

Having corporate parents

A report of children's views
by the Children's Rights Director for England



Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Personal accounts of care by children and young people | 4 |
| How we asked for views | 11 |
| What difference does having 'corporate parents' make to children? | 12 |
| Key points about having corporate parents | 16 |
| Having a set of professionals working with you | 16 |
| Having decisions about your life made by the local council | 20 |
| Being moved to live in a new placement | 22 |
| Having a social care file about you | 27 |
| Being represented by a Children in Care Council | 27 |
| Having a public set of promises made to you in a council Pledge | 28 |
| Being moved to a new school when you change placement | 28 |
| Experiencing living in both children's homes and foster families | 29 |
| Being placed to live away from your home area | 31 |
| Being returned to your parents after living in care | 31 |



Introduction



Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England

As Children's Rights Director for England, the law gives me the duty to ask children and young people in care for their views about their rights, their welfare, and how they are looked after in England. The law also gives me the duty to ask children getting any sort of help from council social care services, as well as care leavers and children and young people living away from home in any type of boarding school, residential special school or further education college.

As well as asking children and young people for their views and publishing what they tell us, with my team I also give advice on children's and young people's views and on children's rights and welfare to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the government. I have a duty to raise any issues I think are important about the rights and welfare of children or young people in care, getting children's social care support or living away from home. With my team, I do this both for individual young people and for whole groups of young people.

This report sets out what children and young people in care say about some of the things that those in care experience because the council is acting as their parent. We asked 85 children and young people about things that children from care experience, but other children and young people usually do not. These included having different professionals making decisions about the child's life and where they will live, and moving from one placement to another. The report begins with the personal stories of six young people from care about their experiences, in the words they used when they wrote them for us. These personal accounts set out far more clearly what it is like to be a child in care than surveys, statistics and focus groups can ever do.

Our reports of children's views are all written so that they can be read easily by everyone – including children, professionals and government Ministers. You can find and download copies of all our children's views reports on our children's website: www.rights4me.org.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Morgan'.

Personal accounts of care by children and young people

Our report begins with six personal accounts sent to us by children and young people. We had asked children and young people we had recently consulted on other things whether they would like to send us personal accounts for this report. We have included all the six accounts that were sent to us in time for the report. These accounts give their personal experiences of being in care and therefore having corporate parents. We have not chosen or edited these accounts:

we have printed all six that were sent in to us while we were preparing this report. We have printed them here in full. The only changes we have made are to disguise or leave out names or places, and to correct a few typing errors.

I am extremely grateful to the six children and young people who sent me their personal experiences for this report.

First steps in care – Lisa

First coming into care

Initially for me, going into care was not seen as a great threat. However, it was social workers that I saw as a threat. I found them to be very misleading and vindictive at the time. They seemed to work against me and not with me. I did not feel as though I was 'going into care', due to the fact that the social workers did not phrase it in that way. Instead their choice of wording somewhere along the lines of temporarily living with my relative until the council had sorted out my family's living arrangements. This is because the 6 of us were living in a 2 bedroom council flat which was overcrowded and quite cluttered as you can imagine. The idea of being a 'looked after child' did not fully strike me until I began to see less of my family, attend more meetings with a varied amount of professionals who seemed to know a lot more about me and my circumstances than I knew about them. I felt as though I was the 'odd one out' everywhere I went as I no longer had the support from my parents which I needed really badly. This feeling grew especially during my high school years when parent's evening came and my parents were deemed as a huge threat and were therefore never allowed to attend. It was at times like this when I felt as though the love and nurture

from my parents had been cruelly taken away from me for reasons which I did not agree with.

Over the years I began to understand the reasons why I was being looked after and struggled to cope with the separation from my parents and siblings. It was not until I began college that I began to feel very depressed as a result of this. As I was in 'kinship care', my relative was not given much of an allowance to look after me. For this reason I felt as though I stood out from my peers as I did not have the luxuries such as they did. I learned that I needed to carefully save my pocket money in order to pay for the things I wanted, or to simply fund myself when going out with friends. Coming into care forced me to grow up. It often made me feel very alone and sorrowful. There would be times when I would just get in from school, show my face during dinner time then just go into my room and silently cry. I felt as though I did not get the support that I often requested for and that the professionals working with me only saw me as a case load rather than a person.

Going to my review meeting

Firstly, although the purpose of this was always explained I never knew how important it was so

therefore never made the most out of it. To me the review meeting was seen as a depressing time of the year which for me marked the seasons. This was because it was depressing to think that it happened twice a year – when it's winter, then when it is summer. I used to dread the thought of having to meet with these professionals in this way. This was because my memories of it are coming home from school to find a table full of people that wants to have a boring discussion with you about things that would simply be forgotten the moment they walked out of the door. It was also a daunting experience as not only did I feel really uncomfortable living in my relative's house with their children and family, but the concept of me having a meeting about my 'current situation' in their house isolated me even further. I did not feel at ease living there, more like a burden, therefore having this meeting was always a bore. I always wanted it to get over and done with so these people could just stop pretending to care and get on with their lives like I was. Looking back in hindsight I did not like the fact that the meeting was in a location that I was not comfortable with, I did not like the fact that the meeting often started without me but most of all I did not like the fact that I was never addressed or made to feel as though my opinion really mattered. Review meetings just made me feel more uncomfortable with my relative.

First moving into a foster home

My feelings of moving into a foster home were mixed between anticipation and excitement. I liked the idea of having my own room and what seemed as a 'short-term sleep over'. It never dawned upon me that I was unpacking my stuff into a 'new home'. Everything seemed strange as I knew that there would be new living habits and rules to follow. I also didn't want people to

be overly hospitable because it felt patronising and as though they pitied me. For the first week or two I tried to fit in with the family by having dinner with them, spending time watching TV with them and so forth but gradually my presence often felt unwanted. Conversations began to feel false then I started to notice that the only time I'd be addressed would be if I had done something wrong. I then began to segregate myself from the entire household. It was then I noticed that this way they all seemed happier. Going into foster care in general, I was never told any of my rights, who to contact in case I needed support, any cost arrangements, to name but three examples. I felt as though my carers were benefiting more from it than I was. Trying to have my friends and siblings around me felt strange as I always had the feeling that I was being observed. Therefore anything that I intended to do was often kept in secret to avoid the attention from social services. At this point my use of a social worker seemed pointless. I have continued to see them in a bad light and foster care made me feel like a child in need. To me I wasn't in need, I was doing better at school than when I was put into care, I felt much happier and foster care at the time seemed like a bad decision made by social services.

My social worker – Shelley

I think my social worker has been so great to me. He is one of the best I have ever had because he is so nice and genuine to me and it is always really easy to get hold of him when he is in and out of his office. So I am able to talk to him about something. I find it really easy to talk to him and

feel comfortable around him even though I am not usually that comfortable around men. Also when I ask questions to him he goes away and finds the answers really quickly. And visits me every 1 to 2 weeks. Which is why I think he is the best social worker ever. Many thanks.

My experience of being in care – Tim

In my experience of being in care it hasn't been too pleasant. To begin with I was upset about leaving my mum and was moved from foster home to foster home and being moved so many times really messed my head up. I thought that nobody cared about me and started to lash out at them but deep down I knew they must've cared to put up with this behaviour. At the current company I am living at they have really helped me settle down, they have helped me share my problems, encouraged me to attend children's rights days and also go to Voice Projects. I have been here for 4 years now. I lived at one children's home for 4 years and 2 months and now have moved to

another house within the company. I appreciate everything they have done for me but I just feel like moving me here to this home was an awful decision, which was mine but it seemed like a great idea at the time. I really want to give foster care another go and so I am going to raise this issue at the next review of mine this week and hopefully things will be resolved. I would just like to add in that if I wasn't introduced to children's rights and didn't learn of all the rights that we have then I probably wouldn't have been able to settle down as well as I have so I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity!!

From one place to another – Adam

- Getting bullied for being in care
- Leaving care
- Going back to live with family after leaving care

I was born into a life of crime and drugs. My parents were heroin addicts. They had both been into drugs when they were teenagers using cannabis and glue sniffing. They met when they were teenagers. At the age of 5 things had got bad and the social services got involved. I used to hide food and a little bit of money under a

floorboard on the upstairs landing for me and my brother so we could eat because I knew at that very young age that my parents needed all their money for heroin and other drugs they used.

At the age of 5 and my brother 3 we were taken into care. As we left in the social worker's car all kinds of things were going through my mind as I turned around to see my mum and my nanna standing in the distance I knew this wouldn't be the last time I would be moving. I gave my brother a love to try and reassure him everything was going to be ok. I was told I was only going to live

with another family for a couple of weeks just till my parents got better. 12 years down the line and I was still in care. These words what the social worker told me from that moment made me hate and have no trust with the social services until about the age of 21.

When me and my brother arrived at the foster family's house we were very nervous and scared as what to expect, as you can imagine this was a terrible ordeal for a 5 and 3 year old to deal with. The first couple of weeks were really bad it was the first time away from our family for a long period of time. Me and my brother didn't like where we were or the foster parents looking after us. They had their own children and we used to get treated differently from them, they were about the same age as us. This is where I started bed wetting because of all the trauma and stress and worry of not being able to see my family again. My foster mum didn't like that I did it but I couldn't help it and she used to use it against me. This made me feel uncomfortable. My brother had an accident and cut his head open and they didn't want to take him to the hospital, they were more interested in playing bingo. Not long after it happened an ambulance came down the street so I ran out and stopped it. The foster parents didn't like this as they were questioned about why they had not phoned one or taken him to the hospital. After this it was too much for me and my brother we decided to tell our nanna who we were allowed to phone and she told the social services and we were moved. I can remember driving away from that place and saying to my brother we're going to be alright now we've gone from there. And I was right.

We moved in with new foster parents and it was great. They showed us how to live like a proper normal family household. They taught us values and manners and to have respect. We also got punished if we were naughty which we never

got at home, this gave us discipline which we needed so we knew when we were doing wrong. We started school, made new friends and were learning, getting an education which we badly needed. I can remember it being my birthday and I was walking home from school with my brother and foster mum and she told me to run to the back garden someone is waiting for you so I did and when I got there, there was a clown, a bouncy castle and a big trampoline. All my new friends were there, it was a party for me. I've never experienced anything like it before it was brilliant. I learnt more while living here than I did anywhere else. While still living there my mum and dad had got better and we were allowed to go back home.

This is where it all went wrong. When we got back home things were better for about a week then it was hell. Everything was back to how it was before. From there me and my brother got split up, this made me mad and I started to rebel. After this I ended up living in 38 different places. My life was in bits, it just went horribly wrong. I was only 8 years old at this time, my education was starting to suffer. At school I used to get bullied for being in care and then because I was struggling with my work so I started fighting then I'd misbehave in the class then I would get kicked out then I'd make the foster parents mad so they wouldn't have me anymore so I would just get moved on. Every time they moved me this would make me even more angry and hate them even more because I thought they would either take me to my brother or take me home but they didn't right up until I was 16½ and the social services kicked me out. I was living in another county at the time and I couldn't get straight back to my home town, I had to wait for someone to come and pick me up but I couldn't stay in my placement, they told me to stay at a friends. I had to wait 6 days for someone to take me back to my home town and drop me off at a bed and breakfast.

Personal account (after attending a focus group) – Seb

I would like to elaborate on something I mentioned yesterday, where I mentioned that the safety and wellbeing of the young person is the foremost and most important of where they are placed, but so is the stability, and I believe the stability should not be compromised under no circumstances, other than what I mentioned before about their safety. For example, the legal contradiction of where you would trust a priest or social worker with something strictly confidential, and where they can only break that confidentiality if they believe you are a risk to yourself or those around you. I believe stability is above accommodation and education of those placed in foster homes, residential units, hostels, or family under a care act should be of a similar importance, but no more than the safety and wellbeing of the individual.

I mentioned this in our smaller group meeting yesterday, and was surprised by the reactions of the rest of the younger people, where they felt totally the same way, where we might lack the confidence and self-belief in care. I noticed a government poster at a bus stop a while back where an advert might be, showing a young person with the caption 'he doesn't believe in himself, so who will?', and to me I was automatically able to connect with this poster. It is hard for a child or young person to be able to develop their life skills when they are being moved from home to home and school to school, where they have to continuously break from one relationship, and then automatically develop another. Especially a child who learned to walk and started to talk a few years back, and obviously when a child is learning to speak and extending their vocabulary. Young people need a role model other than those they see on television, in music

or magazines. They need someone physical to talk to, to connect to. Moving from home to home cannot provide this, moving from school to school only tires the child or young person who has so much to do than become another statistic, labelled another failure of the care system. Someone with no ambition or drive, someone who is reckless and dangerous. I sincerely believe that continuous movement in one of the most important times in one's life where development is considered as important as how well one grows, can considerably affect one's opportunities in life.

I was speaking to another boy yesterday, and he said that he totally agrees, and if he was not so busy, he would have attended himself. But he brought up a point that I feel I should have mentioned yesterday. Where when you move from house to house, and you continuously have to ask where the plates are, the knives and forks, if you can use the toilet, or where the spare toilet tissue is, or afraid to use the bath. I was so glad to have him agree with me rather than someone say that's life, move on. I already know that, but it's just good to have someone to talk to who shares a past, and can truly understand, than someone telling you a shallow 'I understand, what can I do to help?', where what they don't realise is you just need to speak about it, such as away from the watchful eyes of councillors and stern faced, strictly to the book social workers. What no one else seems to realise is that it is not the fact that we continuously have to ask for these things when moving from home to home, but the fact that we have to spend ten, twenty minutes building up the courage to ask where the plates or ketchup are.

Please do not think that I have limited this to the movement from home to home, but it is equally important to have stability in education.

This is an important tool in our development into adolescent life and beyond, and personally, I believe we (looked after young people) do not have enough support in considering our future options, taking life as a joke as we believe deep down that we cannot truly achieve anything. Making relationships at school, whether you are a geek, or one of the 'ruff riders' who always wore their tie short and shirt collars upturned and shirt sleeves rolled up their arms, is one of the most pivotal in a child's life, where social relationships are concerned. Why? Because we learn who we are. Someone who loves to read. Someone who loves to write, draw, paint, talk, or even someone who would rather be with the latest fashion, rocking the newest trainers or tracksuit every so often. Moving from one education establishment to another (nursery, primary, secondary, or even university) prevents this self-development and social boundaries from being formed, and consequently makes life much, much harder than those who have grown up in a stable home and educational environment.

Furthermore, I believe social workers and other job titles similar to those of the latter should have a little slack in the way in which they can help young people. I had one social worker out of the hundreds that stood out all alone. She unfortunately met me when I was in the after care

team, so I had already pre-conditioned myself to trusting no one other than myself, and learned that I am in this world alone. However, she listened. Not with her eyes, but with her heart, and she believed in me, and unlike the other social workers, I could not take the piss with her, although at first I must admit I did. But as the relationship of social worker and young person developed between myself and her, I found I could not take the piss no more, as she had remained nothing but true to her promises, kind and understanding, and most importantly, she listened. She knew when to give me my space, and when I really needed help, even when I would persistently decline it. She always showed me she would be there, like a true parent, and not a legal guardian.

This brings me on to my next point. I truly hope the group meeting yesterday was sincere, and will amount to something. It can do nothing for me right now, as I am out of the care system now, but it can maybe do something for the next generations of children and young people in care, and I truly hope that whatever change is to come out of this, it will get as massive a response as the million of orphans in Haiti after the earthquake this month.

PS. Please please stop training social workers to be robots, but let them be kind, considerate human beings so they know what to do.

Leaving care – Darren

Leaving care was certainly not an easy time for myself. It came very sudden (I had to leave my placement with literally only 6 hours of notice). I was moved into a building called 'the foyer' which housed over 60 young people for various different reasons. Once moved into the building I felt very alone, my social worker had contact with me on a monthly basis, but other than the few stable friends I had at the time, I was left to myself. My expectations of any parent was that they would never throw their looked after child out to defend for themselves and that was not the case for me. They did pay for the accommodation and when I moved into the 'move-on' flats, they paid for the rent (still aged 19 and attending college) but I had to pay for everything else, electricity/food/gas, etc. This gave me a taste of true independence. In a way, this actually helped me to become more resistant and able to cope with a lonely future life (without any family of my own).

Throughout my university life, the social services were quite good, they left me to my own devices but supported me financially in a comfortable way (although I still had to work around 25hrs/week to have enough money). This though, was certainly what most parents would do so that was good.

The lack of stability through social workers distressed me as I did not have any family, they were the only people that I thought I could rely on and even throughout university I had 3 different social workers. The difficult times were

the 'seasons' – Christmas, Easter, summer, etc. 'Normal' people have their parents' home/family to go back to or spend time with. I had nothing, and I think the social services could have set up a group which would have people similar to myself in those situations getting together, this would have helped. The fact that I did not know any other looked after child going through university at the same time as myself was quite upsetting and I felt quite isolated.

The worst thing that happened to me was that of the ending of my help from social services. When I finished my degree, I had not spoken to my social worker for over 1 month (not by choice but by how busy they were) and then I suddenly received a letter stating the ending of my financial help and realistically, of any help I was going to get. This was not planned and this led to several difficult complications for my life. I desperately wanted to become an accountant and wanted to take a 'top-up' course at my local college, however, due to not being able to support myself any more, I was unable to do this and I had to work over 40 hours a week on my minimum paid job just to pay the bills and debts that I had accrued. The lack of planning and communication between the social workers and myself caused upset and distress for myself. I do not think a 'parent' would act this way for any child and I think this certainly could have been dealt with in a better manner

How we asked for views

We asked a total of 85 children and young people from care about the differences having corporate parents can make to a child or young person. We invited them from many different children's homes and fostering services to join us at one of two consultation days, one held at Sadler's Wells theatre in London, and the other at the Centre for Life in Newcastle. As we always do, we picked the homes and services to invite people from at random from our lists of homes and services. So we did not invite children we already knew, or from places we already knew, or those who were likely to have a particularly good or a particularly bad view about being in care.

At each of our consultation days, children and young people took part in two separate sessions to find out their views. In one session, they gave their views by voting on questions we projected on to a cinema-style screen, using electronic key pads so that their votes were confidential. In the other session, children and young people took part in focus groups to discuss in more depth their views and experiences of being in care and having corporate parents. Each group was led by a member of the Office of the Children's Rights Director. We took notes of what the children

said for this report, and the adults who had brought the children and young people stayed outside the groups. We held eight separate focus groups, four in Newcastle and four in London. We have done our best to put all the views that came up in our groups into this report. Sometimes we have put in a quote from a particular child or young person where this was the best way to report a view. We have also put quotes in the report where what one person said summed up the views of others too.

Here are the children and young people's views and experiences on what difference it makes when your parents are 'corporate parents'. First are the points the children made to us when we asked them generally for their own experiences. Then comes what they had to say about each of 10 subjects we particularly wanted to ask them about. They clearly had much more they wanted to say about some of the subjects we asked about (like having different professionals working with you, decisions made about you, and moving placements) than others (like having a Children in Care Council or a Pledge from the council, or seeing your file).



What difference does having 'corporate parents' make to children?

In each of our discussion groups, we began by asking what it meant to the children and young people to have the local council as their legal parents – that is, to have 'corporate parents'.

What it feels like to be in care

In one group, young people said that you may stop being treated as an individual child: 'being in care, you're not anyone, you're a number'; 'we're not treated like children, we're a case'. One said that when they compared living with your own parents to having corporate parents, they thought that for most children, 'Parents do what's best for you, they do what's best for their job.' Even so, as one child put it, 'Sometimes it's good not to stay with parents.'

Being in care and then leaving care can mean that you have had many problems in your life, and often you can't escape from these and what other people think about them: 'You're forced to constantly relive your past. Why bring the past up when I've changed everything about the way I was when I was badly behaved?' For some, though, being in care meant they had got more help with personal problems than they thought they would have had outside care: 'If you have a problem, your words get listened to more than when you are with your parents.' There were different views about getting support for problems. Some in our groups felt that 'looked after children and young people don't have relatives if they need help', but others felt that being in care meant that they had good support to deal with any problems.

For a few in our groups, having a complaints system to use was important, and something that children not in care didn't have. There are 'social workers and wider support network if you want to complain'.

We also heard how being in care can make a big difference to how other people see you: 'there is a stigma attached to being in care'; 'the outside world thinks you're a bad child'. However, some thought that the attitude of the public towards children in care

is getting better. Some children told us that different cultures have different views about children being in care, and they thought that in some cultures it is seen as something wrong to be in care.

'We're not treated like children, we're a case'

Children discussed how they had very different experiences of care. Being in care is very different for different children. We heard that some children have had good care for a long time in the same placement, and are well settled, while others have had many different carers and find it hard to settle down. There was agreement, though, that sometimes it is right to move on from a placement that is not working out well or where you have not settled down.

Having plans and meetings about your life

Children and young people told us that one big difference when you have corporate parents is that you have a structure to your life, set out in plans and agreements like 'care plans' and 'pathway plans' and involving a lot of other people. These are discussed at review meetings, which is something other children don't experience. You do get a definite say in things, which not all children may have – 'they listen to you more' – but these meetings are very difficult to cope with: 'They talk about you like you're not there. It is like people are not talking about your lives.'

Children in some groups also told us that laws saying you had to have regular medicals if you are in care

mean they are treated very differently from children who aren't in care: 'Medicals every six months, a year. If you've got a problem you should just go to the doctor's, you don't need interim visits.'

Many in our groups told us that when there are meetings for children's parents, like at school, having corporate parents can make you feel very different from other children because you will probably have your social worker or carer at the meeting, while everyone else has their own parents.

Funding

The children and young people in our groups told us that how much help you got, both while you were in care and when you left care, depended a lot on which council's area you lived in: 'It's mix and match. Looked after children have more chances in some boroughs.' How much help your foster carers could give you made a big difference to many children in foster care: 'If you didn't have carers helping you, you wouldn't get it.'

For many in our groups, the issue wasn't just about how much money you had, but about having a different amount of money from what others had. One person said, 'My friends get more money than me and so can go out more often. That makes me feel even more different.' But another person in the same group said, 'I get more than my friends and I am in foster care.'

Many had lived in both foster homes and children's homes, and told us, 'there is a difference in money depending if you are in foster care or in residential care. That shouldn't be the case, we should all get the same'; 'everyone is different, but I think we should all expect to get the same when it comes to money and what you can do'. In a children's home, you often had less say in what you spent your money on: 'You don't get a choice in how money is spent in a home. You're told what you can spend on clothes and what you can spend on activities. You wouldn't have that at home.'

One group made a definite recommendation that because children often don't know what they are entitled to when they are in care or when they leave care, there should be clear information for every child in care or leaving care on what they are and are not entitled to, 'then they would be able to make sure their corporate parent was doing the right thing'.

Getting permissions

Our groups told us about the problem of getting your corporate parents' permission to do things. We heard that looked after children need permissions for lots of different things, and permissions that other children's parents could give quickly took a long time to get when you have corporate parents: 'It's crazy and bureaucratic, when you have to get a letter... to go bowling at 16.' One young person still in care but living independently in a flat told us that she wanted to give her mum a spare set of keys to the flat in case she lost hers. She trusted her mum more than the local authority to keep the keys safe for her, but the authority said she wasn't allowed to give her spare keys to the person she chose.

The problem of getting permissions had two different parts to it. One was that your carers couldn't give you permissions to do things that other children's parents could just give straight away, and had to ask people from the council first. The other part of the problem was that it often took a very long time to get those permissions from the right people in the council. One child summed this up for many: 'Foster carer always has to call social worker when you want to do something and they can't always contact them.'

One group thought that corporate parents have got the balance wrong. On the one hand, they expect young people to be independent at a very young age, but on the other they treat looked after children with 'kid gloves', keeping a very tight rein on what even those living independently are allowed to do. Another group simply decided that corporate parents and foster carers are 'over protective' compared with other

children's own parents. As an example, one young person said that in their care experience 'your mobile phone gets taken away at night and checked', which they didn't think happened to many children living at home.

As well as needing permissions for lots of things, we heard that there is sometimes a particular difficulty when a child in care needs a passport. Some told us that they could not get a passport, and others that it took much longer to get one than it did for people who weren't in care, because of the permissions needed from the council.

'You can't just go over to your friend's house... it takes three to six months for police checks'

In this consultation, as in many of our past consultations with looked after children and young people, we heard about not being allowed to go to stay overnight with friends at their houses. 'You can't just go over to your friend's house... it takes three to six months for police checks. Other people just go.' This is something that the Minister has recently written to councils about, reminding them that there are no requirements for police checks before a child in care can stay with a friend overnight. Unless there is some special reason in the child's care plan, their carers should decide whether or not they can go in exactly the same way that parents do for other children.

Education

Many in our groups told us that leaving foster care or a children's home to live independently at a young age can make a big difference to your education. One young person living independently told us of their experience of this: 'When you move to supported lodgings, if you're still in secondary school, you go home and not have anyone to help you with your school work and sit in a cold room. You need help.'

Another difference we heard about from many children is that if you are a 'looked after child', you can be treated differently at school or college. Not better or worse than other children or young people, just differently: 'treated slightly differently at school or college... get isolated'; 'you are treated differently. I don't like it when they are too nice. They let you get away with more things'. As well as being treated differently by adults, other children can be very curious about you, which can be difficult to take: 'people might say you are weird'; 'when I go to school, people say your mum does not look like you'.

We also heard, though, that being in care can have advantages for your education. In one group we were told you can 'go to whichever school you want to, we get first priority'. Being in care might also mean you get to go to more activities than many other children. Others told us that being in care could bring support for your education: 'they want us to stay on in education'; 'you are given more support for your education when you are looked after by the local authority'. Again, different people told us about their quite different experiences of care.

Leaving care to live on your own

We heard that leaving care at an age younger than most young people leave home can be a major problem for some young people who have corporate parents. As one put it simply: 'You have to set up a place independently. You may feel like leaving care to set up on your own at the time, but you are likely to

be too young to cope: 'You're made to move out to get a flat at 16, and at that age you think "great", but you're not ready.' 'You still need family when you're forced to leave. We have to be independent too quickly.'

'You're made to move out to get a flat at 16, and at that age you think "great", but you're not ready'

However, as with many aspects of being in care, some young people told us there is a good side too. For some, it was very helpful that 'the local authority has a duty to get accommodation for you when you leave care'.

Being adopted and returning to care

In one discussion group, children shared their experience of leaving care to be adopted, but coming back into care again because the adoption didn't work out. One person told us that they 'got adopted at the age of two and then they could not handle me when I was 12 and I was taken back into care'. Coming back into care from adoptive parents felt just the same as coming into care in the first place from your birth parents. Children in this group told us 'some people will adopt children at a young age and when they get older, just hand them over'. One who had experienced this said that they had 'thought adoption was for good'.



Key points about having corporate parents

Having a set of professionals working with you

After asking children and young people to tell us whatever they wanted to about their own experiences of being in care, we asked them about 10 specific issues we wanted their views on for this report. The first one was about having a set of professionals working with you.

Children and young people in care can often have a large number of different professionals working with them, each with a slightly different job to do. As well as having foster carers or children's home or residential school staff as their day to day carers, they will have a social worker and an independent reviewing officer. They may also have an independent visitor, a key worker and an advocate, and a CAFCASS¹ guardian as well if their case is going to court.

We asked the children and young people at our two voting sessions what they thought about having many different care professionals working with them. Figure 1 gives their votes on the three answers they could choose from.

'If you have a problem, your words get listened to more than when you are with your parents'

Figure 1: Having different people on your case

Each child should have only one professional doing all the things that need doing for a child in care

11

It is good to have different professionals doing different things for a child in care, but there shouldn't be too many

42

You should have as many people working with you as you need – the number doesn't matter

17

Number of children voting for each answer. 70 people voted on this question.

From these answers, **the children we asked thought it was better to have a number of care professionals around them doing different things for them, rather than just one trying to do everything needed – but there should be no more professionals than the child needs.**

In our discussion groups, we asked children to tell us more about what different people did for them as children in care. Having lots of different professionals around you was the issue that was talked about the most in our groups.

The job of the Independent Reviewing Officer (often just called an IRO) is being made more powerful by new government regulations, so we asked children to tell us what their IROs had done for them and anything else they thought their IRO should be doing. Officially, the job of an IRO is to check that the local council is doing what it should for the child, to go to the child's reviews, and to make sure that the council takes proper notice of the child's wishes and feelings. Every child in care should have an IRO, but not all the children in our discussion groups knew one.

Children told us a lot about how they saw their IROs at review meetings. One child described their IRO as 'the bloke that sits at the top of the table'. Some said they had no contact with their IRO between these meetings. Because this meant that they didn't see or talk to their IRO for six months at a time, they didn't really get to know their IRO. They told us their IRO chairs their review meetings, and 'they come to meetings and write down everything'. Most said their IRO talks to them before the meeting, and some said they also talk with others such as foster carers before the meeting. Some, though, told us that their IRO never spoke to them before their review meetings. We heard that **just as social workers often change, IROs change too, so that children do not always know the IRO chairing their review meetings: 'They change the chair as you get to know them.'**

Some were worried that whatever they said to their IRO then got repeated at their review meeting afterwards. As one young person put it, their **IRO 'talks to us before the meeting and then discusses everything at the meeting so not really confidential'**. On the subject of confidentiality, some in our groups said how important they thought it was that IROs should make sure that review meetings are held in places that children feel comfortable, and not, for instance, in foster homes if the child does not feel comfortable there. Some said that **review meetings were best held 'in professional places', not where the child lives or goes to school** and where there are other people around who might hear or know what is being discussed.

'My IRO prevented me moving to lots of different places and got my social worker changed'

Some children told us that their **IRO had been particularly helpful to them, especially in sorting problems out and stopping some things happening**. One told us: 'My IRO prevented me moving to lots of different places and got my social worker changed.' Another said that what their IRO had done had simply 'made me a lot more settled and in one school'. Yet another said, 'The school were treating me differently, I told my IRO, he arranged a meeting with the school and sorted this out.' It was **important for IROs to be powerful enough to get things done**, though. One person proposed that 'they should be given more power to make decisions'. Someone else commented that their IRO got things done for them because 'my social worker was scared of him'!

Some said that IROs are there to follow up points made in review meetings on behalf of the council, though some said this didn't work very well: 'They say they follow up things with the social services but never do.' In different discussion groups we heard that IROs asked some young people whether they thought they were in the right accommodation, or asked generally about their welfare, which was helpful, but that sometimes an IRO can ask young people to fill in a lot of forms. One group said that their IROs usually reported back to someone more senior if a child or young person was having any problems with social care services.

Views differed on whether IROs were helpful. In one group, one person said, 'They do nowt,' and that they didn't have a bond with their IRO so couldn't really talk to her. But someone else in the same group said of their IRO, 'Give her a problem and she'll sort it.' It all depended on who your IRO was, and whether they had kept up a relationship with you.

On the point about not seeing an IRO very often, one group said that they thought **IROs should have each child's number and contact each child every one or two months. It was also important that IROs did follow things up, and that they stayed in touch with children about things they were following up for them:** 'If you raise a point with them they should stay in contact and follow up.' Suggestions in one group were that instead of only seeing an IRO at review meetings, 'you need to be able to have a support day where you can meet up', and that you 'should have a meeting with them whenever you request and have a number you can reach them on'.

One discussion group raised the question of how independent an Independent Reviewing Officer should be. They thought it was **not right that a reviewing officer who had to check what the local council was doing should themselves be working for the same local council.** The group thought that Independent Reviewing Officers shouldn't be paid by local councils, and that they should be allocated to children by a separate national organisation.

Some children in our discussion groups did not see a big difference between the job of an Independent Reviewing Officer and what they thought their social worker should be doing. One told us that their 'social worker does everything IROs do anyway. Social workers are there all the time. You don't know your IRO. They are the ones that go back to their manager and report things'.

'Social worker does everything IROs do anyway. Social workers are there all the time. You don't know your IRO. They are the ones that go back to their manager and report things'

Another person some children in care have working with them is an Independent Visitor. Some children had never heard of an Independent Visitor and didn't know what one would do. The official task of an Independent Visitor is to be a volunteer to 'visit, befriend and advise' a child they are working with. **Most of the children and young people in our discussion groups who had actually had an Independent Visitor said they valued them.** In one group, a young person summed the job up, and again told us how important confidentiality was, when they said an Independent Visitor is a 'best friend for you, you can tell them stuff and they won't blab about it to anyone unless they think you are in danger'. Another young person said about having an Independent Visitor: 'It's like having someone to talk to; they won't tell your carer.' Yet another said, 'They keep what you tell them personal – they're not part of the home so they don't go and tell everyone.'

Others told us how their Independent Visitor was a person who took them out to visit places and spent enjoyable time with them: 'I get to get out of the house and do what I want to do'; 'she comes, picks us up, and takes us to the fair'; 'where I am living is not nice and it's great to have someone that takes you away from all that'. Independent Visitors might also help you in different ways, for example: 'I was behind with my coursework and my Independent Visitor helped me.' One person told us their Independent Visitor was 'like a role model', another that 'I see them as an older friend'.

'An Independent Visitor is a best friend for you, you can tell them stuff and they won't blab about it to anyone unless they think you are in danger'

How good your Independent Visitor was at keeping in touch with you was important: 'they should come more often; I haven't seen mine in two months'; 'you can ring them but they usually call you'. One person told us their Independent Visitor came to see them every week or two weeks, and they thought this was about right.

How you got on with your Independent Visitor was very important. In our discussion groups we heard that in one local authority, young people could interview the Independent Persons that were available, and then choose which one they wanted. Someone simply said they had been lucky and 'I had

a really nice one'. Not everyone had got on so well with their Independent Visitor, and many agreed that **having one or not should be the child's own choice.**

Again, people in our groups compared this job with that of a social worker. One person said that **being an Independent Visitor 'sounds like what a social worker does'**, but another said their 'social worker sorts things out and Independent Visitor helps you with budgeting, finding a job and feeling comfortable in the area'. Someone else found the differences between an Independent Visitor and the professionals working with them simply confusing, while another said, 'You won't remember who does what and who to go to.' One person felt odd having an Independent Visitor to make up for not having their parents around: 'Friends have parents to do everything – it's not normal.'

Some children in care have an advocate to help them and speak on their behalf when they make a complaint, or at other times when they need someone to help them get their views across. As one child put it, 'They represent you.' Another summed up why some people need an advocate when they said: 'I think if I had someone to help me speak out then I would get listened to more.' **People in our discussion groups who had been supported by an advocate had found this helpful:** 'they are helpful if you don't know what channel to use to make a complaint'; 'they know things like who to send the letter to'. One person said: 'My advocate has done more than my social worker... she chases up my social worker for me.' We also heard that an advocate can be very valuable if a young person is not present at an important meeting: 'They go instead of me and say things I want them to say.'

Just like the comment about an IRO scaring someone’s social worker, a different person said, ‘My advocate scared my social worker’s manager’, to get a problem sorted out for them. A very common view was that **advocates often need to be strong and powerful to get things done for a child**. They are ‘representatives of children in care’ who therefore ‘need more support, power and recognition’. Good ones can be ‘like bulldozers’. Sometimes young people got to know their advocate very well. One said, ‘She’s not my advocate, she’s Alison.’ (We’ve changed the advocate’s name for confidentiality.)

‘My advocate scared my social worker’s manager’

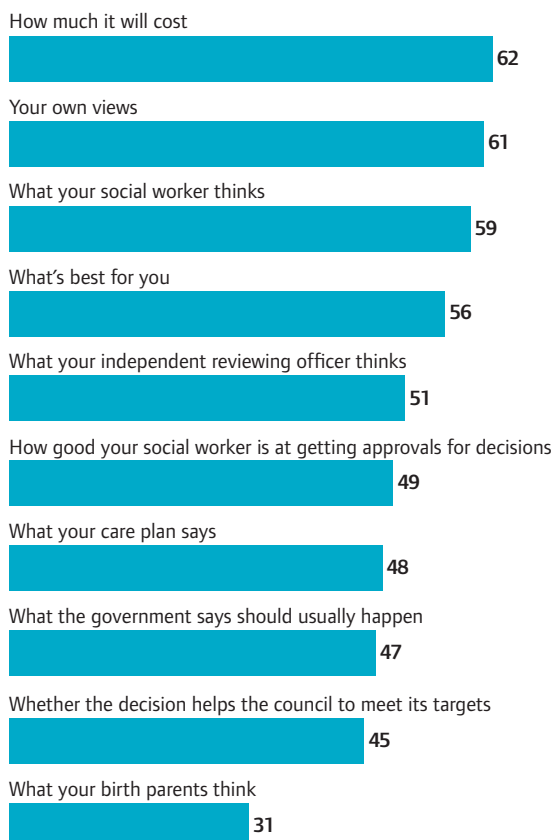
One young person told us a very personal example of why they thought it might help them if they could have an advocate: ‘I’m not meant to have contact with my brother and sister and so when a teacher sees me talking to them at school they try and stop me. I kick off. They don’t understand that I’m just trying to speak to my brother and sister. If I had someone to explain what I was doing they might listen.’

Not everyone in our discussion groups knew what an advocate was, though. Also, though most people who knew about advocates spoke well of them, there was a worry too. In one group, young people raised their concern that **if young people were given advocates, that would take money away from the social work budget and could mean fewer social workers working with children in care**.

Having decisions about your life made by the local council

We wanted to find out how much children think different things and different people affect decisions about their lives. We gave children at our voting sessions a list and asked them to vote on how much difference they thought each item on the list makes to decisions about their lives. Figure 2 lists each of these according to how much difference the children thought they made.

Figure 2: What makes a difference to decisions about your life?



Number of children saying factors make ‘some’ or ‘a lot’ of difference. 76 people voted on this question.

From these answers, it is clear that these children see many factors as making a difference to decisions about their lives. Just top of the list, the children we asked clearly think that how much something will cost is the most important factor affecting decisions about their lives, but this is closely followed by the next most important factor, which is the child's own views. These **children see cost and their own views as the biggest deciding factors when decisions are being made about their lives.**

In one of our discussion groups, one young person said they felt that decisions were made with 'calculator in one hand, the budget in the other'. Children were clear that their own views and concerns should always be very important in making decisions about their lives and future, especially as a 'wrong decision will affect your life'. Even so, some thought that there were dangers in giving some children too much say in such vital decisions: 'depends – if you're young, you can make the wrong decision'; 'you might not be in the right mind to make a decision'. One person summed it up: 'It depends on how old you are, if you have a disability, and funding.'

The **other factors that a majority of children told us made some or a lot of difference to decisions about them were the social worker's view, what is best for them as a child, and their Independent Reviewing Officer's view.**

The children's answers also show their view that **care plans make little more difference to decisions about individual children than what the government says should usually happen for children generally, and that the views of their birth parents make the least difference to decisions.**

In discussing this issue in our focus groups, children raised the question of exactly how much choice there is in many decisions. Sometimes a child was given a choice, but only between a few options that someone like their social worker had already decided on. **Often the main decision was already made and the child's choices were actually quite small ones, not the**

main decision at all: 'the little options are not much anyway'; 'they give you options for decisions already made'. As one child put it, 'It's like saying, "Have this bread – what slice do you want, top or bottom?"'

'They give you options for decisions already made...'

'It's like saying, "Have this bread – what slice do you want, top or bottom?"'

An issue for many children was that decisions are often made about them in meetings which include people the child doesn't know and who don't know the child. Going to these meetings can be important for a child in care, but it can also have its problems: 'Get taken out of lessons for meetings. When you come back, friends ask where you've been and why it is always you that has these meetings.' We know from our other consultations that children in care do not want to be made to stand out as different from other children in school.

Many in our discussion groups told us that it is **important that people making decisions affecting a child's life should actually know that child well before they make such decisions.** This is not always the case. Sometimes, perhaps because of lots of changes of social worker, decisions are made by people who hardly know the child. Here are two examples of how young people had experienced this: 'I've had four social workers in the one year I have been in care, how can they know me and know what's best for me?'; 'every time I get a new social worker they ask me why I am in care. If they don't even know that, how can they make decisions that affect me?'

'I've had four social workers in the one year I have been in care, how can they know me and know what's best for me?'

At different stages in their time in care, different people might make big decisions about how a child's life should go. Often social workers made decisions, but for care leavers a care-leaving worker might make major decisions, and sometimes a judge might make the biggest decisions about a child's life. For a child in foster care, big day-to-day decisions were made by foster carers – sometimes different foster carers at different stages of your life. **Some in our groups thought that senior staff in social care services often made final decisions, rather than their own social workers:** 'Social workers' managers are powerful.' Sometimes, decisions were made jointly: 'my carer and my social worker'; 'myself and my carer'. A few children in our groups told us they might not cooperate with decisions that people made for them that they disagreed with: 'If they make a decision, I stop following it.'

Overall, children in our groups thought they should have the final say in as many decisions as possible ('you yourself, because it is your life!'), but that most decision-making was done by social care services: 'All decisions are made from LA social services and some decisions are made for me.'

Being moved to live in a new placement

One of the biggest differences between being in care and not being in care is that you can be moved from one placement to another, to live with different sets of people. You can be moved from living with a family to

living in a children's home, or the other way around. As one child put it, 'More strangers, more new places.'

We know from earlier consultations with children and young people in care that having lots of different placements can be very difficult to cope with and that moving to a new placement is often very difficult. You have to get used to new people looking after you and **learn different sets of rules about what you are supposed to do and not do:** 'You want to get relaxed as quickly as possible and get into a routine.' But we also know from our earlier consultations that sometimes it can be right to move on from a placement that is not working out very well, for example to get away from particular people, or if there are lots of arguments, you are not settling in well, or something bad is happening. One child told us, 'I have been in a long-term placement. I moved schools which benefited me a lot and wasn't far from my mum. Once my social worker spoke to me, I understood more.'

The children in our discussion groups for this report told us that **moving placements is stressful.** We were told that feeling 'unsafe and scared' is not good for your health. Expecting that you will always be moving on some time does not help you to settle anywhere: 'If you move whilst in care you are not always sure how long you are going to be there.' One person said, 'I've been moved loads of times. I have settled down now after three years. There is no good thing about moving. It affected me. I couldn't think straight. We're like objects.' Another told us, 'I got told the day I was moving. I got no information.' Someone else said, 'Police got involved. That just wasn't needed.' Bad behaviour can very easily come after a move: 'the way you're moved around can ruin your life and you get stressed inside and so you lash out'; 'I was scared because I knew where I was going, but not when it was happening'; 'it affected my behaviour because the more I thought about it the more bad stuff I did, testing them to see what they'd do'. If you behave badly, though, this can make your future harder too: 'If you're bad in your old placement, it makes it worse for your next.'

On the other side of this issue, **some children in our groups who had stayed settled and stable in good placements and not had to move on, told us how important and valuable this was in their lives.** Others told us that their **last change of placement had been a good one:** ‘they take you to a better place’; ‘got a lot of notice before moving’; ‘my placement move was really good... a place where I would fit in’. There were lots of very different experiences of moving from one placement to another.

‘My placement move was really good... a place where I would fit in’

Moving placements can be made less stressful if there is plenty of warning, if the child feels the move is in their best interests, and if the move itself is done gradually – with lots of information about the new placement and whenever possible a trial period first. As one young person explained, ‘You should get plenty of warning. Go and have a stay overnight and see how you get on. If you don’t like it, it would be better to find out at that stage than after you move in. If that happens then it’s just another placement that’s gone wrong and you get labelled as the one that’s caused it, even if it’s not your fault.’ Many in our groups thought it important that they should **have the opportunity to meet and then stay overnight with new carers before the final decision on moving in was taken, but this didn’t usually happen.**

Children told us they didn’t usually get enough information or notice when they were moved on: ‘I was sleeping on a Friday and the social worker rang to say, “I’m coming to get you, are you ready?” Nobody had told me I had to go.’ Another said, ‘My social worker picked me up and took me to an office and took a taxi to somebody’s house.’ Sometimes moving meant being separated from brothers or sisters too: ‘My mum was pregnant. She sent me to school. They picked me up from school. My sisters went into another car and they said your sisters are going for adoption and you can’t do anything about it.’

Just a few in our groups had been given good information: ‘I got a book with them [foster carers] all in and the animals’; ‘went to foster carers’ house before which was quite good. Got the chance to meet them before, which helped get to know them.’



One of our groups drew up a list for us of their advice for making changes of placement work better.

- I think there should be three to four placements for you to choose from, not just one.
- Talk to you, be honest, keep you informed, and give you information.
- Always let you go to the placement and let you have a look so you can find out things you like to help make it work out.

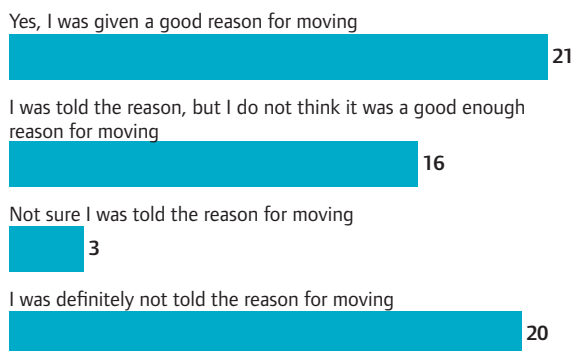
- Know where you're going.
- Tell us not just the good things but also the bad things... be honest.
- Actually ask what you think.
- It's important where you're told about your placement change and to tell those who are important to you in your life, like current foster carers.
- If I'd been given an IRO at time of moving placement, that would have helped stand up for my choices.

Good matching of the placement to the child is vital, 'instead of putting the kid somewhere and expecting them to live there'. Even then, placements do not always work out. One person summed it all up: 'Some don't work out, some do, it's not that simple with placements. It's not easy to get on with everyone, so you might not get on with your carer.' A foster placement might not work simply because you 'don't fit in with the family lifestyle'.

Knowing why you are being moved is important.

One group was concerned that children do not always know why they have to move: 'The reasons come after you move. That's the wrong way round and just confuses you even more.' In our voting sessions, we asked whether the children had been given good reasons the last time they had to move placement.

Figure 3: Last time you moved to a new placement, were you given a good reason for having to move?



Number of children voting for each answer. 60 people voted on this question.

'You get labelled as the one that's caused it, even if it's not your fault'

From their answers, **about a third of the children we asked thought they had been given a good reason for moving the last time they had moved to a new placement, and another third said they were definitely not given a reason for the move.** Just under two thirds said they had been given a reason, but 16 out of the 37 who said they had been given a reason did not think that reason was good enough for having to move. In one discussion group, a child told us how they had been moved without understanding why at the time: 'Woke up one morning and saw social worker, had to move placement. Told four months later why I moved.'

An example we were given of why a child had to move placement was where they were not fitting in well to a foster home they were in. One person told us that in their last foster home 'you have different food and different eating times from everyone else in a foster home. They make you feel different and not wanted. Because you're upset you act up and then you get the blame for things going wrong'. One child described how they and their new foster carers had stopped getting on together once the nice time just after moving in was over: 'When I first got there they were really nice and got me things, but after a few months they got stricter.'

Some reasons for having to move out of a placement were nothing to do with how the child was doing, but to do with other people: 'sister ran away every day for two weeks. I had to move as well. I quite liked it but had to move with her'; 'because old carer got another little girl and it was really difficult'; 'home could only have children or young people for 2-6-week period'. **Some children thought placement changes were often just to do with money rather than what was best for them:** 'don't believe reasons given. They're trying to save money'; 'it's more about the money than actual children'.

'It's not that simple with placements. It's not easy to get on with everyone, so you might not get on with your carer'

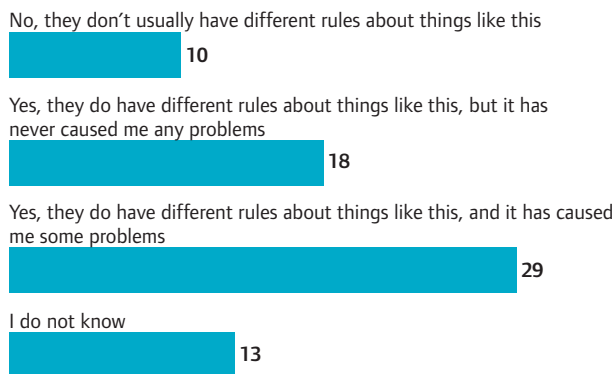
Sometimes children thought the placement they moved from hadn't worked out because it was not the right placement in the first place; going there had been 'one wrong decision'. **Children often felt they took the blame for a placement not turning out to be the right one for them:** 'Some were my fault, some were foster carer's.'

Some children in our groups told us about **how they had first come into care.** Many knew why they had first moved into a placement from their parents' home: 'family problems. My parents argued a lot'; 'my dad remarried and I now have a stepmum I hate, that's why I moved'. Some didn't know why they had made that first move into a placement away from home: 'Don't have any idea why I came into care.' One person described their experience of coming into care and being moved into a placement without knowing why: 'My mum came and said I was going into care. I was crying my eyes out because I didn't want to go. Then the social worker turned up and took me. They put me in a children's home and I just kept kicking off because I was so upset. What else can you expect?'

In two groups, children discussed **what happens if a child wants to move placement**, rather than being moved when they didn't want to go. The groups agreed that this was difficult: 'Had some not so nice foster carers and my social worker didn't allow me to change.' Sometimes a young person has to make a placement break down completely if they want to move: 'I wanted to move, so I had to do something bad'; 'I kept absconding – the plan wasn't working'. As one young person put it, 'My last placement change was a victory for me.'

Figure 4 gives children's answers to a question about whether they had found that different placements expected them to keep to different household rules, and whether this was a problem. This was something that had been raised with us in past consultations.

Figure 4: Do different placements have different rules you have to keep about everyday things?



Number of children voting for each answer. 70 people voted on this question.

Two thirds of the children answering this question told **us that they had found that different placements they had lived in had different rules they had to keep about everyday things like whether you are allowed to get food out of the fridge whenever you want, or whether you can have a shower whenever you want to.** Over half the children who had found different rules in different placements said that these differences had caused them some problems.

Moving to a new placement could mean **losing out on your hobbies and activities**: 'I was doing karate and drama but it stopped.' It could also mean you felt banned from where you used to live: 'You get moved out of an area and are not allowed to get back in.' For others, it could mean a better social life: 'I knew the young people who came to live where I did'; 'the change was good'.

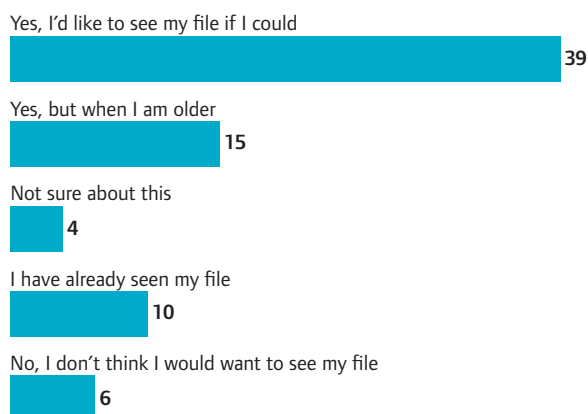
'I wanted to move, so I had to do something bad'

Having a social care file about you

Children in care have details of their lives recorded in their social care files. **Some children told us that having big arguments put on your file was something that happened to children in care, but does not happen to children who aren't in care:** 'if you argue, it goes on your file and in your record', but if you are not in care, 'if you argue with your mum, it doesn't go in writing against you or to your social worker'. One child said, 'They do daily reports on what you are up to. It's like I am being watched.'

Not all children thought that they were allowed to see their social care file: 'If you ask for the file, they can refuse.' Figure 5 gives the children's answers about whether they would want to see their own files.

Figure 5: Would you ever want to see your social care file



Number of children voting for each answer. 74 people voted on this question.

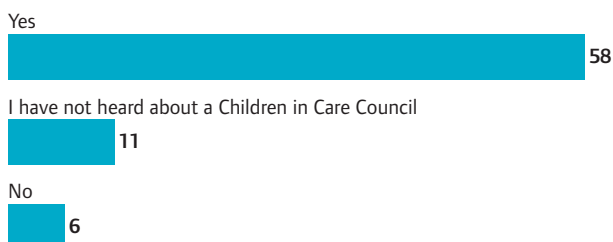
Just over half the children we asked told us they would want to see their social care file straight away if they thought they could. One in five wanted to see their file when they were older. Only six out of the 74 children who answered this question said they never wanted to see their file.

Being represented by a Children in Care Council

Under government guidance, each social care authority should have a Children in Care Council to represent the views of the children in the council's care. These are not always called a Children in Care Council, but may be called by a different name. In one of our discussion groups, a young person had been listening to other members of the group talking about bad experiences in care, but wanted to tell us how positive she thought the Children in Care Council was in her area in helping to make things better for children in care now: 'We have participation meetings and we can ask, "Why aren't we getting this?" When you point out things that are wrong, you can get things changed. It's good.'

In Figure 6 we can see what children told us about how much difference they thought the Children in Care Council in their areas had made to them personally.

Figure 6: Has your Children in Care Council made any difference to you?



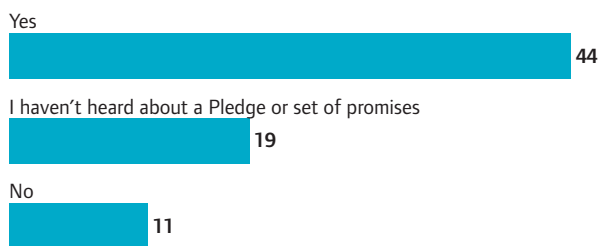
Number of children voting for each answer. 75 people voted on this question.

According to the children who gave us their views on this question, over three quarters thought their local Children in Care Council had made a difference to them – but 11 of the 70 children who answered the question told us they had not heard about a Children in Care Council in their area. Very few – six out of the 70 – knew about their Children in Care Council but thought it had made no difference to them.

Having a public set of promises made to you in a council Pledge

Something else that has been set up for children in care under government guidance is that each social care authority is expected to make a 'Pledge' of promises to the children in its care. Many children and young people have told us in other consultations that many of the first meetings of their Children in Care Councils were taken up with developing their authority's Pledge. At our consultation days we asked children to tell us how much difference their council's Pledge had made to them personally. Figure 7 gives the children's answers.

Figure 7: Has your council's Pledge made any difference to you?



Number of children voting for each answer. 74 people voted on this question.

Well over half the children who answered this question told us they thought their local council's Pledge to its children in care had made a difference to them, but a quarter hadn't heard about such a Pledge. Eleven out of the 74 who answered the question knew about their local council's Pledge, but didn't think it had made a difference to them.

Comparing Figures 6 and 7, we can see that children thought their local Children in Care Council had made more difference to them than their local council's Pledge had done. Children were more likely to have heard of their Children in Care Council than to have heard of their local council's Pledge to its children in care.

Being moved to a new school when you change placement

Children told us that changing to live in a **new placement also affects your schooling**: 'You can't really minimise the impact of a placement move on schooling. Moving in with strangers is on your mind first and you just can't think about anything else. It's bound to affect your schooling.' 'The bottom line is you shouldn't be moved. It's horrible having to go to a new school because you're in care. How do they expect you to do anything?' Changing schools in the middle of a course was very disruptive to your learning and passing exams: 'If you have to leave halfway through a course, you then have to start from scratch.'

As well as affecting how someone was doing at school, having to move schools also meant **losing friends and having to make new friends**. This can be very difficult when you are going through a bad time anyway: 'The move was bad. In care you're different. I didn't know the area, was away from family and friends and was made to feel isolated in my new school.'

One point that arose in one group was that moving from one school to another could sometimes mean that you lost out on any education allowances that had been made.

Some children were concerned about **how confidential a new school would keep the information that they were in care**. One person said, 'The teacher left information about me on the table about me being in care.' Other people, both teachers and children, are naturally curious about why a newcomer has moved into their school: 'people were asking me why I was there'; 'they need to keep it confidential'.

The **time it takes to travel to school** was raised in our discussions. Moving to a placement a long way from your school could mean ‘nightmare transport to and from school, being late quite a few times, time away from learning’. One child told us they had to ‘get a taxi every morning, takes an hour’. As one child put it very simply, ‘Need to avoid travelling too far.’ However, changing to a school closer to where you had moved to live was a good thing: ‘Foster carer got me into a close-by mainstream school.’ When planning placement changes, ‘social workers should find placements closer to schools’. Or, as someone else put it more bluntly, ‘If they’re all so much for education, they should find closer placements.’

‘Moved to a school where the kids liked me and didn’t bully me’

Changing school is a major event: ‘It had a big impact in a big way for me.’ However, as we know from our previous consultations, **changing school when a placement changes can just as often be a good thing as a bad thing**. Here is one young person’s experience of changing schools, having behaved badly in their last school: ‘I chose with my carer a school with her help and I got in. I made friends quite easily so was OK.’ Some other comments from our groups about changing schools: ‘moved to a school where the kids liked me and didn’t bully me’; ‘kept in touch with my old friends from school’; ‘the last two schools have been really supportive and not made an issue about me being in care’.

It was clear from many discussions that changing school is a major issue when changing placements, and that it can be either very bad for the child (‘worst place on earth and then double it’) or very good.

Whether or not to change schools, and how well the new school would fit the child’s needs, should be thought through as part of decisions about placements, and schools should be chosen carefully: ‘My social worker and their manager chose my school for me.’

Experiencing living in both children’s homes and foster families

Many children in care have not only moved from one placement to another, but have also lived at different times in both children’s homes and foster homes. We asked children in our discussion groups to tell us, from their own experience, how these two sorts of placement compared as places to live.

We were told about two main ways that children’s homes and foster homes were often different from each other. These were **how far the people looking after you tried to be like parents to you, and the number of other children and young people you were with**: ‘in foster homes you’re living with a real family. Children’s homes try to make it like living with a family but you get different staff etc’; ‘a children’s home is better because I don’t like people trying to be my mum and dad like in a foster home’; ‘in foster homes, you’ve got someone who really cares for you’; while in children’s homes ‘staff are more like your friends’.

Views were not as straightforward, though, as saying that children's homes have staff while foster homes have people acting as parents looking after you, and that you get to meet more children in children's homes than in foster homes. Some foster carers were very careful not to try to act like your parents: 'In foster homes they don't try to be parents, they look after you and try to give you the best possible opportunities.' One young person told us that children's homes and foster homes are often 'not too different'. Also, some children and young people prefer to live with a group, while others prefer to live in a smaller family. Some prefer carers acting like parents, and others do not want this and prefer staff. It all depends – 'It's about choice.'

Some children told us of other **good things about each type of placement**. We heard that in foster homes, 'you don't have to share stuff and have more free time'; and 'people can focus on you as an individual not as a group'. If there are other children already in the foster family, some children may find it easier to fit in. Foster families usually offer better holidays, and 'foster care is more secure than a children's home'. In foster homes you do not feel so 'watched' as you might by the staff in a children's home: 'in a children's home you get watched more, foster home they leave you alone'; 'in a children's home they watch you in case you have a fight'; and in a children's home you feel 'institutionalised, saying every time you are doing something'. However, 'foster care is a form of attachment, which is good'.

On the other hand, we were told that living in a group of other children in care suits many people: 'You can mix with people your own age. There are more opportunities to have fun. It feels more comfortable. You get a bit more privacy and can be yourself.' Another view was: 'It teaches you how to share with others and learn more about different cultures and

religions.' Living with others in care in a children's home means that you do not stand out as being different, as you might do if you lived in a foster home: 'If in a foster home you don't want to have to explain to everyone that they are not your real parents.' However, coming from a children's home can make it more obvious to everyone outside that you are in care: 'If you're in a foster home, not everyone will know, but if in a children's home everyone will know.' How it feels to be in the two different placements can be very complicated.

In our discussions we were told of some other differences that children had found between life in children's homes and life in foster care. In a children's home you have to ask for food if you want something between meals, you don't get so much pocket money or choice in how you spend your money, and mealtimes can be fixed and not suit the time you get home from school or college. When you are expected in and what you should do are more likely to be fixed according to your age than for you as a person, and different age ranges can be more difficult in a group in a home than they would be in a family. You are also more likely to be asked whether you are ready to move on to independent living.

In a foster home it matters much more how you get on with the carers and the rest of the family. If things start going wrong, you can be pushed aside, especially if the foster carers have their own children. If you do something seriously wrong, you are more likely to be moved on from a foster home than you are from a children's home.

One young person told us how they felt about the two different sorts of placement: 'If my family didn't work, why do I want a family? I want an independent life in a children's home.'

Being placed to live away from your home area

Although children and young people didn't discuss this issue much in our groups, one point was made very strongly. This was that whether a placement in a new area, a long way from **home and friends, works out depends a lot on how good or bad you are at making friends**: 'it's all right for some people that can make friends'; 'some young people end up in their shell and be shy'.

Some other points were made during our discussions about being placed outside your home area. One was that **sometimes you are placed outside your own area, and then later on your corporate parents simply decide they want to move you back into the area you started from**. Another point was that sometimes in a big city, such as London, a child can come from one council area but be placed in the area of another council, even though they are not far from each other. One person told us that for them, this hadn't been a problem, since they were able to keep their same social worker and they lived close enough for their social worker to visit them easily. One group told us that moving out of the area, or back again, usually meant changing schools. One person told us that they had 'missed out on school work so didn't know what I was doing'.



Being returned to your parents after living in care

Some young people in our discussion groups had experienced returning home from care. One group told us that **when someone goes back home from care, they need more visits from their social worker to check that things are working out at home than they had needed when they were in a care placement away from home**: 'the social worker should visit us more often if living back at home'; 'you have to make sure we are settled in and ready to make a fresh start for us to re-establish the relationship with our parents again'. One person told us their experience of not being visited enough after they had been placed back at home: 'I didn't have a choice. They should have come to check if I was OK, because I wasn't. I had to sleep on the floor. They should come around every day depending on your case.'

One child said that they were pleased that they were being closely involved in whether or not they should go back home yet: 'They are trying to send me home, but are consulting me a lot.' Another young person simply told us, 'I got placed back home, but it didn't last.'

The words of one child about being in care but placed back at home give us the last word for this report:

'I was able to see my dad, which was good because I forgot I was in care, but remembered when the social worker came to see me'



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