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The care files: Exploring the experiences of teenagers entering the care system

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Report

This report explores the experiences of older children and young people when entering the care system as teenagers. Produced with and by older children and young people, the report looks at the support and care they and their families have received, and how they feel various systems and services could change to better support teenagers in the future.

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Executive summary

“Every young person who has been in care gets ‘care files’, but these are the files that social services keep on the young person; they only offer one perspective. What we have done here is created our own care files, our own story of how the system can change based on our journeys.” (Young person, 25)

This report presents the key themes and insights drawn from a number of co-designed workshops and interviews with 24 older children and young people who are either being supported by the care system, or who were supported by the care system in England and Wales between the ages of 10 and 17. The majority had entered care via Section 31 of the Children Act 1989 (CA 1989), with a smaller number entering under voluntary arrangements via Section 20 (CA 1989) and Section 76 of the Social Services and Well-being Act 2014 in Wales.

We worked alongside five co-researchers who were central in helping us to understand the ethical issues we were likely to encounter as well as co-creating the research questions, generating themes and outputs, and disseminating the findings of the work. While our focus begins with looking at the experiences of those who have been supported by the care system, we also look more widely at other systems that may have some involvement in a young person’s life, such as youth justice.

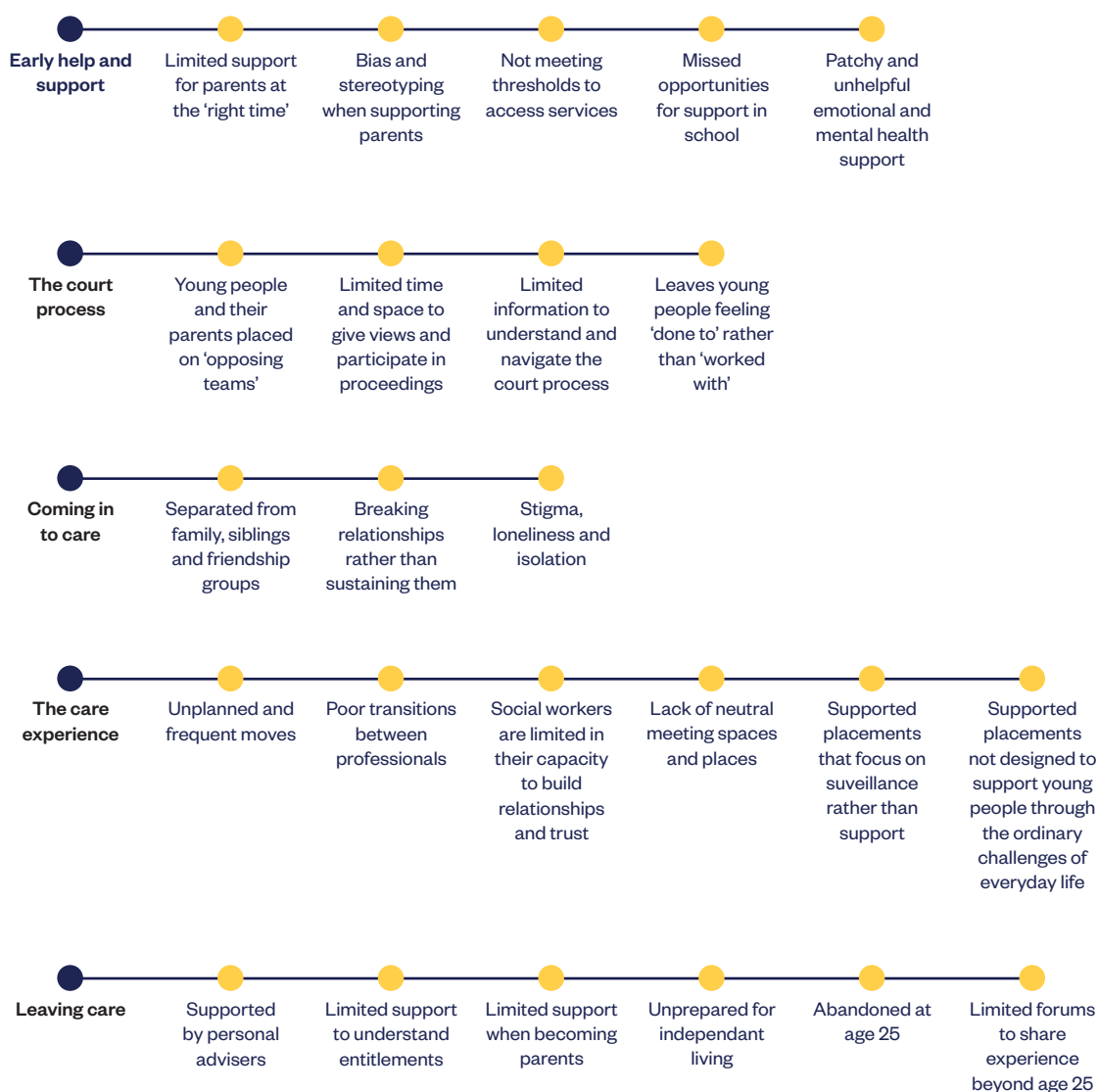
Through our conversations we sought to understand more about the support older children, young people and their families receive before and after coming into care. They told us how different systems work together, and how these systems and services could change in the future to better support those who are cared for and supported in their teenage years. The overall aim is to understand what a system that responds well to the strengths and needs of older children and their families would look like.

Key findings



Key issues on the journey of support

The care files: Exploring the experiences of teenagers entering the care system



Young people's wishes for the future

“This isn't just about social workers, key workers, foster carers, or care homes. This is about everyone involved in the system and beyond. If a young person doesn't get their needs met and isn't able to move on from their trauma, they then take that on through their whole lives, including with their own children. It then becomes a vicious, vicious cycle. It just goes round and round. Somewhere along the line, somebody is going to have to say; 'enough is enough' and make some serious changes. Because at the end of the day, it's not just this generation's lives that can be impacted by the system, it's the generations after.” (Young person, 19)

It is of concern that many of the things young people are asking for are not already happening in line with regulations or statutory guidance as a matter of course. That they have been raised in recent discussions suggests there is much more to be done to ensure practice is in line with guidance. Any future system that cares for older children and young people should ...

- 1. Support and enable young people to be actively involved in decisions being made about their care – and at the very least help them understand the reasons behind decisions.**

Even if young people do not agree with the decisions made about them in the care system, feeling heard is important for future well-being. They should be given information about their rights and options before each key transition toward adulthood. Good support should also be tailored and authentic, rather than general and formulaic to comply with guidelines. Young people should be asked their views privately and before decisions have been made – they should be communicated with as young adults and told the truth. This goes beyond being 'consulted' to becoming an active participant in the decision-making process. We heard that this is not happening for all young people.

All young people want to know who is making decisions about their care, and at the very least, be able to understand how any decisions have been reached – including decisions made in the family court. More information should be provided to young people about the role of the family court, and the different legal professionals involved, in order to help them navigate the court process.

Cafcass and children's social care should consider using shared digital systems to allow for a young person's voice, preferences and feedback to be relayed to judges in the family court over a longer period of time before proceedings, rather than solely relying on a short session with a social worker and children's guardian.

2. Trust young people to build relationships with the professionals in their lives.

Many of the young people involved in this project had supportive relationships with their key workers and social workers, and most appreciated the enormous emotional, time and capacity pressures they faced. However, even in these circumstances it was felt that these relationships were limited by the professional fear of creating dependency and relationships that in effect made a young person feel like a younger child who could not be trusted, and leading to a lack of engagement.

In a future system, young people should be trusted to build equal, consistent relationships. This does not mean a professional needs to be available on the phone every day, or to become the primary person in a young person's support network. Instead, the system should allow professionals to engage in a more rounded, equal relationship that is more appropriate for the young person's age. This might involve meeting in neutral spaces rather than local authority buildings, using accessible plain language when speaking about living arrangements and carers, and showing an interest in all aspects of the young person's life.

Professionals should give ample notice when they are due to leave a post or go on an extended period of leave. Transition and handover meetings should take place between the young person and both the current and new professional.

3. Provide young people with both care and support when approaching 18.

Most children in care are looked after in children's homes or by foster carers – but the number of children housed in supported (unregulated) accommodation is growing (Children's Commissioner's Office 2020). These are settings that are intended to support young people between care and independent, adult life.

High quality forms of supported accommodation can be a good option for some young people, when considered following a concerted assessment process that includes a consultation with each young person, and when regular monitoring is in place to ensure the arrangement is offering positive and caring experiences (Become 2021).

However, we heard that supported placements often do not provide the care and emotional support 16 and 17-year-olds need to ‘move on from [their] trauma’ when entering care later in childhood.¹ We also heard that they did not provide ‘support’ either, geared rather more towards surveillance than helping young people through the ordinary challenges of everyday life. Many young people questioned whether professionals were able, or willing, to offer guidance or assistance on issues they might have at school, or socially or financially when disruptive life events occurred.

4. Help young people maintain relationships with their families and communities.

We know that many young people will continue to have a relationship with their birth families even if their living arrangements while in care have been a positive experience. This is particularly true for young people who enter care as teenagers.

Young people must be supported to maintain connections with the networks they have built before coming into care – siblings, birth parent(s), extended kin relationships or members of the community. While in some instances ongoing contact and relationships with birth families may not be appropriate or desired, all young people must be supported to understand and address what ‘family’ means for them and given time and space to ensure those relationships are maintained.

A number of young people spoke passionately about one particular adult – usually a key worker, teacher or staff member in school or college – that supported them during their time in care. Where possible, these relationships should be nurtured and maintained, even when a young person moves between homes.

¹ Supported (unregulated) accommodation has recently been banned by the Department for Education for those under 16.

5. Encourage and support young people to understand their rights and entitlements upon leaving care.

Many of the young people valued the support given to them by their personal advisers, providing them with a stable, caring relationship after they had 'left care'. However, despite these positive relationships, some felt that finding out about rights and entitlements as a child in care or as a care leaver remained difficult.

Organisations such as Coram Voice are working to help young people understand their rights and entitlements, yet we heard many young people say that they struggle to navigate this complex maze. It was suggested that all young people should be offered time with their local authority's children, rights and participation officer (or equivalent) to understand their entitlements before they reach 16, 18 and 25.

Not all young people who leave care are entitled to the same support after the age of 18. Those who are placed with relatives under a special guardianship order are currently not entitled to the same support and entitlements as those who have spent time under a care order or who have been in foster or residential care. Those who have been supported after the age of 16 for less than 13 weeks also fall into a grey area when reaching the age of 18. The same duties should be extended to all care leavers.

6. Provide young people with the corporate parenthood they need to thrive beyond the age of 25.

If the state makes the decision to intervene in a young person's life and become their 'corporate parent', society has a responsibility to ensure that support continues beyond the age of 25 and well into adulthood. We have an ethical and moral responsibility to provide young people with flexible emotional, relationship and financial support in their communities throughout their adult lives.

7. Provide young people with the mechanisms to provide support to others and to have their voices heard beyond the age of 25.

Many of the young people who engaged in this project expressed feelings of frustration that the avenues available to them to discuss their experiences and offer support to younger children in care were severely limited. Most noted that their local children in care council placed an upper age limit on participation of 24 or 25.

Local authorities should provide regular forums and spaces for those over 25 to come together and engage with those currently in care and to share their insights, concerns and ideas about how the system can improve.

Next steps

This report and other materials created through this project represent the first step in a longer engagement with stakeholders at all levels of the child welfare system to explore different and innovative ways of supporting older children, teenagers and young people.² The project advisory group co-researchers will present the key themes from the project and discuss how the system can improve via a series of collaborative circles. These circles will feature representatives from legal and social work professions as well as other agencies that have an influence on the experience of older children and young people in care, such as the police, mental health practitioners, and those working in secondary and further education.

² See: <https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/our-work/young-people-family-justice>

Introduction

Adolescence is a unique stage of development that presents particular challenges for those responsible for older children and young people supported by the care system.² For social workers, parents and carers, managing increasingly complex relationships during this period, while striking a balance between promoting independence and offering protection, remains an ongoing challenge (Tunnard and Brown 2021).

We know the majority of teenagers continue to enter care as a result of voluntary arrangements under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 and Section 76 of the Social Services and Well-being Act (Wales) 2014 (Clarke and Penington 2021). However, recent research has shown the number and rate of older children and young people entering care proceedings in England and Wales under Section 31 of the Children Act 1989 has increased drastically since 2011/12 (Roe et al. 2021; Clarke and Penington 2021).

Through a series of reports and other engagement activities, Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) is bringing together existing and emerging evidence, combined with the insights of young people, parents and carers, professionals and other experts by experience, to identify ways to improve provision for those who are supported by the care system at an older age. While our focus begins with looking at the care system and children's social care, we also want to look more widely at other systems and services such as youth justice and support for separated migrant children.

We have been able to draw on the expertise of five advisory group co-researchers who have been involved in the project as active partners from the outset. They were central to the design, analysis and dissemination of the research.

² For a full description of the use of the term 'adolescence' in this programme of work see: Roe et al. 2021.

For the main consultation work, between June and November 2021, the Nuffield FJO project team engaged with 24 young people who are currently being supported, or who had previously been supported, by the care system across England and Wales between the ages of 10 and 17. The project engaged with young people who had moved in and out of the system from early childhood, as well as those who became new to the care system as teenagers. Most of the participants entered care after the age of 14 and remained in care up until the age of 18. A smaller number had been in care earlier in their childhoods but were back in family-based care on protection plans as teenagers (see the appendix for a more detailed breakdown).

We present the common themes and insights that emerged during our conversations, workshops and interviews, but we make no claims to speaking for all young people. Together, our reports and research aim to help build a better understanding of how older children experience different systems of support, to understand what is working well and what needs to change if systems and services are to respond well to the strengths and needs of older children, young people and their families.

Terminology and language

Looked-after children

Not all young people come into care via the courts or care proceedings. ‘Care’ can also be provided on a voluntary basis if the family or young person request it and it is in the child’s best interests. The terminology and language used to describe those who have been in care, both by professionals and by extension wider society, has long failed to reflect the preferences and wishes of children and young people themselves (TACT 2019; Jones et al. 2020).

Children and young people’s childhoods are often spoken of in a way that labels them, and that injures their right to be viewed like any other young person; to have a home, to have parents, and to have a right to be allowed to develop away from feeling under scrutiny (Goddard 2021, 27 April). This is often done without malice, but also without thought for the stigma and embarrassment it may cause. Terminology and acronyms used in both policy and professional contexts continue to serve as a potentially stigmatising label for young people in the care system and ‘may still exacerbate the labelling and othering process’ (Jones et al. 2020, p. 12).

“I’m coming from the perspective of someone who has been labelled as a ‘looked-after child’, as a ‘care leaver’, as an ‘ex-offender’, as someone with ‘mental health problems’. Labels can cause significant damage to a young person. Right now, I’m 25 years old and just a human being, yet I’m still defined by me being in care. It makes me think of that film Matilda, someone is basically saying ‘I’m big, you’re small.’”
(Young person, 25)

This report intends to focus on the experiences of young people who are or who have been ‘looked after’ as well as their perspectives and insights on the way support is provided. In a similar vein to Jones et al. (2020), we simply refer to them as ‘older children’ and ‘young people’ from this point onwards, though we make it clear when we are referring to young people who have not been in care.

Older children and young people

In this report we use the phrase ‘older children and young people’ to describe those who have taken part in the research. This is the preferred terminology of both the co-researchers and participants of the research who did not identify with the term ‘adolescents’, which is sometimes used to describe children of this age in other research.

Under the Children Act (1989) and UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, all children under the age of 18 are legally defined as ‘children’ and this affords them a particular set of rights and protections. We appreciate that using the term ‘young people’ may infer that this group are no longer children, and therefore do not need to be safeguarded and supported in the same way as their younger counterparts. However, this phrase was suggested by the co-researchers and participants as it identifies them as a distinct group supported by the care system. A group that need care and protection as children, but also the support to flourish as young adults.

What we did

Our research centred on a commitment to promoting the voices and insights of young people through active participation in its design, development, fieldwork and dissemination. A full description of the research process and participants can be found in the appendix.

Preparatory work

A young person's advisory group was established to work alongside the project team to shape the design and general approach to the research. The group – made up of young people aged 21–25 who had been involved in care proceedings and/or had come into care via voluntary arrangements in their teenage years – worked with the project team as co-researchers throughout the project. In total, five co-researchers were recruited. This number allowed for the fact that their personal circumstances might change or differ, and they might not all be equally involved at every stage (Rosen 2021). Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the group largely met online via Zoom.

“[This project] is not about us, without us. We must ensure that the stories are kept authentic by making sure we're involved in the process from start to finish.” (Young person, 23)

Most of the co-researchers had prior experience of research or consultation work, either when they were in care or just after. They designed the questions and activities for our meetings with young people and professionals in order to help us understand how the system responds to older children and young people, to tell us the things we should avoid, and to tell us what had worked well in past projects.

Data collection

For the main engagement work, the Nuffield FJO project team engaged with 24 older children and young people who are currently being supported, or who had previously been supported, by the care system across England and Wales between the ages of 10 and 17. The engagement work took place between June and November 2021. The young people had a wide range of experiences of the system, including living in foster care, residential homes and supported accommodation. Each of the six sessions focused on the key events that had taken place in a young person's life before, during and after they entered the care system. Participants were then encouraged to think about the support they had received and the people who had supported them, and how they would improve that in the future. The guidelines for the interviews and workshop discussions with young people are included in the report appendix (see 'Scope').

Young people who participated in the main consultation work were engaged via existing support groups. Each group session was facilitated by a member of the Nuffield FJO project team alongside support workers and advocates. Each one-to-one interview was carried out with a support worker also on the call or meeting. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, most workshops were conducted using Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

Support workers, social workers and other professionals were also present during the workshops. In some instances, they responded to the young people's perspectives with views as to why certain structures or processes were in place. We have also included these insights.

Analysis

The transcripts and written data from the groups were thematically analysed by the project team. A preliminary analysis of the findings was discussed with the advisory group co-researchers as well as the participants who took part in the main engagement. Both provided feedback on the emerging themes. This report draws on the analytical structure used by Sawhney (2021, 19 January) in work exploring the experienced of 'late entrants' to care in North London. We explore different segments of the typical journey into care: from early help and support to the court process and coming into care; and from the care experience to leaving care.

Many of the insights, concerns and recommendations for change raised by the young people involved in this study will not come as a surprise to practitioners working in and around the care system. Indeed, some of the suggestions for changes to practice have been proposed in other projects over the last decade (Care Inquiry 2013; Thomas 2018; Commission on Young Lives 2021), and in the last year, as a result of The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (see children's insights papers from Barnardo's 2021 and The Independent Review of Children's Social Care 2021).

This report aims to offer a different perspective in that it focuses specifically on the experiences of those who entered the care system later in childhood. Their needs are diverse and different to those of younger children – and the evidence suggests that there is a need to work with their strengths and to address their unique needs in the short window before adulthood (Field et al. 2018).

It is of concern that many of the things young people are asking for are not already happening in line with regulations or statutory guidance as a matter of course. That such issues have been raised in recent discussions suggests there is much more to be done to ensure that young people are supported – and cared for – in a way that they can take forward into their adult lives.

Early help and support

Effective parental support

We spoke with young people about what could have been done to help support them before they came into care – the things they would have kept, and the things they would have changed. Many focused on their parents, and the (lack of) support that they themselves had received. Though each story was unique, and this was not a position shared by all participants, many young people felt their parents were not bad people but were facing pressures at a particular moment that had made it hard for them to parent.

“My mum is not a bad person actually; she just couldn’t do what needed to be done at that particular time.”
(Young person, 19)

One young person, who had entered care due to long-term neglect, felt the current system did not adequately take into account the context and circumstances of a parent, including their financial situation, before demonising them.

“Most of the time they [professionals working in the system] actually don’t take into account all the things that can cause certain people to like parent the way they are. Where they’ve come from, the amount they’ve got to work, and how they understand their situation. How do we kind of not demonise these people? How do we take into consideration their experiences and also make decisions that still benefit the most important person in that situation, which is the young person?” (Young person, 24)

Young people often felt their parents had not been offered appropriate support by local authorities in the years and months before care proceedings had been issued or voluntary arrangements sought. Under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, local authorities and partners have the power to provide support, including accommodation and financial subsistence to families with 'children in need', even if they have no recourse to public funds.³ Despite this, many felt that the care system focused solely on protecting the young person, instead of also reducing pressures on parents and supporting them in times of struggle (see also Barnardo's 2021, where young people raised similar concerns).

“I don't know what the social workers' jobs are in that situation, but from a humanity point of view, if you can see that someone has certain needs or someone needs help and you're the person that has actually been asked to see them, you should try and do something about that. People in the system need to know that actually this isn't just someone that doesn't want to be a parent, this is someone that actually is having a difficult time at the moment.” (Young person, 24)

“The humanity of it kind of gets stripped away by it becoming a big legal process, as opposed to, what focusing on what the family needs and like stuff like that, as much as on paper, that's what they say is being done.” (Young person, 17)

Research has consistently highlighted the gap between the availability and provision of services for parents, including mental health and drug and alcohol support, and the expectations of social workers and children's services (Smith 2021).

3 Under s.10 and s.11 of the Children Act 2004, local authorities and partners have duties to promote the welfare of and safeguard children. This was passed to strengthen s.17 of the 1989 act and make it clearer that the duty is on other agencies too, including health, police and education.

Expectations, assumptions and bias

Throughout our discussions we frequently heard examples of stereotyping and unconscious bias. One young person felt that parents from certain ethnic groups were treated more harshly, investigated more quickly, and had their children taken into care more readily than others. They argued the standards were higher for parents from ethnic minorities, leading to them being demonised, where others would be offered support.

“Sometimes some things are ingrained like people don’t even know that these things are existing. This like racist bias, unconscious racist bias. I just feel like some parents are judged more harshly than others, and there might be a little bit more compassion for certain groups of parents that may be struggling a bit more as opposed to another group of parents.” (Young person, 24)

Others, on the other hand, felt that professionals had failed to act and intervene because of lower expectations placed on their parents. Another young person felt the level of neglect they experienced was seen by professionals as expected and perceived as normal and less harmful due to their parents’ ethnicity.

“You’ve got a 14-year-old looking after their parents, being a young carer. Some will look at this and think ‘This person is a great young person. They’re taking care of their parents’. But for young people in other cultures, it’s looked at as ‘This person is being neglected by their parents’. Their parent isn’t taking care of their needs, they’re taking care of their parents. Like, what’s the difference? From my experience the only things that I can say have made a difference is skin colour, race, or ethnicity. I’m seeing that certain groups are being demonised for certain behaviours.” (Young person, 24)

Previous research has suggested that professionals might dismiss certain behaviours or practices as being part of that community's culture and as a result not take the necessary protective action (NSPCC 2022). Some practitioners might worry about being perceived as culturally insensitive or racist if they raise concerns about children in Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities. This can also lead to them ignoring child protection concerns (Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse 2020; Barnard and Harris 2019).

Missed opportunities

We encouraged the young people we spoke with to look back on key people and places in their lives to help us understand where they had been cared for and supported at crucial moments.

While in school

On some occasions, the young people who were part of our study felt adults, especially those in school, failed to try and understand the reasons and drivers behind their disruptive behaviour and absences – with many simply seeing these actions as them 'acting out', as one young person put it.

“I do feel very strongly on the face of it that often they see your behaviour and not you as a young person. I don't know, stuff like shouting, lashing out, breaking things, or not coming back for a few days, but they don't see the reason behind it.”
(Young person, 19)

“If a kid is telling their mum, 'I need to see you three times a week or five times a week just so you know who I am' and the parent is saying, 'I've got to work, I've got to work'. Ok, that's fine. But people should actually try to understand when that kid is then smashing up things at school, because that kid is so angry at the world, because they actually don't get to be loved or care for by their parents.” (Young person, 21)

Recent data has shown that children who have been in care are over four times more likely to have had one or more suspension (formerly ‘fixed period exclusion’) from school compared to all pupils in 2019 (Department for Education 2021).

“One thing that really frustrates me is academies and schools that want to suspend and permanently exclude children. I absolutely get that they’re looking at it from the whole school perspective, and kind of the disruption and everything else that that leads to. But in terms of that individual child’s trajectory, once they’ve been permanently excluded from school their outcomes just get so much worse. And it’s something that potentially could be avoided if further support was put in. So when we talk about prevention or kind of intervention, you know, I think schools have got a massive role in terms of that as well.” (Support worker)

Echoing recent work by the Children’s Commissioner for England (Children’s Commissioner’s Office, 16 July 2020), young people suggested that teachers and other adults should always try to consider why young people were behaving poorly or not coming to lessons, appreciating that this may be their way of communicating that they were struggling and frustrated with things at home.

While receiving mental health and counselling support

Young people told us they had not received the emotional and mental health support that they needed, which could have offered vital support in the years and months before they were drawn into potentially risky circumstances – or as one young person described them, ‘bad places’. We heard about how difficult it is for those in care to access child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) because of the high threshold for referral (see also NSPCC Wales 2019). Many spoke about needing to have a mental health diagnosis or to be in ‘crisis’ before receiving support.

We also heard about the feelings of frustration when engaging with CAMHS support, largely due to the standardised, impersonal approach and frequent changes in mental health practitioner between sessions.

“I’ve also had an experience with CAMHS in a couple of different counties and boroughs and they were difficult to work with as a young person in crisis. They speak to you in jargon, which makes it really difficult to engage. Your worker changes nearly every session which you spend half your session going over things you’ve spoken about before. You come out feeling frustrated.” (Young person, 17)

“It’s a real cookie cutter approach. You go through this thing of being referred, discharged, referred again without thinking about how traumatising that is for you. You miss a session and you’re put to the back of the queue again. The offer is so standardised, it doesn’t feel flexible or tailored at all.” (Young person, 16)

Young people recalled that they felt alienated by the terminology and jargon used as part of CAMHS assessments and therapy options. This contributed to a feeling that CAMHS was too ‘clinical’ to be helpful in supporting them through issues before they escalated.

“I had CAMHS when I was a bit younger. I mean it was ok, it didn’t feel like it helped enough to me. It was like I think called ‘DBT’? It wasn’t very helpful to me, didn’t click.” (Young person, 15)

“It all feels too clinical, it doesn’t make you want to open up at all.” (Young person, 14)

The court process

A court system that places young people and their parents on ‘opposing teams’

We spoke to several young people who, despite recognising that their parents were struggling to look after them and wanted to go into care, felt the adversarial nature of care proceedings – being on ‘opposing teams’ – contributed to further breakdown in their relationships with their parent(s). They often felt that the court process was more concerned with establishing why that person was unfit to be a parent, rather than the benefits to the young person and their siblings of living elsewhere for a while.

“I felt like I understood the benefits or like the way that we would benefit from actually going into care and being with foster carers and stuff. So it was a bit difficult to kind of be in the court when we would go together, but we would kind of be on opposing teams or on opposing sides. It was really difficult to listen to some the stuff that was being said. I know that was one of the things that contributed to the breakdown in the relationship between me and my mum.” (Young person, 25)

The adversarial approach used in the family court can be bruising for social workers, stressful for parents, and challenging for young people who want to maintain relationships with their parents after proceedings (Welbourne 2016). In care proceedings this means that each party presents their case to a judge, who makes a decision on what is in the child’s best interests based on the evidence. The young people we spoke with did not come to any firm conclusions as to what an alternative court system might look like as part of our discussions. Many argued that, where safe, maintaining a positive relationship between the young person and parent should be central, given that many young people will continue to have a relationship with their parents after proceedings.

“I think a lot of the time when parents are demonised, you’re essentially telling a young person this person is bad, you know. How do we present to them that actually this person is unable to do what they need to do for you right now?”
(Young person, 24)

A court system that is both unclear and confusing

The majority of young people who had been through care proceedings expressed feelings of confusion when discussing specific parts of the court process and the role of legal professionals. Most felt that they had not been provided with sufficient information to navigate and understand court proceedings, instead recalling that they were only told when their cases had started and when they were due to end.

“You’re not even informed of the decisions, they’re already made.” (Young person, 17)

Others had searched the internet to find out more about what care proceedings entailed, and what the process meant for them.

“I feel like a lot of young people don’t really understand what’s going on [in proceedings] but I made a point to kind of be clued up about what’s going on.” (Young person, 24)

Some of the young people had made a concerted effort to attend the proceedings but remained unsure about whether the legal professional who was supporting their parent in court had the power or right to challenge the local authority perspective or findings.

“In my experience with the lawyers that we had, I just felt like he was not supportive of my mum at all. He was just like, ‘Sign the papers, don’t object to anything, just do everything that they say’ and I was thinking at a time. I was just thinking, ‘You should be trying to help this woman to fight for her kids and even try to support her and help her realise what she needs to do.’”
(Young person, 24)

There was a general consensus across all the groups that information should be given to all young people in an accessible format before proceedings begin on how the court process works and the role of lawyers (acting for parents and children) as well as court guardians.

Limited participation

A prerequisite for justice is that all those involved can fully participate in the process. Yet children and young people reported that court proceedings are often difficult to navigate and that they do not feel listened to or understood. While children are parties in care proceedings and have representation from lawyers and guardians, ensuring they have felt that they have a voice in proceedings is complex and requires additional support from skilled professionals and advocates.

Many of the young people who took part in this project highlighted that their experience with court-appointed guardians had been a good one, noting they had given them an opportunity to express their concerns.

“I felt supported by my guardian [...], I felt supported by her.”
(Young person, 16)

“I think the one thing that I would say was she [the Cafcass guardian] actually like, listened to me, like I could speak to her and I would tell her, ‘I don't want this, or I don't want this.’”
(Young person, 15)

Others felt that the limited time they were given to speak to both social workers and Cafcass guardians before proceedings started meant that their stories and preferences were often distorted.

“A lot of young people's and children's voices are taken away when it comes to the court as kind of like they're the adults they know best.” (Young person, 17)

“You'd start to explain something and the first thing that is said that the person [Cafcass guardian] builds an entire story based on that one sentence, instead of actually waiting to hear how everything goes along.” (Young person, 24)

One young person described their story as a fragile piece of glass that gets knocked and broken by the professionals they share it with.

“There’s a very big misunderstanding between the professionals working with the families who have to relay the messages for the families and on behalf of the families. Because these people that are basically delivering this message, they’re carrying a very fragile piece of glass. And most of these members of staff, they just bumped it into everything. They knock it, they change it. That is someone’s life. That’s a future. That is our future basically.”
(Young person, 25)

This was a view shared by a number of support workers who took part in the group sessions. One social worker felt that the time allocated to Cafcass to work with young people, to understand their views and preferences, was too short considering the emotional upheaval they will have recently been through.

“They [Cafcass] often forget that these older ones are actually in fight or flight mode at the time they’re going through proceedings. They need to spend more time trying to build that relationship because at that point they’re absolutely scared out of their wits. The courts want it all done there and then, but it’s about investing that time.” (Social worker)

“I think that it says a lot that not one of the young people that we’ve had speaking today remembers having a conversation with a court guardian. Even the ones who went through the court only a couple of years ago. So even though we assume it did happen, it obviously wasn’t a very meaningful interaction.”
(Family support worker)

There was strong agreement from most young people that there should be greater opportunities for judges and legal professionals to hear the voices of older children and young people during proceedings beyond the Cafcass guardian’s report. However, a number cautioned against forcing young people to be present for proceedings. Instead there was enthusiasm for a digital or app-based method of expressing preferences and concerns over a longer period of time before proceedings.

A court system that leaves young people feeling ‘done to’ rather than ‘worked with’

When discussing the court process, a number of young people recalled feeling both anonymous and insignificant as proceedings continued. Echoing findings from Camden Council (2019) and Sawhney (2021, 19 January), the paperwork and bureaucracy involved in proceedings left many young people often feeling ‘done to’ rather than ‘worked with’. Prior research has highlighted that this is also often the experience of their parents (Camden Council 2019).

“Like you are just like a case, and you are one of a thousand. You’re a number on a piece of paper that your feelings aren’t really taken into account. They just see the case and they see what needs to be done and what boxes need to be ticked. You’re no longer a person. You’re not even a number. You’re a piece of paper and I think that’s the hardest part.”
(Young person, 16)

“Once it gets to court for a lot of people, they kind of don’t know how to approach it, it’s like, ‘Ah it’s court’, like it becomes a lot, you almost looking at it as if it’s like, you’re not dealing with a family or you’re not dealing with people. You’re just literally looking at a file and this needs to be done.” (Young person, 19)

A number of young people felt that Cafcass guardians should engage with them and their other key workers following proceedings, as well as before, to explain the decision the court has come to, and why a particular order was given.

Coming into care

Separation and isolation

From existing community and family networks

The networks of older children and young people who enter care as teenagers may not be as well known to professionals as those who come into care earlier. However, these links to professionals, friends and members of the local community can often provide meaningful support (Sawhney 2021, 19 January). We spoke with several young people who had been moved out of the areas they had grown up in. Many expressed sadness that connections to their friends and community had not been sustained after moving into care.

“I had a lot of people I was really close with, but because I got moved to this place, I lost touch with all of them. I don’t even see them anymore.” (Young person, 16)

“I felt like I had all these friends at home, so why did I need to try [to make friends] if I was only going to be here for a few months. But then you realise you’re not going home. Yeah, it still is really lonely.” (Young person, 17)

Despite a duty on local authorities to provide accommodation for young people ‘within the local authority’s area’ unless this is ‘not reasonably practicable’ (Children Act 1989), limited availability of suitable homes means that this often does not happen (Children’s Commissioner’s Office 2019).

In 2019, the Children’s Commissioner for England estimated there were over 30,000 looked-after children living ‘out of area’ in England. This is around 41% of all children in care and has risen by 13% since 2014. Over 11,000 of these children are more than 20 miles from what they would call home, and over 2,000 are further than a hundred miles away (Children’s Commissioner’s Office 2019).

This happens for a number of reasons. Sometimes it is to manage crisis and facilitate an immediate de-escalation of risk, rather than considering what is best for the young person (Roe 2022; Firmin et al. 2019). In most cases, however, it is simply because there is nowhere suitable for them to live locally (Roe 2022; Children’s Commissioner’s Office 2019).

From siblings

Young people spoke about the importance of their roles as the protective older brother or sister and expressed feelings of deep sadness that this part of their identity was stripped once they were separated from their siblings.

“We came into care at the same time and like I didn’t know my younger brother was going up for adoption ‘til a month before the court hearing. Considering he’s our baby brother, that really messed with my mental health.” (Young person, 14)

“My younger brother and sister have both been adopted for six years now, and they can’t tell you anything because they’re adopted. I just wanted to know they were being adopted – we just had our last contact and didn’t ever see him again.” (Young person, 15)

Many older children and young people enter care with their younger siblings. Some are placed together, and this is often the preference of the young people as it maintains some tight familial bonds. In a number of cases, however, siblings are placed in homes separately temporarily (living in different foster homes or children’s homes) while others are permanently separated through adoption (Ashley and Roth 2015). More than 12,000 children and young people in care were not living with at least one of their siblings in 2020 (Kenyon and Forde 2020).

Statutory guidance says that every effort should be made to keep siblings who have been separated while in care in contact with each other.⁴ But, in practice, these arrangements can slip because of shortages of time and resources (Monk and Macvarish 2018). Older siblings tend to lose out when decisions are made. There is a lack of consistency in response to those who are considered to have taken on an ‘inappropriate’ caring role for their younger siblings (Monk and Macvarish 2018).

4 The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 places a duty on local authorities, so far as reasonably practicable, to place siblings together.

In reality, the number of carers able to receive multiple siblings into their homes will always be limited – and siblings do not always come into care at the same time. It is not unusual for one sibling to be in care but not another. We must, however, accept that too many siblings live apart. It is up to those working in the system to create the conditions where sibling relationships can be maintained, even when children are apart.

Maintaining relationships

A number of young people told us they moved back in with their birth families as young adults, with some taking on caring responsibilities when they returned home. Others struggled to establish a relationship with their parents in the immediate months after leaving care, citing the emotional impact of being told their mum, dad or other adult was a ‘bad parent’. In all cases, it is clear that these relationships continue to shape their lives.

“With my mum, I’ve had to kind of be like, ‘You know what, even as a parent, there’s certain things that this this person might not be able to do for me’. But that took a long time. I never got supported to think about ‘How do I manage my own expectations and manage my life and still have a relationship with this person even when they are unable to do the things that are expected of them?’” (Young person, 24)

We do not think enough about what permanence and stability mean, or could mean, for those who enter the care system as teenagers (Care Inquiry 2013; Boddy 2013). Clearly supply issues mean that many young people will have to be moved out of their home areas. When this occurs, the system needs to build (and provide funding) in ways that support a young person’s ability to sustain previous relationships wherever possible.

We know that many young people will continue to have a relationship with their birth families even if their time in care proved a positive experience. Approaches such as No Wrong Door and Lifelong Links are working to ensure these relationships are maintained in line with the young person’s wishes

and best interests.⁵⁶ Both approaches aim to work with and build on the relationships that exist for a young person as well as focusing on the future – thinking about the adult that teenagers will become (What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care 2021; Family Rights Group 2021).

Limited participation in decisions

Despite legal duties to ascertain the wishes and feelings of young people in decision making (Department for Education and Skills 2010), a small number of young people felt their social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) had not tended to meaningfully listen and take on board their views. One young person described how their preferences were disregarded after being consulted about their future care.

“So, I remember yeah they actually asked who I wanted to live with. I didn’t want to live with my dad, I didn’t know my dad. I wanted to stay with the foster family I was with at first. But they said, ‘He’s got your last name, so we think it’s best if you live with him’. It’s like, why even ask?” (Young person, 15)

One young person noted they had to ‘jump through hoops’ to have their voice heard in decision making and have their needs met.

“Not only are these children taken away from childhoods, but they’re forced into a system and a service that forces them to jump through hoops to get something done when they shouldn’t need to meet these standards. They are already under the service. They meet their standards and requirements to be cared for and to be loved and to have their needs met.” (Young person, 23)

- 5 The No Wrong Door initiative involves the creation of hubs that bring together an integrated range of accommodation options, services and outreach to support young people aged 12–25 who are in care or on the edge of care, at risk of family or placement breakdown, stepping down from residential care to family-based care, or transitioning to independent living (What Works for Children’s Social Care 2021).
- 6 Lifelong Links aims to ensure that a child in care has a positive support network around them to help them during their time in care and in adulthood. An independent Lifelong Links coordinator works with a child in care to find out who is important to them, who they would like to be back in touch with, and who they would like to know. The coordinator searches for these people, using a variety of tools and techniques. They then bring the network together at the Lifelong Links family group conference to make a plan with and for the child, which the local authority supports to ensure these relationships continue to grow (Family Rights Group 2021).

This echoes previous research that suggests that young people are more likely to participate and feel engaged in the planning process when they feel that their worker knows and understands their personal needs (Ofsted 2022). When asked how they would improve current practice, a number of young people felt that social work training and inductions should always include young people who have been supported by the system.

“I’ve been involved in lectures to social work students in the second year of their Masters and I was given time to deliver a presentation to these students to make them aware of the realistic side of things. The way to properly engage with a young person, how to connect to them on a personal level. The feedback I’ve been given has been that it’s more effective than their entire time at university.” (Young person, 25)

Young people noted they felt the professionals in their lives had not always recognised the need to explain certain decisions or processes properly, instead using confusing jargon and terminology. If the role of the social worker was not then made clear, this would often impact a young person’s engagement with them.

“Whether it be the higher ups in social services or the people at the bottom, we need more in terms of transparency. I mean like having a bit of trust and being honest with the young person, fully explaining what’s going on and what’s happening and not just chuck all this unnecessary jargon at them that they don’t understand, which obviously we can get confused and stressed.” (Young person, 18)

Complaints and advocacy

A number of young people engaged in the project felt unhappy with the service they had received from their local authorities when thinking about making a complaint, or once a complaint had been made. One young person recalled having to meet with the professional they were making a complaint about.

“I’d say there’s a massive issue with the complaint system within the social service. Because for a young person to go through a complaint against one of their workers it’s not simple. You make the complaint. You’ve then got to have a meeting with the person you’re complaining against with someone else.” (Young person, 25)

Echoing recent findings from Diaz et al. (2020), young people expressed continued dismay and frustration about complaints not being taken seriously and managed at the lowest possible level. One young person highlighted that many children in care often have to make a decision between expediency and advocacy, raising questions about the availability of advocates and advocacy services.

“If you want to get an advocate involved it takes longer. If you want it to be efficient, then you go through the procedure without the advocate, and then at the end of it, you go through about 100 emails to get an apology and no actual changes made, no actions delivered, nothing.” (Young person, 19)

Despite the introduction of guidelines and procedures aimed at encouraging and supporting children and young people to complain about the services they receive, many still face barriers to doing so in practice (Pithouse and Crowley 2007; Barnes 2009; Diaz et al. 2020). While making a complaint should be easier for children now that advocacy services are available and there is legislation and policy in place, it is also well established that many children in care feel unhappy with the service they receive. According to recent estimates, the number of complaints registered by children in care remains very low (Diaz et al. 2020).

Stigma and isolation

Previous research has highlighted school as the area where young people feel the most stigma and embarrassment about their status as ‘looked-after children’ (Mannay et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2020). We heard about the fear young people felt when first going back to school or college after they had been moved out of their homes. One young person described feeling unprepared for the questions posed by peers at school regarding their living arrangements.

“I remember going in to school after everyone had found out I wasn’t living with my mum anymore. Most of it wasn’t nasty or anything [...] they just kept asking me stuff all the time and I didn’t know what to say [...] yeah, I was embarrassed.”
(Young person, 17)

Bullying and harassment around care status was also very much seen as the norm, even for those who entered care later in their teenage years. There was a feeling of acceptance among most, if not all, of the young people we engaged with. Bullying was seen as something they could not fight against and had to live with (echoing findings from Jones et al. 2020).

“It just happens really. I became a bit of a teacher’s pet as they kept asking me about my ‘placement’ when people were leaving the class, that’s when it [the bullying] got much, much worse.” (Young person, 15)

“So as soon as people saw me getting upset when they were talking about me not living with my parents anymore that’s when the bullying properly started, and hasn’t stopped since to be honest.” (Young person, 14)

As we noted earlier in this chapter, when young people come into care as teenagers they will often be placed in homes outside of their local areas. Several young people recalled being openly judged and branded as being ‘trouble’ or engaged in criminal behaviour simply because they were living in a particular children’s home or supported accommodation.

“You just feel it you know. People think you’re trouble.”
(Young person, 20)

One young person explained how suspicion and blame from members of the local community resulted in them becoming socially isolated and lonely.

“I could tell as soon as I moved there. I’d go to the Londis and people would already know where you lived and start following you round thinking you were nicking. It just puts you off going anywhere.” (Young person, 19)

Many of the young people involved in the project struggled to identify what they or those working in the care system could do to rectify and challenge these prejudices.

The care experience

Stability

Breakdowns in living arrangements and relationships with carers were a common theme throughout our discussions. Many of the young people we spoke to had experienced a number of moves throughout their short time in care.

“I had moved 30 times before the age of 25. That alone just shows the lacking stability. The lacking support. The lacking provision. If social services were efficient and effective and work like they were supposed to when they were created in the first place, no care leaver would need support after leaving care because they would have been set up to win. They wouldn't have been set up to fail.” (Young person, 25)

Several young people described the emotional and logistical upheaval and disruption caused by moving home.

“The one thing I would say is they should never move you before your GCSEs. Once you mess them up, that's it. It's like how can I work and focus if I've got to do all that [move home] again.” (Young person, 17)

Breakdowns in living arrangements are more common as children get older (Children's Commissioner's Office 2019). As young people move through their teenage years and begin new relationships, they can push boundaries, which in some cases can be difficult for their carers. It can be seen as easier to remove them from their foster homes and give them a 'fresh start', rather than supporting them and their foster carers to work to keep the home and relationship stable (Become 2021).

In some cases, circumstances may mean that it is important that a young person moves to a different home. Their current home may not be meeting their needs, or concerns about their safety or well-being may mean they need to move out of their local area. Echoing previous research, in all circumstances, young people wanted well-planned, gradual moves that they were involved in and informed about throughout (Care Inquiry 2013). They then wanted to have someone who would check if they were settling in.

Uncertainty

Lack of certainty and stability was identified as a significant issue for those who had experienced living in supported (unregulated) accommodation at 16 and 17. One young person, who had entered care because of exploitation risks in their local community, explained how they were moved out of their home without warning.

“When I got moved back in May again, I didn’t get told anything. They turn up and say, ‘You’re not allowed to live here anymore, you’re going somewhere else’. It was an emergency thing, turned up in the middle of the night and there’s two police officers with her.” (Young person, 17)

This was particularly so for young people who entered the system as separated migrants. Despite mentioning how grateful and thankful they were for the support they received, feelings of uncertainty and loneliness were frequently highlighted.

“I got moved to a hostel. At first the lady [social worker] was always coming by to ask me how I was doing [...] once she left it got really hard. I didn’t know where I was supposed to go, who I could speak to [...] I felt really lonely, yeah.” (Young person, 19)

Surveillance rather than support

When in supported accommodation

Other young people noted that the metrics used to measure the effectiveness of supported (unregulated) accommodation forced professionals to focus on surveillance rather than support.

Most older children who come into care at 16 and 17, or remain in care until they reach 18, enter a part of the care system battling an internal tension. A tension that centres on whether these children should be provided with ‘care’ or ‘support’ to live independently (Children’s Commissioner’s Office 2020). In recent years debate has centred on the provision of supported (unregulated) accommodation.⁷

Unregulated accommodation, often known as supported accommodation for those over 16, is not inspected by a regulator in England or Wales. While these placements have recently been banned for children under 16 in care, they are allowed for those aged 16 and 17 because they are qualified to offer support not care, and young people housed there live semi-independently with a key worker for help.

“They place you in these accommodations, and you’re meant to learn a lot of independent living skills, that’s what you’re meant to learn during those times. So sometimes you could be in a supported combination that could be like a unit where you’ve got three members of staff, checking in on you once every 8 hours. But they don’t actively get involved with what the young people are doing, they actually just sit there and monitor what the young person is doing.” (Young person, 25)

We heard frequently that supported (unregulated) placements were not designed to support young people through the ordinary challenges of everyday life (see also work by Boddy 2013). Many questioned whether professionals were able, or willing, to offer guidance and assistance as well as advice on financial matters when disruptive life events occurred.

⁷ Some establishments that provide accommodation to looked-after children do not meet the criteria of a children’s home and are thus not required to register with Ofsted. These fall into the category of ‘other arrangements’ under s. 22C of the Children Act 1989 and under the Care Planning, Placement and Review (England) Regulations 2010.

This has been reflected in recent research by Pierre (2021). Drawing on her own experiences of living in such settings, Pierre argues that unregulated placements can result in ‘unique disadvantages’ for those living in them. These include sustained periods of isolation and harm, inadequate conditions and support, and increased risk of poor social mobility and criminal and child exploitation.

The Department for Education claims that the use of this sort of accommodation for 16 and 17-year-olds is a helpful step towards independence, but the evidence suggests that those seeking asylum and those who have only recently come into care typically need more rather than less support to manage this transition to independence (Children’s Commissioner for England 2019). Local authorities have reported that they have nowhere else to put those most at risk owing to the growing number of young people coming into care and the increased pressure on the availability of appropriate accommodation and placements (Local Government Association 2021).

When caring for their own children

A small number of participants had become parents while in care or shortly afterwards. Historical data has estimated that children who have been in care are up to three times more likely to have children in their teenage years (Centre for Social Justice 2015). Most young people we engaged with were aware of the intergenerational trends and the high proportion of care-experienced young people that end up having their children removed from their care.⁸

“If a young person doesn’t get their needs met and isn’t able to move on from their trauma, they then take that on through their whole lives, including with their own children. It then becomes a vicious, vicious cycle. It just goes round and round.”
(Young person, 19)

One young person described the challenges of feeling judged, stereotyped, and scrutinised by professionals due to their care status and teenage parent status (see also Maxwell et al. 2011; Broadhurst et al. 2017). There was a common feeling that social workers do not become more involved during early parenthood unless they have concerns over child protection, and most young people would not immediately ask for help from the local authority out of fear that their children would be taken into care (see also Broadhurst et al. 2017).

8 Broadhurst et al. (2017) found a high number of women who repeatedly appear before family courts and lose many children into public care or adoption have themselves been in care.

“You just feel they’re waiting for you to slip up – like it’s pre-destined or something.” (Young person, 21)

Despite these feelings of suspicion and surveillance, all felt determined to break the ‘care cycle’. Many felt a need to demonstrate that they were different from their own parents – not only to themselves but to professionals who they feared would remove their children from their care.

“For me with my own children, they would always be taught about the real world and the practicalities of life, not just, ‘You can figure it out.’” (Young person, 19)

Relationships

Balancing support with dependency

Relationships of any kind are fluid. Social workers are working with human beings and everything they bring – history, emotions, previous attachments. Within social work practice and guidance there have been longstanding tensions between providing relationship-based support and being wary of encouraging ‘dependency’. Training materials often stress the importance of maintaining professional boundaries while building and working on relationships with young people (Ingram and Smith 2018). Several young people felt their social workers were limited in their capacity to build collaborative relationships and trust, with many too focused on maintaining professional boundaries.

“We have no connection. I’m just a young person or a case in your eyes, but it might not be the way it is, but that’s how we see it.” (Young person, 16)

“So, if I’ve got a social worker, ‘Dave’. I don’t actually know Dave. Dave isn’t allowed to let me know Dave. The way they interact is to protect themselves and keep themselves secure. That’s all I know, Dave and his surname.” (Young person, 25)

Barriers to making relationships

Young people and professionals also spoke of the importance of relationships and what ‘good practice’ looks like. They emphasised the importance of practical support, listening to people’s views and trying to action them, being respectful and honest, displaying acts of kindness, and treating people as individuals (echoing findings by Featherstone et al. 2018). Most, if not all, wanted a support worker who was interested in them as people and spent time getting to know them.

They were not asking or requesting their worker to be available on the phone every day, or to become their primary person in their support network. Instead, they simply wanted a more rounded, equal relationship that was more appropriate for their age.

“You’re sat with someone [social worker] who has a whole case file about you, in front of you, and you’re barely allowed to know their details or their information. And I get it, it’s understandable due to safeguarding and risk assessment. But on a relational level, if you want me to relate to you and you want to connect with me, you need to give me something to relate to. You need to actually throw something out there that I could latch on to.” (Young person, 19)

“There’s so much that they’re [professionals] not allowed to reveal when they’re not allowed to say, especially within their personal circumstances, that they are not themselves when they are in their job. They’re not themselves. The people that we are working with.” (Young person, 24)

Some young people spoke in glowing terms about the low-level support provided by targeted youth support teams, often in comparison to the support they had received from other key workers in the past.

“She hears my problems and helps me in a non-judgy way. I’m not constantly getting asked questions, or feel like what I’ve said is going to be used against me.” (Young person, 17)

Transitions

Young people continue to experience multiple transitions between key workers during their time in care or when they are supported on a child protection plan (see The Independent Review of Children's Social Care 2021; Barnardo's 2021). Almost all young people involved in this project noted they had experienced an abrupt ending to their relationships with professionals, contributing to feelings of abandonment and rejection.

“Well, I can't tell you how many times I changed social workers. I don't think they realise the impact they have on a young person like right now to this day. I've got separation anxiety because of changing social workers so many times building a relationship for them to leave.” (Young person, 21)

“Then all of a sudden I get this new person and I haven't even been told that my social worker's left. They just leave and then I've got this new one and then I'm like, 'Oh alright, ok, why wasn't I informed that my social worker was leaving?' and it's just, it's so damaging to a young person.” (Young person, 17)

The young people we spoke to understood that people leave their jobs and were sympathetic to the pressures social care professionals faced.

“You just feel they're so so busy. You're probably one of a hundred kids they're responsible for and you can understand why they feel like they always leave.” (Young person, 19)

However, there was general consensus across the groups that social workers should give ample notice when they are due to leave a post or go on an extended period of leave. Transition and handover meetings should take place with the young person, and both the incoming and outgoing professional. This was a view shared by the professionals involved in these discussions, with some suggesting that 'endings' are often overlooked within practice, often due to time pressures and transient workforce.

“Because of the time pressures we really don't consider 'endings' as much as we probably should. I still feel there's a real lack of training on this in general.” (Social worker)

“If you’re lucky, you’ll be able to introduce the next worker, which really helps the young person be part of the planning. But most of the time it might be a short-term member of staff or a cover person, which makes it harder.” (Social worker)

One social worker described the many different types of professional that can be involved in a young person’s life when they enter care as a teenager. The short-term nature of these interventions can often be both confusing and overwhelming for the young person.

“So, I was in an allocations meeting yesterday and we were talking about a young person who who’s being criminally exploited, involved in gangs and going missing and the school are about to say goodbye forever. There’s a social worker, there’s somebody doing a section 40, there’s the YOS [youth offending service] team, and we were just reflecting a little bit on what that’s like for that young person. And actually, that they may well be thinking, ‘Who on earth are all these people?’” (Social worker)

Repetition and trauma

We heard about feelings of anger and frustration at the number of times young people had to re-tell their stories as they moved through different systems of support or as they began working with new and different professionals. Many felt that it seemed as though new workers had not read their files before meeting with them, leading to feelings of frustration and distrust.

“You walk into a meeting with new workers and half that time is spent talking about things you’ve spoken about before. It’s so, yeah, frustrating.” (Young person, 16)

“I come away thinking, ‘You couldn’t even be bothered to read my file, why should I be bothered to tell you anything?’” (Young person, 15)

Upon hearing these concerns, a professional involved in the session explained that professionals would often ask questions they may already know the answers to in the hope of breaking any tension between the professional and the young person.

“I know that a lot of people I work with will ask where a young person went to school, or where they grew up, even if they know the answers to those questions, just to help break the ice. But I can see how that might be a bit frustrating.” (Youth offending team worker)

Neutral spaces and places

Both the young people and professionals who engaged in this project commented on the importance of meeting in neutral spaces, where they could feel comfortable and on an equal footing.

“It’s about having a mutual space for like mutual respect. You go somewhere where you feel equal. Where you don’t feel like you’re being judged [...]. You just feel relaxed. There’s no association between your problems and where you go to talk about them. I’ve had to go into offices and council buildings before to meet my social worker, and they just left me feeling cold.” (Young person, 19)

A support worker who was present in one of the workshops also called into question the suitability of council spaces for building trust between workers and young people – but added it was sometimes necessary to minimise the risk of running into people in the community.

“I just want to cut in there. I completely agree, our meeting and office spaces are, I don’t know how to say it, sterile maybe. Other places are very busy. I can definitely see how it would feel overwhelming for a young person. I would just say that for some young people, especially our YOS young people, the risk of meeting in the community is quite high, for the young person and the worker. So we’re a bit more limited.” (Social worker)

Relationship building in children's social care is in part achieved by social workers and family support workers creating positive spaces for young people and their parents and carers, by immersing themselves in their lives and the routines of the family (Ferguson et al. 2020). For young people too, the spaces where they meet and talk with professionals is often key for initial and long-term engagement (Ferguson et al. 2016).

Leaving care

Supported by personal advisers

When a young person leaves care at 18, a local authority must appoint a personal adviser (PA) to help them plan for their future. Many of the young people we spoke to valued the support given to them by their PAs, saying that they had provided a stable, lasting relationship after they had 'left care'.

"I'm quite lucky, I have a PA and she's lovely. She walked through the door when I was just about to leave care and she went, 'I'll be here for you' and I laughed at her and went, 'Yeah, yeah, whatever. You'll be gone within six months.' And you know, she's still here." (Young person, 19)

We heard that having time to meet and get to know a PA was vital in building trust and creating an equal relationship. Knowing who you can rely on and reach out to helps in creating a gradual, supported transition to adult life. However, as recent research by Ofsted (2022) has highlighted, many care leavers do not meet their PAs until they are 18 or older. This is despite statutory guidance requiring that young people should be introduced to their PAs from age 16.

Support to understand rights and entitlements

The length of time a young person has been in care, their age on entry and their legal care status will determine their rights and entitlements on leaving the system at 18.⁹ Despite the positive relationships many young people had with their PAs, finding out about rights and entitlements as a child in care or care leaver remains difficult (this is echoed in work by Ofsted 2022). Some felt their PA was not up to date with the latest guidance and legislation on entitlements for care leavers.

“The PAs are great but they don’t know as much as they should. If they [young people currently in care] are lucky they’ll have spoken to the children, rights, and participation officer in the authority. But realistically they can’t speak to everyone. There’s usually only one of them, and you’ve got hundreds of kids needing to know.” (Young person, 23)

Many young people who were being prepared to leave care (aged 16 and above) were unclear on the support they could expect when leaving care at 18. A number noted they were yet to meet their future PA and had limited knowledge of what their PA could offer.

“It might have been explained to me ages ago [what would happen next] but I can’t remember it.” (Young person, 16)

“I think I get a ‘PA’, is that it? [Facilitator: ‘Can you remember who they are and what they can do?’] Um, no not really.” (Young person, 16)

⁹ Since 2014, local authorities have also been required to provide financial support to enable young people in foster care to remain living with their former foster families to age 21 in a ‘staying put’ arrangement. Local authorities must also publish a ‘local offer’ for care leavers, which sets out their legal entitlements, as well as any discretionary support the authority provides.

This was particularly pronounced for young people who had come into care after the age of 16, where it was less clear as to whether they would meet the leaving care criteria as a 'relevant' young person. One young person described themselves as 'lucky' for receiving support from the local authority.

“So, I think I was yeah [lucky]. I’ve been to a few of these meetings [young person forums] and I speak to people who had the same story as me.” (Young person, 21)

There was strong agreement that any information about what a young person can expect in terms of support should be repeated multiple times. For those looking back, they wished that someone had reminded them of what they were entitled to in different ways and at different points in their short time in care. The impact of trauma and disruption means young people might not always understand or remember what they are being told the first or even second time (Sawhney 2021, 19 January).

“That’s it. You’ve got to be meeting the 16-year-olds once, twice, three times a year before they leave care to understand their rights and entitlements. That way they’ll be able to go to their PA and know exactly what they’re entitled to.” (Young person, 25)

Support for independent living

Concepts of independence and living alone are particularly relevant for those who enter care as older children and teenagers (Stein 2012). Young people who are able to access 'staying put' arrangements are effectively able to receive care and support from their foster families until the age of 21. But for thousands of young people living in unregulated (supported) accommodation, 'care' ends at 16.

Managing money and paying bills

Almost overnight, young people experience an abrupt shift from professional control over everyday decisions to suddenly being responsible for managing their own money. While some young people had a good experience when leaving care, it was clear that the level and nature of support varied considerably in different local authorities. Many young people told us that they had been given little practical support in such settings and received minimal guidance for the challenges of living independently, such as paying bills.

“When I’d left my supported placement, or whatever you called it, I’d been told about council tax but I’d never seen a form and all of a sudden you’re supposed to just work life out there and then. They just throw you into the deep end with no preparation.” (Young person, 19)

A number of young people were frustrated that classes and sessions to learn how to manage money and other skills for life were not provided by professionals in the accommodation but were often instead provided as drop-in classes.

“You can attend a drop-in service [for independent living skills], but I don’t know any young person who’s going to want to take their time out to go to a place to do that. It would be so much better if it was part of the job role for the people that are working in supported accommodations. They’re the one working with young people, seeing them every day.” (Young person, 25)

Concerns around money, financial security and paying bills have also been raised in recent consultations. Young people felt that while they were helped to access benefits or get money to set up their new homes, many reported not getting help to work out what bills and payments they needed to pay and when (Ofsted 2022).

Financial education is only one small part of the potential solution to this issue. One young person described his personal ‘survival guide’ that he developed upon leaving care; ways of budgeting and adjusting to the amount of money he had when he first moved into his own flat. Similar financial tips and ‘life hacks’ were described by other participants; ways of making every last pound or penny stretch and last. Many of the participants who had recently left care felt their universal credit entitlement simply did not allow them to live, but merely survive.

Shopping and creating a home

We also heard that many young people had real concerns about shopping and cooking when moving into their own homes. Some stated they would have preferred much more direct, hands-on support in the first few weeks and months after leaving their placement to help them with the specifics of living alone.

“It’s like when you first get your allowance – can the PA and your social worker come with you on that first trip to help you budget? It’s like, ‘Let me see if you’re buying the top brand pasta or you’re buying the own brand Tesco stuff’. It’s just about being there for them with those things.” (Young person, 25)

Similar concepts arose in research by Field et al. (2018), which explored cliff edges in support for older children in secure settings. Young people involved in the research project highlighted they had ‘no clue’ what independence would feel like and questioned how it was possible to prepare for it, despite being given the opportunity to learn ‘independence skills’. These concerns were echoed in this project around the difficulty of knowing what ‘independence’ looks and feels like before it is experienced.

Caring for their own children

As noted in the previous chapter, the project engaged with a small number of young people who now have their own children (some during care, some shortly after). All valued access to formal childcare and the space these settings provided, especially as informal childcare provided by family members was often less available to them. Having someone to listen to them, who was consistently available and on their side, was particularly valued.

“Yeah, my little monkey loves nursery and they’re all so lovely there. It gives me time for me.” (Young person, 21)

However, parents reported obstacles in accessing or remaining in employment and education as a result of limited childcare options, particularly if they were lone parents (see also Svoboda et al. 2012). One young person was appreciative of the free childcare offer when their child was two, but argued it still left them limited in their employment options.

“I mean it’s just me – so she goes as much as she can but that [nursery] is only in the afternoons on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. So, I’ve got to find something in the mornings, on one or two days. It’s hard. Do you know what I mean?”
(Young person, 21).

Young mothers, especially those who had also been in care, were also seen as an important but often untapped source of support. Some recommended the use of other young mothers to be mentors, as they felt they would be able to provide support and advice that they would be more likely to accept. Some local authorities are already working to support young parents. As noted by Coram Voice (2021), some authorities have designated individual PAs to lead on supporting and providing advice to care leavers who themselves have children, ensuring they continue to get the care and support they are also entitled to.

Support beyond the age of 25

There was a strong, common feeling among the groups that children’s social care, or an equivalent service, should continue to offer support to those who have been in care beyond the age of 25 (the age at which most, but not all, young people cease to receive support).¹⁰

¹⁰ The support young people are entitled to as care leavers depends on when they came into care and how long they were in care. The law separates care leavers into four different groups, known as the young person’s ‘leaving care status’ (Coram Voice 2020). These are: eligible child, relevant child, former relevant child and ‘other qualifying care leavers’.

“There should be a follow-up programme for those over 25. I get it that young people can’t be supported forever but the local authority should still provide some support if it’s needed. And to be fair it has improved, it was 21, now it’s gone to 25, but there should be something after that. They’re failing a lot of young people. Because it’s like the second you turn 25 really, they don’t care.” (Young person, 25)

“A lot of people working in the system don’t acknowledge they are corporate parents. They do have these obligations for life.” (Young person, 25)

During our discussions with young people we spoke at length about the way in which parents, in most circumstances, support their children throughout their lives. Whereas it was felt that the care system in its current guise seems to ‘abandon’ and ‘give up’ on young people as they approach 25. They argued strongly that a truly caring system would assess a young person’s capacity to live and thrive independently based on their current competencies, rather than solely on their age.

“If the needs are not met, the timeline should not end. Because the child is under social services protection until they’re able to live independently. And if they are unable to do that, they should not be abandoned by that service until they are fully capable of living independently. And psychology says some people take longer than others to mature and to develop those independent living skills.” (Young person, 25)

Young people entering adulthood can fall out of contact with services or disengage with them for a range of reasons – often because services are not flexible or responsive to young people’s needs. Many of the challenges young people face when leaving care can emerge beyond the age of 25. To be truly meaningful, corporate parenthood should be a lifelong responsibility.

Mechanisms to engage and listen beyond 25

Most local authorities will organise forums for children and young people in care to come together to discuss their experiences and provide feedback on the services they are receiving or have received. However, the mechanisms to engage and listen to those who are approaching 25 are much more limited.

Many young people who had 'left care' felt the avenues available to them to discuss their experiences and offer support to younger children were limited as they moved towards 25. Most noted that their local children in care council set an age limit of 24 or 25, after which they could no longer participate. They felt they had much more to offer younger people to find their voice and to understand their rights and entitlements, but were prevented from doing so.

“Apparently, I’m too old to do certain things for the care council. How does that make sense?” (Young person, 25)

“I’m the most qualified academically, the most qualified in terms of care experience, the most qualified in terms of experience with working with other young people. But yet, because of my age, I’m suddenly not qualified to do things that will benefit the community that we’re working with.”
(Young person, 25)

Conclusions

We heard both from young people who had moved in and out of the children's social care system from early childhood and others who were new to the care system. Many of those who had experienced social care support earlier in their childhoods felt that their parents had failed to receive the support they needed to help them cope with the pressures of parenting – in some cases because of perceived bias and stereotyping. Others noted their schools had failed to pick up that they were struggling with things at home, choosing to punish their poor behaviour rather than seeing it as a call for help.

Young people felt that the adversarial nature of care proceedings – the feeling that they were on 'opposing teams' to their parents – contributed to further breakdowns in relationships. Many argued that, where safe, maintaining a positive relationship with their parents should be central, given that many who enter care as teenagers will continue to have a relationship with them after proceedings.

Some older children and young people will want to attend court during their proceedings. Yet many participants recalled feeling isolated and distant from the decision-making process, noting they had limited information about how the courts operated and what their guardian, appointed lawyer and judge could or could not do. Many of the young people who took part in the project appreciated the work of their Cafcass guardians, but most felt that the limited time they were given to speak to both social workers and guardians before proceedings started meant that their stories and preferences were often distorted.

While some experiences of the system were positive – including supportive relationships with key workers and stable foster placements – this was not the case for everyone. We heard that some felt that professionals did not always communicate and involve them in decision making early enough for it to feel meaningful. Others felt that information about their rights and entitlements was not always clearly given, especially in the weeks and months before 'leaving care' at 18. For most, however, they simply wanted tailored support that helped them through both practical and emotional hurdles from someone that truly believed in them.

Many of the young people we worked with in this project were living in, or had lived in, semi-independent accommodation – placements that are designed to support rather than care. We heard stories about a system that failed to address past trauma, provide sufficient support or encourage healthy strategies for coping with stress and the inevitable uncertainty that comes from moving placements or coming into contact with a multitude of professionals. While the nature of care and the way professionals engage with older and younger children will differ, this is not the same as saying older children are not in need of care (Coram Voice 2021).

Many of the reflections in this report are not new and have been proposed in other projects over the last decade (Care Inquiry 2013; Thomas 2018; Commission on Young Lives 2021), and in the last year as a result of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (see children's insights papers from Barnardo's 2021 and The Independent Review of Children's Social Care 2021). In fact, some of the recommendations made by the young people in our project related to ways of working that should already be happening in line with existing statutory guidance. However, the fact that many older children and young people who are currently or have previously been in care continue to share similar experiences and feelings about their time in the system clearly demonstrates there is still more that could be done.

The care system must do more than simply listen to those it has supported – and in some cases failed. It must also begin to act. We have heard that any future system that truly cares for and supports older children and young people should:

1. Support and enable young people to be actively involved in decisions being made about their care and, at the very least, help them understand the reasons behind decisions made about their care.
2. Trust young people to build relationships with the professionals in their lives.
3. Provide young people with both care and support when approaching 18.
4. Help young people maintain relationships with their families and communities.
5. Encourage and support young people to understand their rights and entitlements upon leaving care.
6. Provide young people with the corporate parenthood they need to thrive beyond the age of 25.
7. Provide young people with the mechanisms to provide support and have their voices heard beyond the age of 25.

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Appendix: Methodology

Recruitment

For practical purposes co-researchers in the advisory group were recruited via the informal networks of the Nuffield FJO project team, most of whom had been involved with services supporting looked-after children. As a result, most of the advisory group were aged 21–25 with experience of being in care, rather than other support services such as youth justice. This research was designed from this perspective, and while it was certainly a highly relevant perspective, it is arguable that it is only one of many possible perspectives that may have emerged had we been able to recruit young people from a wider range of locations, ages and experiences.

Where applicable, all co-researchers were introduced to the project alongside their personal advisers, where information on ethics, consent, and scope and expectations were shared and discussed. A consultant experienced in participation and peer research was engaged at an early stage and supported the planning as well as facilitating the analysis sessions.

Between June and November 2021, the Nuffield FJO project team engaged with 24 young people aged 10–17 who had either been supported by the care system in England and Wales, or who were currently being supported by it. The young people had a wide range of experience of the system, including living in foster care, residential homes and supported accommodation.

Throughout the project the Nuffield FJO team followed the established ethical principles set out in the Ethical Checklist Involving Children (ERIC) and the NSPCC Research Ethics Committee: Guidance (NSPCC 2019), as well as recent overview guides (Boddy et al. 2017, p. 22). Ongoing ethical oversight was provided by the individual the project advisor and advisory group, which comprised a range of individuals from academia and practice, all of whom provided a wealth of experience in ethical review, safeguarding, service design, research and consultations.

Scope and expectations

This project was not designed to be an ‘action research’ project as such, and we were open and honest with our co-researchers and participants from the outset about what this project set out to do and what we hoped to achieve in the short and medium term, built around a shared understanding that system change is an incremental process that takes time.

We explained the following:

- We would listen to the views of our participants and faithfully present their testimonies and experiences.
- We could not promise that the system would change tomorrow, or next week, because of the project or wider Nuffield FJO focus on young people. However, in line with Nuffield FJO’s wider mission, we aimed for the project to illuminate our understanding of the issues facing older children and young people in the family justice system, highlight the areas where change would have the biggest impact, and foster collaboration to make that change happen.
- We would use the convening power and influence of Nuffield FJO to open a dialogue with people at all levels of the system and draw on the testimony of young people to discuss the issues facing the system in its current guise, what could be done to change and improve services, and what an ideal system would look like.

Participants

We include the voices of young people generated through two different channels.

- Firstly, via group sessions with five young people aged 21–25 who had previously been in care proceedings in their teenage years (the ‘young persons advisory group’ co-researchers).
- Secondly, via group discussions and one-to-one interviews with 24 young people who were currently in care or were being supported by the care system in England and Wales between the ages of 10 and 17 (the ‘main engagement’).

We engaged with young people who had entered the system for different reasons. Below we give an overview of the journeys of those who took part in the project. We have included information on the co-researchers involved in the project, as they also provided valuable insights into their experiences of the system.

Routes into the system (most recent):

- three had not been in care but had been supported as a teenager under a child protection plan
- five had been in care under the age of 10 and remained in care as teenagers
- 10 had been in care under the age of 10 and reappeared in care as teenagers
- eight entered care for the first time between the age of 10 and 14
- six entered care for the first time between the age of 15 and 17.

Reason(s) for entering care aged between 10 and 17 (most recent proceedings):

- 14 had entered due to family breakdown/contextual safeguarding
- 11 had entered due to intrafamilial risk factors
- two had entered as separated migrant children
- three had entered as a result of entering the youth justice system
- none had entered as a result of receiving mental health care.

Note: some young people appeared in multiple categories.

- 16 appeared in proceedings with siblings.

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. Covering both public and private law, Nuffield FJO provides accessible analysis and research for professionals working in the family courts.

Nuffield FJO was established by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. The Foundation funds research that informs social policy, primarily in education, welfare, and justice. It also funds student programmes for young people to develop skills and confidence in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.



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