Less paperwork and things to sign. If I was at home I wouldn't have to do group meetings, care plans and weekly agreements etc... It makes me feel different.” (young woman, 15, online consultation, entered care aged 11)

“Social workers should not make the young person feel like a burden and that they are not important and are just another case.” (young woman, focus group)

“Take time, try asking the child what kind of family they would like to be with, then that way you will notice the child won't want to rebel if you think about their feelings ... I would recommend to actually take in consideration the child's choice and not what the 'social workers' think.” (young woman, 19, online consultation, entered care aged 4)

**SOCIAL WORKERS SHOULD
BE TRAINED BY YOUNG
PEOPLE**

“Social workers need to change their attitude and maybe get better training.” (young person, focus group)

“Care leavers should be employed to support young people in the care system and TRAIN professionals.” (young person, session 2a)

“There should be a day where professionals have a day / week to become a young person in care and first hand gain the experience to understand. Professionals to be fostered.” (young woman, aged 22, session 2a)

“Foster carers [should have] more training on how to handle us.” (young woman, 23, online consultation)

For example:

“Whenever they see us they need to stop saying I know how you feel when they actually DON'T! They think they know how to deal with your situation because they've dealt with other children they think are like you, but they don't.” (young woman, session 2a)

“Social workers should tell you when they are going on holiday and who you can contact.” (young person, session 2a)

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO ADVOCACY FROM ORGANISATIONS INDEPENDENT OF THEIR LOCAL AUTHORITY

An advocate is an important support for young people if something has gone wrong and they want to complain. The children and young people were worried that if this person was employed by the local authority, rather than an independent organisation, they would not get as good a service.

“My borough has internal advocates and it is not effective as everyone knows each other and things get left.” (young person, session 2a)

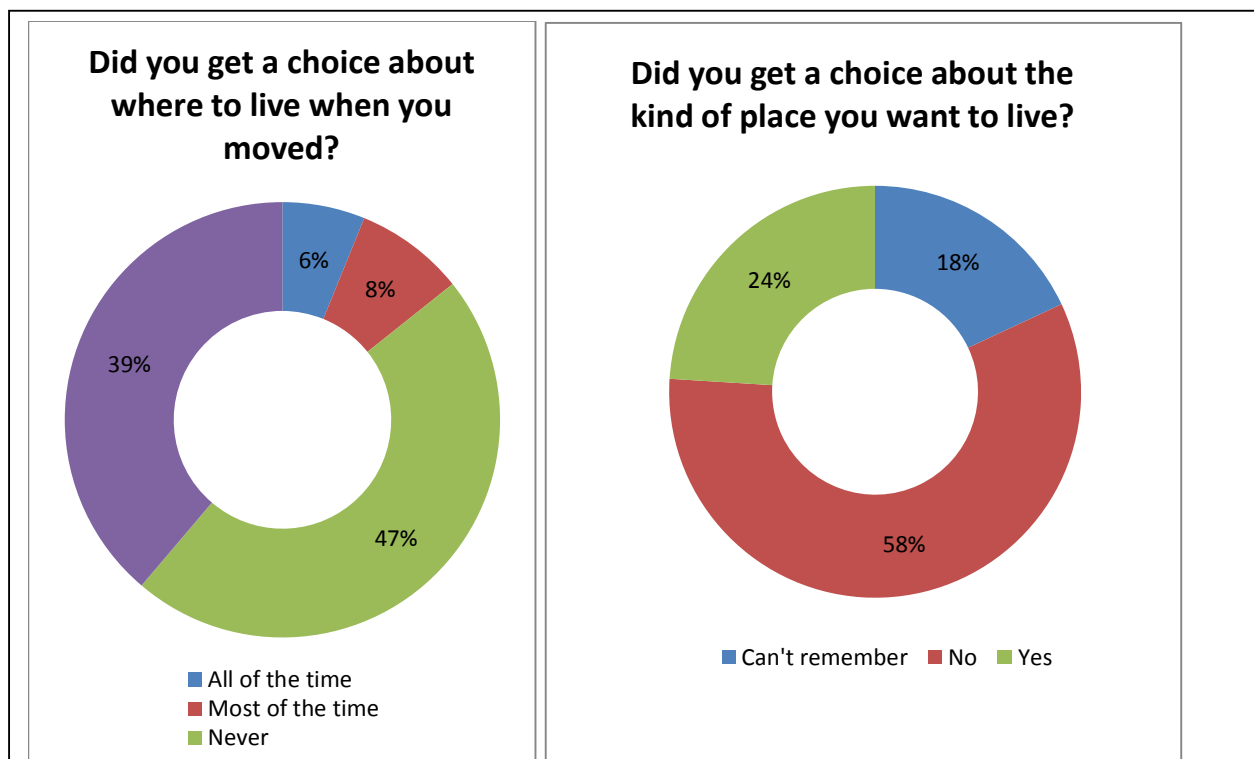
“We didn’t get much information. At the time it didn’t matter, but looking back, if we’d have gone into foster care without knowing our rights, we wouldn’t have known who to turn to.” (young woman, 20, interview)

“I wish I knew what my rights were. I grew up to find out [that] how one carer treated me in particular was illegal and this was kept quiet.” (young woman, 23, online consultation, entered care aged 10)

“Because I was young everything was sugar coated and the truth wasn’t explained. I always had to go with whatever was easier for them at that point which turned out to be the worst situation in the long term.” (young woman, 23, online consultation, entered care aged 10)

Young person had had advocacy for the Family Group Conference process and this had worked because he is now going to football matches and going swimming with dad. (young person, focus group)

When you have a review every 6 months do you speak with the Reviewing Officer? “No, because I don’t think they will be able to sort it out.” (young person, focus group)



MORE INVOLVEMENT IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Children and young people are supposed to be asked about their views, wishes and feelings about where they should live. They told us that this was not happening often enough.

There was much discussion about the importance of listening to the views of children and young people and of these views informing decisions made about their lives. Children and young people felt that they would be more likely to find and maintain a home if they were consulted and involved well. They want information about their rights, options and the situation; to be asked their views privately and before decisions have been made; to be communicated with in a way that suits them; and to be told the truth.

Having a choice/being involved in decisions:

“I went to stay with my nana when mummy & daddy wasn't looking after us. The social worker asked me and my sister to put stars on homes I would like to live in & I chose mummy & nanna. she then said a wise man would decide where I should live & he said nanna.” (young boy, 8, online consultation, entered care aged 6)

“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.” (young man, 19, online consultation, entered care aged 4)

“I was taken to McDonalds by my social worker, and when I was there she told me I wasn't going home ... they probably thought I might kick off at mum's. Then they told me 'you're going to go home soon – your mum is just a little bit unwell.' They knew I wasn't going to go home. They didn't say anything ... When you are young they think they can lie to you and they think you'll forget about it but you can't forget.” (young woman, 24, focus group)

“My social worker was not very good because she did not move me close to my family [several counties away] and I was not happy. Nobody even told me I was going to Hereford.” (young man, 14, focus group)

“I was promised by social services I would be in the same town or near where my sister lived (she is 9, 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. Social services didn't listen to me or take time to ask me how I felt. I was just another tick off the list.” (young woman, 18, online consultation, entered care aged 17)

“I wanted to stay living with my friend for longer, whilst I

**MORE INVOLVEMENT IN THE
DECISION-MAKING PROCESS
(cont'd)**

decided whether or not going into care was for me, and for them to find a place for me to live near the people I knew. I had been living with my friend for 4 months when I had to leave. I was still confused and stressed out and depressed/angry from the incident which led to me becoming homeless (my dad was physically and emotionally abusive) and I felt like social services did not meet the needs I needed.” (young woman, 18, online consultation, entered care aged 17)

Being informed

“The choice was: move [out of the area with kinship carer] or go into foster care ... Our extent of knowledge of care was Tracey Beaker. I didn’t know going into foster care could mean moving away too – not as far, but could’ve meant moving schools, being far away from my sister and family.” (young woman, 20, interview)

One young person said they had to leave one foster home: *“they had children and we had apparently behaved inappropriately with them ... sometimes we’d be moved on and I wasn’t sure why. I think sometimes our foster families didn’t want to cope with us anymore ... we were difficult sometimes ... I think we wanted them to get rid of us to prove that no one could keep us ... It would have been nice to be at least consulted about what was going to happen. No one even sat down and said ‘if you do this, you can stay here’ or anything.” (young woman, 23, online consultation, entered care aged 7)*

In the right way:

“In my review, they asked me what I thought about being adopted but [my carer] was sitting there. They ‘sugar coated’ e.g. saying that you’ll never have to have reviews, you won’t have to see a social worker anymore etc. I didn’t want to be adopted. I said I didn’t want to be adopted but it was hard.” (young woman, 22, focus group)

“[Young people] should have a chance to meet various foster carers and make a choice where they would prefer to live and who with.” (young woman, 19, online consultation, entered care aged 10, referred to staying in at least 10 placements)

A young person who is deaf communicated that he had “lots of difficulties” when finding a home, because of communication barriers. He wanted people to communicate with him using British Sign Language. (young person, interview)

At the right time:

“I only got a choice after I was placed if they I didn’t like it ... I got a choice when I decided to speak up and say I wanted to go to

**MORE INVOLVEMENT IN THE
DECISION-MAKING PROCESS
(cont'd)**

this house". (young man, 17, focus group)

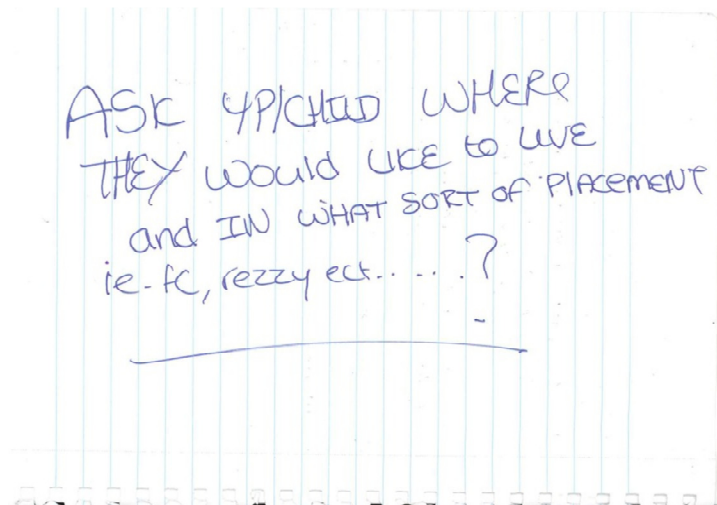
"The only time I got a choice was when I was over 16." (young woman 20, online consultation, aged 3 when entered care)

Some young people said that a lack of information and choice caused them to run away:

"I came home from school one day and was told I'm moving to Kent. I tried to run away. The motorway was scary." (young woman, 19, online consultation, entered care aged 13)

"I didn't want to stay so I ran away. Now I wish I had stayed but then I didn't know what was going on." (young person, focus group)

"I got told where I was going and when; and when I didn't want to [go there] I said I would just run away, which I did on many occasions. Young people don't get a say when it is vital we should as it is our lives they are messing with!" (young woman, 25, online consultation, entered care aged 13)



**Written by a young woman, 17, at
interview**

Children and young people want help to settle into where they live and with any problems along their journey to find a home

"It's not just finding a home that's hard, it's maintaining one." (young woman, 24, focus group)

"I am with my family. My nan and my sister. I am loved and cared for. I don't feel that I am in care." (young girl, 12, online consultation, entered care aged under 1)

"I like having different staff ... you're not just reliant on two people ... you can go to different people for different things. Some are good at empathy, some good at practical things." (young woman, 17, interview, chose residential care following an adoption breakdown)

"Feeling safe, as in I've got a safe haven, doesn't matter what happens - I can go home and am looked after. Knowing I can rely on it ... where I don't have to look after myself anymore ... Last weekend I was stressed from doing lots. I went home and just cried. My [carer] woke me up in the morning and took me out for breakfast." (young woman, 20, interview)

"Home is where you can be part of a family if you want but don't have to be if you don't want" (young woman, 17, interview)



What children and young people said made a place feel like home

Children and young people told us that it was really important to have a home that was right for them and that you might not get this right first time. They wanted the right support to be given to them and the people that cared for them so they could settle in and stay there in the long term. They therefore made the following recommendations:

THERE SHOULD BE MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO “TEST” PLACEMENTS OUT

Even if good matching is in place, sometimes children and young people and their carers just do not fit together. Children and young people said that there should be more of a chance to test things to prevent later breakdowns.

“I had a tester a few times. I didn’t with the foster carers I was with for two and a half years. I wouldn’t have gone there. I didn’t like it there. [Children and young people] should always have a taster.” (young woman, 17, interview)

“You could go to Thorpe Park but if that’s a once in a lifetime trip then it’s not good. It’s better to do something that the carers like doing, so you get to know them.” (young person, focus group)

“I met with the foster carers on a regular basis for about 2 months so I was told everything I needed to know.” (online consultation, young woman, aged 20, mentioned that she has moved placement 13 times)

“Meet them before you move in. I had 16 temporary placements and would have been better to have one long term placement.” (young man, 20, online consultation, entered care aged 12)

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD RECEIVE MORE REGULAR VISITS FROM SOCIAL WORKERS WHO KNOW THEM WELL

The law sets a minimum standard for how often looked-after children and care leavers should be contacted and seen by social workers, but it does not allow for them to request additional visits. Young people in all forms of care, including adoption, spoke about having times when they needed support, to help them deal with issues and therefore try to prevent them having to move.

To stop children and young people having to move house when things are difficult, one young person suggested: “[social workers should] see you now and again [and] ring others to discuss options [if things are difficult]. Respite does not help get a new home.” (young person, focus group)

“When telling professionals I wasn’t getting on with my [carer] ... to preserve the placement they should have said ‘why don’t we set up to talk to you both’, or helped me to see things from her point of view. You’re selfish as a teenager. They should’ve said ‘why don’t we sit and talk with you both’.” (young woman, 20, interview)

Young people in one group said that the social worker should call once a week. They said at the moment that doesn’t happen and that there is not enough contact from the social worker once the young person is placed. (young person, focus group)

How often should social workers see you? “If nothing is going wrong then not very often. If things were not going well – whenever you needed to.” (young person, focus group)

SOCIAL WORKERS AND CARERS SHOULD TALK ABOUT CULTURE AND IDENTITY WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AND TAKE THIS INTO ACCOUNT WHEN FINDING THEM A HOME

Children and young people told us that culture and identity were important, but not straightforward. To feel at home, they wanted to feel like they belonged. This wasn't as easy as matching skin colour or country of origin. It was important to find out what they felt about their background rather than make assumptions.

Young people who talked about identity and culture wanted to remind professionals that their views about identity and culture can change regularly.

“Culture is a big thing – the foster carer should not force their culture on the young person. With one foster family I was forced to go to church [young person was clear he didn't like this situation]. You should be made to feel comfortable and want to go back to the house/home.” (young man, 20, focus group)

“You can't assume, even if you're placed with family members, that the young person will feel at home. They [carer] have a very different culture and parenting style than my mum. They weren't born in this country.” (young woman, 23, focus group)

“I wouldn't have learnt some of the things I have learned if I had been brought up by a white person but a loving family is better than an abusive family.” (young woman, 24, focus group)

“They didn't know what to do with my skin and hair. I felt like I was trouble ... it felt like what I need to do is to be more white.” (young woman, 24, focus group)

“You need to have people who can help you know your culture, are nice about your accent.” (young man, 18, focus group)

“My foster family was Ghanaian but it wasn't right. I didn't want to go with a Congolese family though, even though that's where I'm from – I didn't feel accepted in my community because of what happened.” (young woman, 24, focus group)

“I am Vietnamese and live with a Jamaican and I am fine.” (young woman, aged 19, focus group)

“It didn't matter to me, I didn't fit with anyone.” He described feeling out of place and said because of his mix of race and heritage, it would be difficult to find an exact match. (young man, 20, focus group)

NEEDS ASSESSMENT - IDENTITY

Identity refers to more than the young person's culture and ethnicity. This section should provide an insight into the how the young person views his or her self.

	Yes	No	Further Information
The young person relates well to his/her ethnic and cultural background.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Include details of the young person's view of him/herself as part of a family and culture and any self esteem or emotional issues arising from this. Note how the young person maintains contact with ethnic/cultural background or does not do so. Note whether the young person actively participates in religious heritage, whether there are any barriers to this or whether the young person makes a positive choice not to participate. Also note in this section [in the absence of anywhere more relevant to record it] the following:
The young person is aware of their religious heritage, for example observance of festivals and holidays	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

ALL CHILDREN SHOULD HAVE A PRIVATE SPACE THAT THEY CAN PERSONALLY DECORATE AND FEEL COMFORTABLE IN

Having a space of their own that they could personalise and feel comfortable in was important to the majority of young people. 32% of young people responding to the online consultation mentioned having their own room as important to making them feel at home.

“[Home is] somewhere you have a nice comfy bed. When you feel sad, your bed is where you go to cry, so you want it to be comfortable.” (young woman, 17, focus group)

“[Home is somewhere] you get to decorate your own bedroom ... my room looks sick [slang: great] when it’s not messy! ... We looked everywhere for nice curtains, I painted it myself... If you don’t it reminds you that you’re living in someone else’s house.” (young woman, 17, interview)

“When I moved to one children’s home, they called me and asked me what colour I wanted my room. I said I wanted it pink so when I arrived it was all decorated for me. That made me feel at home.” (young woman, 18, focus group)

“Designing how my bedroom was decorated made me feel secure and safe and like it was MY bedroom and MY space.” (young woman, 19, online consultation, entered care aged 12)

Children and young people said they wanted to feel “comfortable and relaxed” and one way to help this was that “[people caring for you] shouldn’t keep asking are you alright all the time. You want to evolve in your own space.” (young man, focus group)

CARERS, ADOPTERS AND RESIDENTIAL WORKERS SHOULD RECEIVE MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE NEEDS OF THE CHILD THEY WILL BE CARING FOR

Children and young people said it was important that carers knew about them and their background so there were not any surprises.

“Foster carers need to meet your needs – they need to learn more about the child before they stay with them e.g. understand their behaviour/ culture etc.” (young person, focus group)

“Let parents know more detail about our background and how we might behave so they can decide if they want us in their homes or not.” (young woman, 23, online consultation, entered care aged 7)

Do you think anything could have helped keep you in your adoptive placement? “If they got told more specific things about what happened and what I could be like when I was growing up thinking “who am I?” ... that’s your identity – knowing what happened when you were little. When I asked questions they [adopters] used to change the conversation a lot.” (young woman, 17, interview)

**CARERS, ADOPTERS AND
RESIDENTIAL WORKERS
SHOULD BE MORE RESILIENT.
THEY SHOULD GET SUPPORT
SO THEY ARE BETTER ABLE
TO COPE WHEN TIMES GET
TOUGH**

A number of young people felt that carers gave up too easily when things got tough and maybe needed more support before they got to that stage, so they could solve problems before breakdown point.

“My placement would always break down and foster carers just wanted me gone rather than working through the issues.”

(young woman, 23, online consultation, entered care aged 10)

“There were times when I had ‘huge arguments’ with [my carer] but we still got on ... I never felt [my carer] would throw me out but I didn’t break the rules.” (young woman, 20, interview)

“Talk to the foster carers to make them aware that it is a difficult time and sometimes the young people themselves don't even know how to deal with what’s happening and their emotions.” (young woman, 18, online consultation, entered care aged 12)

“Carers need to control their stress.” (young woman, 18, online consultation, entered care aged 1)

“I had a foster placement which lasted for 8 yrs but due to my rebelliousness it broke down and this (then) led me being moved fortnightly to different [places] ... these were both negative and positive experiences.” Is there anything that could have been done to help you stay there? *“Carers to have been more supportive of me ... They just gave up on me.”* (young person, 22, online consultation)

“If parents are too stressed that’s a problem. They need to let you have freedom, like they let me go to my mates.” (young man, 20, interview)

“I don’t reckon they should leave adoptive parents on their own. There should be support all the way along. They [adoptive parents] tried to call social services and they said ‘it’s not our problem’, you can understand cos it’s been 10 years but ... they said ‘if it’s that bad, call the police’ when I was standing there with a frying pan in my hand.” (young woman, 17, interview, adoption later broke down)

FOSTER CARERS' FAMILIES SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN BRINGING UP LOOKED-AFTER CHILDREN

For other children, their parents' family offer help and support in raising their children. Children and young people we spoke to felt this could be the same for looked-after children. For example, a foster carer's family could provide respite care.

"Going on holiday with the family makes you feel a part of the family." One young person said he'd been abroad four times to places including Australia and "out of the atmosphere of London – time to chill out ... I'm more calm and chilled out ... I can't chill out in London." (young man, 19, focus group)

Young people were asked 'Which things help you feel that where you live is home?' "Have the foster carers treat you like family ... them inviting you to their friends/families houses with them." (young woman, 17, online consultation, entered care aged 10)

"Ensure that the whole family is going to be welcoming and not just the people who live in the house." (young person, 19, online consultation, entered care aged 13)

MEDIATION AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT SHOULD BE PROVIDED WHEN MOVING INTO AND SETTLING INTO A NEW HOME

Children and young people wanted to get emotional and mental health support more easily. They did not want this to just be higher tier CAMHS support, but someone they could talk to regularly, who was a good listener and could give them practical tips.

"Some of the difficulties for me were me testing them [the foster carers]." (young person, focus group)

"My main message is emotional support. Lots of things could be worked through. How can you feel comfortable in a place where you don't know who you are and what place you play in the family?" (young woman, 20, interview)

"You should be able to have mediation someone looking at how to deal with your problems, like arguments about what time to come home etc. It shouldn't be easy to move, you should have to do negotiation / mediation sessions" (young person, focus group)

"There should be more effort between children's home staff / foster carers and social workers to sort things out." (young person, focus group)

"When telling professionals I wasn't getting on with [my carer] ... to preserve the placement they should have said 'why don't we set up to talk to you and [your carer]?', or helped me to see things from her point of view. You're selfish as a teenager ... I think they didn't do that because my social worker didn't get on with [my carer]." (young woman, 20, interview)

"We have what we call house meetings every week and talk about lots of things about our home with nan, [like] are we happy, and we can give our honest opinion if we're sad or happy

MEDIATION AND EMOTIONAL

SUPPORT SHOULD BE PROVIDED WHEN MOVING INTO AND SETTLING INTO A NEW HOME (cont'd)

and nan will do her best to solve our problems.” (young man, 13, online survey)

Children and young people thought it was important to have some independent mediation when settling into a new place or dealing with problems. They thought this was particularly important in kinship care placements.

“When we first moved in with our aunt, our cousins were angry, we were upset ... you can’t blame them – we were taking up this room and forced upon them. Then names ... are they cousins or brothers now? That was overlooked – the huge change in circumstance and relationship.” (young woman, 20, interview)

“I lived with my Nan and [other family members]. [They] didn’t get the concept of care, that I was in care and my Nan was being paid to look after me... there was a battle for attention.” (young woman, 23, focus group)

THERE SHOULD BE INCREASED SUPPORT FOR CARE LEAVERS TO HELP THEM SETTLE INTO THEIR OWN FLAT OR HOUSE

The leaving care age is 18. There are cliff edges for the support care leavers can receive at 21 and 25. This is not how it works for other families, who help their children until they stop needing it. Children and young people we spoke to thought this should be the same for looked-after children and care leavers.

Care leavers already have to move into independence more quickly than their peers. They felt that the support they get to do this was not good enough. Some of them said they felt at their most vulnerable because, if things went wrong, there were few people to turn to and they felt like a burden.

“Even in my own flat, I still don’t feel at home. I don’t think I’ve ever felt like I have a home.” (young woman, 24, focus group)

“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.” (young person, focus group)

“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.” (young woman, 24, focus group)

“The only support you get is a threat. No college means no rent paid.” (young woman, focus group)

“In leaving care meetings you get nothing ... sometimes meetings are on the phone not in person.” (young woman, 23, focus group)

*“The end of services should be based on needs and not age.”
(young person, session 2a)*

*“Services shouldn’t stop when you are 25. I’m scared to turn 25,
who can I turn to then?” (young woman, 24, focus group)*

Children and young people want help to come to terms with what has happened to them and to understand their own past

“Everyone goes into care for a reason but those reasons are never addressed – they just look at your behaviour there and then and don’t address what happened to you when you were younger, or they throw CAMHS at you.” (young woman, 24, focus group)

“We need to talk about identity!” (young woman, 20, interview)

Children and young people told us that being safe in care was not enough. In order to have a settled, permanent home they needed more than just being taken out of their old home. They said they needed help to think about their past and to ask questions about what happened if they wanted to so they knew who they were and could be happy in themselves. They therefore made the following recommendations:

THERE SHOULD BE MORE WORK DONE WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO HELP THEM UNDERSTAND THEIR IDENTITY AND PERSONAL HISTORY, FOR EXAMPLE MAKING LIFE STORY WORK AVAILABLE TO ALL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Children and young people told us that settling into a permanent home meant finding out about what had happened to them in the past. They wanted to be able to get answers to questions about their personal history and that of their birth family if and when they want it, and with support.

There are no set requirements about how social workers use life story work. Children and young people thought it could be really valuable, but you might not know when you want to do it.

“When you’re told you’re adopted you don’t know who you are ... It’s useful to talk to your social worker [about your birth family and personal history], they tell you what’s going on ... if you found out info yourself, you could be bullshitted, like if you talk to other young people about your situation some say “it means your mum didn’t want you” (young man, aged 20, interview)

“I can’t imagine asking about birth parents and finding out through reading a file. That would lead to regression, mental torture. You need someone to talk to, need to check if the relationship was good anyway.” (young woman, aged 20, interview)

“When we got the SGO [Special Guardianship Order] the support just stopped. [My little sister’s] life story work just stopped. No explanation was given to her. They were building up towards telling her the truth of what happened between our Mum and her Dad ... they just said ‘she doesn’t need life story work anymore’. The injustice of it just gets me so much. It’s scary. She hasn’t had the rest of that work. We don’t know when it’s going to hit her. We don’t know how to deal with it. It’s scary.” (young woman, aged 20, interview)

“It’s important to know your first words, your birth weight, what time you were born ... many a time I’ve thought ‘what time was I born?’. When you don’t know it’s hard. I could wake up at that time and think ‘I was born at that time’.” (young woman, 17, interview)

FILES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD BE BETTER WRITTEN, MORE EASILY ACCESSIBLE AND THERE SHOULD BE SUPPORT WHEN THEY READ THEM

Accessing your files is a key way for looked-after children and care leavers to understand what happened in their past. But it can be very traumatic and children and young people felt there should be good support available to help them through this.

“Social workers need to think that you could want to read the file when they write it.” (young woman, focus group)

“Get rid of the use of jargon (i.e. Looked After Children = LAC, this suggests we lack love, family, support).” (young woman, 22,

session 2a)

“I’ve waited years and years to get my file. When you read your file, you have to be at the right stage and have someone supporting you.” (young woman, focus group)

“You have lots of questions – it doesn’t prepare you for the reality of reading your file.” (young woman, focus group)

**YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD
HAVE SAFE, WELL
SUPPORTED CONTACT WITH
THEIR BIRTH FAMILY WHEN
THEY WANT IT**

Children and young people felt that contact with their birth family was important and that it should be well supported. This meant planning it properly, making sure they were OK and making sure people turned up.

Some young people were very clear that they did not want to see their birth family:

“I was happy because I didn’t see my mum, she was always arguing with me.” (young person, focus group)

“I do not want to see my real family – they were rubbish, they did not even feed me. My birth dad forgot my name.” (young person, focus group)

However, others said that they wanted contact with their birth family. Some explained that being able to have well supported contact meant that they were happier in themselves and therefore found it easier to settle.

“I used to go to a family centre with all my brothers and sisters and my parents for supervised contact. I only see them all once a year when we have a big contact, but I see my brothers and sisters twice a year. I chose to only see my parents once a year because we end up arguing with mum and dad. There are 3 contact workers. I like having contact workers there – I feel safe because I don’t know what my mum and dad are capable of.” (young person, focus group)

“My little sister was adopted – she had been with me all my life – the social worker helped but it was already planned. I see her twice a year. I don’t feel if I said anything it would make a difference. They told me a few months before so I could prepare myself. I did not really feel I could talk to anyone about the experience. At the time confidential, independent counselling would have helped.” (young person, focus group)

“I met my Dad last year. I’d been talking to my aunties for a while ... Dad found it hard to meet because of his mental state. I wanted to know I’d met him.” (young man, 20, interview)

One young person also told us about his experience of having contact with his former adoptive family:

“I see my adopted family every week... I go on my own without a care worker.” (young person, previously adopted, currently in care, focus group)

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD HAVE OPPORTUNITIES TO MEET OTHER CHILDREN IN CARE AND OLDER CHILDREN IN CARE/ CARE LEAVERS

It was important for children and young people to know that there were other people out there who were going through similar things. Children and young people also thought it would be good to have a chat with someone who had been through the system and knew the ropes.

“Care leavers should be employed to support young people in the care system and train professionals.” (young person, session 2a)

What would help children and young people have stable places to live? “Young people meeting others who have been in care - mentors and advocates.” (young woman, online consultation, aged 23, entered care aged 10)

“I have a lot of mates who have step Dads / Step Mums / Dad or Mum in prison / walked out / died ... I have a bigger connection with people with that sort of situation. We have similar insight.” (young man, 20, interview)

“Probably would have helped me out a lot to meet adopted kids – depends on their personality though – if they’re positive or negative ... sly comments are made by some young people.” (young man, 20, interview)

“No matter what the situation, there’s always light somewhere. Don’t sit in the dark, go and find it!” (young man, 20, interview)

Young people wanted to share advice with others in similar situations:

“The young person should enter a foster home with a positive mind ... It’s difficult but you need to be yourself and get on with things.” (young man, 17, focus group)

“Get used to that person and then they offer to take you out. Go because you get to bond with that person.” (young person, 16, online consultation)

“In some cases it doesn’t work out but sometimes if you stick with rules they give to you, or have a better attitude in life, it may help.” (young woman, 18, online consultation, entered care aged 14)

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD BE OFFERED THE ONGOING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT THEY NEED, THROUGHOUT THEIR TIME IN CARE

Young people felt that having appropriate ongoing emotional support was really important. That support could be provided by a range of individuals and should be easily available. Young people wanted support to understand their personal history and identity and to process traumatic experiences.

Did anyone help you during difficult times? “My looked after children’s health worker ... If I needed her I contacted her. Appointments weren’t very often but I would go to the office every day. I was in tears. [She has] been through everything with me. When I done something stupid, she never judged me for it. She’s always been there, she’s amazing. The amount of times we’ve sat there and I say ‘I’m fine’ and she says ‘no you’re not’ and I say ‘I’m fine’ and she says ‘no you’re not’ ... until she gets me talking. She knows me well. It makes life easier. (young woman, 17, interview)

Should all children and young people have a health worker like you? “It don’t work if you don’t want one but everyone should have one if they want one. I like to talk ... Young people growing up ... going through emotions... life changes. It can stress you out.” (young woman, 17, interview)

Who can you turn to for support? “My foster carer or counselling support service at school. Sometimes what happens at home can affect your education. If one person at school knows what is happening at home it is helpful – but not all the teachers.”(young person, focus group)

[If young people have to move placements] “it needs to be dealt [with] sensitively as it’s a massive change and it affects everything in the life of a young person.” (young woman, 18, online consultation, entered care aged 12)

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