

‘How was your day?’

Learning from experience: informing preventative policies and practice by analysing critical moments in care leavers’ life histories.

Sally Holland, Carol Floris, Anne Crowley and Emma Renold
Voices from Care Cymru and Cardiff University School of Social Sciences

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The *executive summary* is a short version of this report which is deliberately accessible in style for participants, other young people in care and care leavers, practitioners and the general public. It is presented as a separate document in booklet style.

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1. Introduction and background

This was a qualitative study of the life histories and experiences of 16 young people who had spent significant periods of their life in the care of local authorities living in Wales. This group is known in the UK as 'looked after' children. Looked after denotes being provided with accommodation by the local authority on a voluntary basis or because the child is subject to a Care Order. The term also refers to children subject to a care Order who have been placed at home or with relatives or friends under supervision and by formal agreement. The research idea arose from an earlier study conducted by two of the authors with children and young people living in care '(Extra)Ordinary Lives'. The earlier study aims were mainly concerned with exploring the benefits and obstacles to conducting participative research with young people living in foster care (see Renold et al, 2008; Holland et al., 2010). This research was designed to follow up on some of the important emerging substantive themes arising from the (Extra)Ordinary Lives study, using one of the most promising methods from that study – life history interviews with recent care leavers.

This study was about 'learning from experience'. It was about asking young people to look back on their lives in care, at critical and key turning points, reflecting on what helped and what didn't help and asking about their key messages, in order to inform future policy and practice. Sixteen young people were interviewed about their lives over the course of two in-depth individual interviews. They were 8 men and 8 women aged between 17 and 25 who had experienced a wide range of experiences at home, in care and after care. They were contacted through Voices from Care and other care leavers' organisations. Those who took part wanted others to learn from their experiences – both positive and negative. Full details about the research methods are included as an appendix.

Research with looked after young people is a growing field in social work and social policy and increasingly researchers include the perspectives of children and young people directly. One of the authors conducted a recent research review in this area (Holland, 2009a). She noted that this field is demonstrating increasing methodological and theoretical diversity. She also noted a general absence of young people's input into quasi-experimental and outcome-focused research. Much research with looked after young people relies on surveys and semi-structured interviews, often exploring a specific issue such as leaving care services, education or health.

Research with care leavers is often related to measuring outcomes or discussing their contemporary experiences. A search of the literature reveals very few research studies that ask care leavers to reflect back on their life experiences. Exceptions include Snow (2008), Unrau (2008), Samuels, (2009) and Gaskell (2010). Unrau, Snow and Gaskell's work differ methodologically from this study. Unrau's Canadian study involved 22 one-off interviews with adults up to the age of 65 and concentrated on the impact of placement moves. Snow reports on research with 27 young care leavers in Canada who were interviewed by peer researchers by one-off telephone interviews that explored their care experiences. Gaskell's study in England included a smaller sample (10), some of whom were interviewed in pairs

and the one-off interviews took place in cafes. Samuels's work was conducted in the USA and her study included a similar age range (17-26). She conducted one-off interviews about relationships and support with 27 young people in four different states. Related findings from these studies and others will be referred to throughout the report. One study has used life-history interviews with a related population (trans-racial adoptees) (Patel, 2005) but our current study appears to be a rare attempt to use life history techniques to enable care leavers to reflect back on their lives as a whole, over more than one interview.

Studies of outcomes for young people who were looked after for all or part of their childhood reveal that this is varied population. Many will achieve in ways that are conventionally recognised as successful by the general public (Chase, 2006). They will attend university, enter steady employment and establish homes and families in adult life. Many outcomes for care leavers are generally improving across the UK with, for example, numbers attending university aged 19 rising from 1% in 2003 to 7% in 2009 (Cabinet Office, 2009). Unfortunately care leavers are much more likely than average to experience unemployment, homelessness, substance misuse, mental ill-health, early parenthood and leaving school with few or no qualifications (Cabinet Office, 2009, Lamont et al., 2009, WAG, 2009). However, it should be noted that for many who have experienced some or many of these outcomes, they will still regard their lives as successful because, for example, they have succeeded in being a teenage parent, they have gained work despite having no qualifications or they simply know right from wrong and care for other people. These types of definitions of success can be seen in this report and have also been noted in other studies (Chase et al., 2006, Drapeau et al. 2007).

Research about children and young people's experiences during their time in the care system has explored the effectiveness of different types of care setting, such as being placed in a family and friends placements compared to foster or residential care, or specialist foster care compared to mainstream fostering. In the UK, there is a preponderance of file studies, semi-structured interviews and surveys. In the US there are a number of quasi-experimental studies and panel studies. In the UK, one of the largest recent studies by Sinclair and colleagues concluded that: 'Children are more likely to succeed in foster care if they want to be there, receive skilful, committed parenting, are attached to a trusted adult and have a good experience at school' (Sinclair, 2005: 123). This is a good summary of the results of many research studies. The findings in this study provide detailed accounts of what it feels like to have at least one, but often all, of these elements missing from a life in care.

In the UK, concerns over the rights of children in care, following a series of scandals about abuse in residential care settings and shock over poor educational, employment, health and social outcomes has led to a concentration on providing specialist help in key areas such as education, leaving care services and advocacy and tightening systems such as reviews and planning. Whilst welcoming these advances, one of the authors of this report (Holland, 2009b) has argued that they may have inadvertently led to a neglect of basic attention to access to continuing caring relationships for children and young people and also a portrayal of young people as simply *recipients* of care rather than active citizens who contribute care and help to others. The findings in this report back the current policy thrust towards an emphasis on educational and employment outcomes. These were vital for the participants,

particularly as young adults and in retrospect. However, the participants, in many cases with extraordinarily reflective and in-depth accounts, clearly demonstrate the gap in establishing continuous caring relationships with adults to replace those that their birth parents have been unable to provide for a range of reasons. It is therefore important to consider the need for educational and employment opportunities to be provided in the *context* of meaningful relationships with a supporting network of adults and peers.

2. Findings

In order to reflect the research design and analysis, the presentation of the findings attempts to reflect both the life trajectories of the young people and the themes which emerged across the sample as a whole. Therefore the findings section is divided into broad life stages. Under each of these headings, the key life events for the young people in our sample are described. We then draw out key themes under each heading. Most of these themes are relevant across the life course, but we have grouped them in the life stage at which they become particularly acute or pertinent.

A. Birth family and coming into care:

By the age of 5, half of our 16 participants were no longer with their birth parents. Six were living in foster care and two had been adopted. The two who were adopted would each later come back into the care system. Of those that knew or shared why they had come into care, it was for reasons of parental substance misuse, physical abuse or neglect. Of those remaining at home, two were living with mothers who were mentally ill and one was experiencing serious neglect and abuse.

This section discusses relationships with birth families throughout childhood. Of course this is rooted in early experiences at home with birth parents, which participants were able or willing to discuss to a greater or lesser extent. One thing that is clear is that for nearly all of the participants the birth (or sometimes adoptive) family remains an important presence throughout their childhood and early adulthood. They may be a strong physical and/or emotional presence. Of note is how strongly narratives about siblings appeared in the interviews, even though they were rarely living together.

(i) relationships with birth parents

It was striking how strongly emotions came to the fore when discussing birth parents, with many differentiating between mothers, fathers and step-fathers (for example feeling sympathy for one and hatred for another). Anger, hatred, disappointment, longing, concern and empathy were all expressed in the interviews. Inevitably some participants held fairly conflicting emotions towards their parents and of course feelings often changed over the years.

Feelings: Many expressed **anger** at birth parents, particularly mothers. Becca's comment below is not untypical of the sample, although her anger at her mother for abuse she suffered before coming into care at a young age, and her mother's actions and inactions since then.

I can't really forgive her, because she's laid too many, she's engraved too many marks upon me ... So, I just think, well you know, good riddance to you and don't wish anything upon her but, you know, I won't be going to her funeral or anything, because she, you know, she has been evil and selfish and that's what it is. (Becca)

A very small number of participants could be said to have expressed some **empathy** with their parents' life circumstances. One or two were able (as adults) to see how their parents must have struggled and their anger towards them and hurt had declined somewhat. For example, they could see that their parents had been very young, in negative relationships, or mentally ill. Mike noted that his mother had been very young, not much beyond childhood herself, when she had her children and he feels that his and his siblings' behaviour contributed to her struggles. Only one (James) has a mainly **positive** relationship with his father. He came into care later, because of his mother's mental illness. He still has some resentment towards his father but in hindsight can see that his father had many struggles of his own.

'I can see in his face that you know that I'm a constant reminder of his failings as a parent' (James)

Other emotions included **longing** to be with parents, particularly when young and when first in care. Now as adults they have a more negative view of their parents and are glad they were not returned to them. A few felt **abandoned**. When Phoebe was in her early teens her father moved abroad and left a false address. This was a second major loss for her as her mother had recently died.

Relationships and contacts with birth parents were often **changing**. Regular contact often petered out as they came into teens, then perhaps picked up again for a brief period in early adulthood often but not always when they left care and lived independently. For one young woman, relationships with her adoptive mother had improved a lot since she had had her own child. Another had grown much angrier with her mother now that she herself had become a mother and knew what it felt like to unreservedly love a child. Cynthia, who had felt angry with her mother since she had committed suicide when Cynthia was a child, now felt quite pleased when people said she looked like her mother. A particularly detailed and poignant story about changing relationships with a birth mother and the many conflicting and painful feelings associated with this is given by Calvin:

'I was about thirteen now, and my sister – my foster mum got my nan and my sister to take me in on half terms and summer holidays and we used to go there and stay with my sister – my sister was pregnant and she said 'd'you want to go and see mum and stuff' because my head was like 'I wonder what my mum's like?' and I used to think that my mum was this amazing woman and everything, so I was just curious and went to meet her and it wasn't really that nice'.

His mother then became an embarrassing and painful presence on the edge of his life in foster care.

'I went on a school trip... and afterwards they said that we could catch a bus back ourselves – we were walking around town and then I saw my mum and she was (*homeless*) and the other children in the class had seen her and I ran away – so, so fast – my heart was beating so hard it was so – horrible because I felt so helpless and I didn't know whether I should care or not, I was angry because the

others had seen her and then in school, everybody used to shout (*about his mother*) when I walked down the corridor’.

His mother’s presence on the edge of his life was for a period a painful secret that he concealed from his foster carer whom he suspected would disapprove.

Quite understandably, several young people feel fairly **conflicting** and contradictory feelings towards their parents. Within the interview they expressed both positive and negative emotions towards their birth parents, most of whom they perceived as having failed them in some way but whom they often still loved or felt a connection with.

There were also a few who discussed their parents in **distant** ways, suggesting that they have disowned them or it is too difficult, painful or complicated to have much to do with them. One of two mentioned that they have moved beyond wanting to have a relationship with their birth parents by now.

I didn’t know none of them so why the hell do I want to prove anything to them. I don’t need to prove anything to no one, because I made who I am, my mother can’t take no credit for it, my father can’t take no credit for it, I made myself.
(Mike)

(ii) Relationships with siblings

These represented the most positive birth family relationships discussed in the interviews. Many came from very large families, and it was striking how different siblings’ experiences could be. Several had lost touch with siblings through adoption. Some felt protective of siblings who had had worst experiences than themselves, or were vulnerable due to special needs. Two described how attempts to return home after many years in care failed, partly because siblings at home resented their return. Stella said she had been brought up with different values, more material possessions and she resented her mother’s attempts to discipline her.

A small number of respondents felt a profound sense of responsibility for their siblings. One was angry at what he felt the system had done to his brother. This respondent was the most negative about the care system, because of his brother’s experiences:

I’ve had to deal with this, I was the one who was there for my brother.... But, I love him and I just think the system failed him. Because now he’s going to suffer for the rest of his life. I don’t think he’s going to make it to thirty myself. And I blame Social Services for it. I mean, they offered – they took him off my mum to give him a better life. (Mike).

On the other hand Oliver noted that his sister, who had had one foster carer for her whole time in care, had positively benefited from her time in care.

Rhian had acted as a carer for her younger siblings. She relates a story of profound feelings of loss when being separated from her young siblings who called her 'mum'. One of her siblings was adopted and she had had a final contact with him 8 years ago.

It was vital to me in those years – it was losing the contact with my brothers and sister that sent me off the rails – just like not knowing how they are, what are they up to, knowing – because when I was at home I was sort of like playing the mothering role in the home – it's like I knew everything my brothers and sisters were doing in school, it's like I'd dressed them that day – I'd bath them at night, I'd read my sister a bedtime story sort of thing and it's like I would tidy their bedrooms – it was like I'd do everything in their lives and just to have it all cut off and having all these people like apparently taking care of me... I had so much going on and I was totally heartbroken that they took like my baby brother and my baby sister away from me and it was just like it – it broke my heart in two to just think that somebody could do that to me like. Because even though things were never good at home, that was one thing I could always rely on like I had my brothers and my sister – you know... eh, still now I even sit and I think to myself – has my baby brother ever had a broken bone, is he like you know, – is he into skateboards, does he wear hair gel ... that's how close I felt to him, like not knowing those things makes me feel so far away from him and makes like the distance so hard to overcome

A small number of participants reported ongoing positive relationships with foster siblings, that had continued long after they had ceased living together.

(iii) other family

On the whole, family and friends care (kinship care) featured relatively infrequently in these life stories. Five participants reported fairly positive relationships with grandparents, with one providing care for some time, one for a short (and unsatisfactory) time and three more had good relationships with grandparents that they could stay with occasionally. One young man had had a couple of unsuccessful attempts to live with aunts and uncles. One young woman, who had almost no immediate family, wrote off her extended family as being dishonest and untrustworthy, 'my grand-mother she's like – you hang around long enough and she'll empty your bank account sort of thing' (Phoebe). On the whole, however, extended family members did not feature significantly in most of the life histories.

(iv) defining family

Towards the end of the interviews participants were asked how they would define their 'family'. Many found this hard and several couldn't name anyone that they would regard as family. Others found it relatively straightforward. There was a range of definitions of WHO would be in their definition of a family, as well as what a 'family' means to them. For example, James named his birth father, some other relatives and his friends as being those he regards as family. Those with stable relationships named their partners and Layla added her boyfriend's family. Luke defined his former residential home as his family. Most defined

WHAT family is as being about feelings and care rather than biological ties. Cipher knew his feelings were different for his birth dad than his foster parents because he felt little emotion when his birth dad was seriously ill. Steve-Dave says he's on his own, except for his children (who he doesn't live with). He searched for his family for a long time, but his dad was dead and his mother disappointing. He found peers in children's home to be like family. Mike was one of the few who used blood ties as his main definition. He says he's stuck with his birth family as family but doesn't care about them at all.

Key issues relating to birth families

- Lack of information. Many did not understand why they were in care when they were children, and some still feel that they lack information.
- There appears to have been an underestimation in some cases of the need for contact between some separated siblings. Relationships with siblings range from being extremely close to almost complete indifference (particularly when they have been separated for some time). This reminds us that there can be no norm in terms of placing siblings together and contact arrangements.
- Some now say that social workers were right to over-ride their wishes to be with parents because as adults now themselves they can see that their parents could not care for them adequately. Some others expressed disappointment at the alternative which they and other children coming into care were provided with.

B. Middle childhood: the primary school years

Between the ages of 5 and 11, three more of our participants came into care, one of these because of parental substance misuse. One more had spells of time in foster care, but returned home regularly in this period. By the age of 11, 7 of our 16 participants were in foster care, 2 in residential care and 2 in adoptive homes. Five were still living at home. Only one had a stable foster placement throughout this period. The others had begun a pattern of regular moves.

On top of the loss involved in changes of primary carers, some of the participants experienced close bereavements during their childhood. Four had experienced sudden bereavement of a birth parent or long term foster carer through suicide or drug overdose by the age of 13. Two had siblings who died as babies.

Patterns of care: loss, learning to be nomadic and looking for love

Nearly all of the young adults in this study had a childhood that could be described as 'nomadic'. For many, this pattern has continued into adulthood. Several could not recall all of their moves, but many had over ten and a handful thought that they had had more than 25 places of residence after coming into care. The fewest were experienced by two who had had only 3-4 homes each. A couple of young people were able to describe how moving had become a habit that they couldn't break. It was noticeable that from an early age the majority of interviewees had regular disruptions of primary carers, and that none had an adult who had a positive relationship with them *throughout* their childhoods. At least three

young people were able to identify a significant loss that left them unable or unwilling to form an attachment to a new carer. Three had recently made contact with early foster carers and found hearing about their early lives, and why they had moved, emotionally important. Some of the most positive and lasting relationships were with carers with whom they had stayed very briefly. Such poor experiences of lasting care meant that even small acts of kindness from carers became significant and noticeable. The best carers treated them genuinely as part of the family, cared *about* them as well as for them and showed a willingness to stick with them.

Nearly all of the life stories are marked not only by frequent change of carer, but also changes of birth family circumstance, changes in school and changes in circumstances since leaving care. Although the first and second interviews were only 2-4 weeks apart, several had experienced major changes between interviews: house moves, job moves, going to prison, birth father getting in touch for first time, change of partner.

Loss

Very many of the interviews were marked by stories of frequent losses of primary relationships, including several bereavements. Sudden losses of social workers they had been close to with no explanation came up in several interviews. Phoebe kept waiting for her social worker who was absent on sick leave to return. As usual she had brought a present for her back from holiday with her carers. Eventually when she enquired she was told that the social worker had died some time ago. Calvin describes the sudden loss of social worker he had had for about 12 years:

Calvin: He was still around – till (*town*), I think it was about – twelve – I was about thirteen when he went....

Interviewer: Wow that is a long time.

Calvin: So, it was a very strong relationship, I mean he'd known me, he'd seen me from birth.

Interviewer: Yeah, gosh – and that's unusual isn't it?

Calvin: But, the saddest thing was that he just disappeared.

Three of the young people were affected by suicide around the age of 12. Two of these lost their mothers to suicide and one a long-term foster carer. Suicide is a particularly sudden and shocking loss, yet there is little recollection from any of these three that they had specialist help or counselling following these bereavements. Another young man found out as a young adult that his father had died through substance misuse many years before and two others had birth families that were affected by the loss of babies (one before the participant was born).

New families and becoming nomadic

Most of the interviews involved young people recounting many moves. Many had moved so often that it was impossible for them to recall each one.

Stella: well I have had twenty seven different placements in all! That's moving around from the age of three to sixteen – moving round like foster homes, children's homes. I moved up to England ... once to be adopted. It was just like - I've been in every children's home in the (valley). And if you went up to my local authority and mention my name, my local authority would go 'Oh – my God!'

Placement stability is a key policy issue for looked after children's services. There has been a fair amount of research conducted that compares the different types of accommodation, and other interventions to try to find ways of promoting stability (Holland et al. 2005, Sinclair, 2005). Several of the participants were able to explain in some detail both how it felt to move regularly and to give some explanation of how their moving became a pattern in their lives. These stories give important detail to the policy discussions and quantitative outcomes studies that are concerned with this issue. As reported in the previous section, Rhian had experienced the sudden loss of her younger siblings for whom she cared deeply, when they all came into care. Her insightful view of how she got into a pattern of moving is worth quoting in full:

Yeh, because what I found – that would happen quite a lot is – I mean, yeh, with being in a foster placement for a couple of months – yeh I would get bored of it and I would start testing the limits, you know and it's... but, then it's like – once you do start testing the limits with that foster mother because she hasn't got any power over you really, she's got like the responsibility for you but she's got no power to make you do anything, so it was sort of – I'd push the boundaries, they'd have enough and give up and there would be a phone call to the Social Services – 'get this person out of my house'. And they'd be – right this is a temporary placement – there's no more foster placements – back into the children's homes. So, it was like one big vicious circle – and it's not only that – when you're moving around so much – like you're getting kicked out of one place or you're refusing to go back to that place – you don't know who your next person is going to be – looking after you, you don't anything about them, you don't know what kind of food they'll in that family, you don't know what time they'll eat, you don't know what's bedtime, what's the laundry system. So, it's like you're changing everything – getting changed so often and you get used to it, and you know, it's like – after two or three months of being in a place – you think 'oh my god when's the next move coming? When are they going to get sick of me? When am I going to have – sort of..... and in the end you stop asking so many questions – you just do it, sort of like an automatic reaction that sort of like gets drummed into your brain and you just – like there's no grounds for stability in care because everything is just sort of like volatile, you don't know what's going to happen next, it's like a day to day basis thing (Rhian).

Rhian describes how pushing the boundaries until she was asked to leave became almost an automatic reaction to change and to the feeling of strangeness associated with being somewhere new. Layla explains that she was moved a lot when she was young as there was a danger of her parents finding her. Thus moving became a way of life for her. As she got older, her behaviour led to some of the moves:

Throughout life was like, about, I was in about 14, 15 different foster placements because they broke down and we didn't get along, and things just... things got really hard for me at the time. And they were just a sort of a place that [unclear] crash, and things didn't work out, so I kept moving and moving and moving. Some of them wasn't... some of them when I was younger was not my fault, it was because of my circumstances and my background. And then as I got older, um, my behaviour changed. (Layla)

Rhian and Layla's accounts both indicate that moving frequently became an expectation and therefore a habit or cycle that they found it hard to escape from. Two young men provided explanations that an early loss made it difficult to settle. Both felt that their subsequent lives had been blighted when they had been moved from foster carers they had loved, and had had no further contact with them. Calvin describes how, following a sudden move from long-term foster carers as a 7 year old, his life became characterised by multiple moves:

and then I started doing this whole going into different families. But because I was so settled (before) – there was no way of me being settled in the other homes. They couldn't settle (me) and I couldn't and I think people knew that they couldn't because I was already – I was already, you know. ...
[Interviewer: You were already attached?] Calvin: Yeah. So, being moved it was quite distressing and a lot of the rejection I went through, – I met people and they would – I would stay with them one weekend and they would say things and that and I'd never see them again. I never had a reason why. I never really under.... because you're a child, people didn't really take the time to explain to you.

Calvin had made contact with these early foster carers by the time of the second research interview and movingly related how relieved he was to find that they had never wanted him to move on and had always missed him.

Oliver had had multiple placements before moving to a stable foster home. He was there for three years before his carer suddenly died and he was abruptly moved. He was unable to settle again and estimates that he has lived in 30-40 placements. 'So I just went and took a huge step back or a couple of steps back and just kept on doing what I was doing, moving around...' Oliver's life story is marked by his seemingly unresolved grief and the lack of clear explanation from adults for his situation. He has had three spells in prison as a young adult.

Continuity of relationships

There was no particular pattern to whether former carers and other significant adults kept in touch with young people after they had moved on. Most of the young people were able to identify one person who had a continuing presence in their lives, but this was rarely someone they had known for many years. It was often someone they had met or stayed with in their teens and surprisingly it might be someone they had stayed with only fleetingly for respite for emergency care. There appeared to be no official encouragement for carers to keep in touch and in the minds of some of the young people we interviewed, ongoing

contact between carers and the young people who left them had been actively discouraged. When it did occur it required effort on the part of the carer and the young person, with some making contact through Facebook. Very few, if any, had maintained a relationship with a foster carer from their early or middle childhood. Some had maintained some sort of relationship with their birth parents throughout their lives, but, as described in the previous section, this was often fraught with difficult emotions. Most had had more social workers than they could count or name. Only the very best or worst stuck in their memories. Features of the best and worst are described in a later section, but for the purposes of this theme it is worth noting that there was little experience of helping relationships having any enduring quality. This is disappointing in the face of evidence that sustained relationships are vital for promoting resilience (Gilligan, 2000).

Phoebe provides an example of how significant carers may be short term carers. She was no longer in touch with her long term foster carers. When asked to describe who was 'family' to her she replied:

I suppose those people in (place) are a little bit like mine – I've got to go up there for dinner at their house, and stuff like that.

Interviewer: But you were only there a few months really? Were you?

Phoebe: Four days!

Interviewer: Four days? Isn't that funny!

Phoebe: Yeh it is and I thought four days I was living there and she's helped me a good bit – with Social Services....

Interviewer: And that's presumably why you kept in touch with her?

Phoebe: Yeh... So like the woman in (another place) – we still meet up for a drink.

Interviewer: Yeh. And you were there – how long?

Phoebe: Two weeks.

Several others, including CIPHER and Carrie described how their most significant former carers were respite or fairly short-term carers.

Key issues

Few appear to have had any formal help with feelings of loss of primary carers, including bereavement.

There were almost no examples of young people who had had a continuous positive relationship with an adult from early or mid childhood into adulthood. Samuels (2009) writing about care leavers across the USA also comments on this absence of 'relational permanence', suggesting that it should be as important a goal as 'permanency' in the form of long-term foster care or adoption.

C. Teenage years in care

The remaining 5 participants came into care between the ages of 12 and 15. Two were for

reasons of parental mental illness, one because of the participant's mental illness, one because of abuse and the last as an asylum seeker from abroad. Two who had been adopted as babies came back into care in early teenage years through behavioural problems. Almost all of our participants experienced significant change during this period—for 10 there were rapid and multiple changes of carer. 8 spent significant periods in residential, care, with two settled in specialist homes. One spent 7 stable years with a grandmother, whilst two others had failed attempts to return to parents or relatives.

Boundaries and discipline

A strong theme for many of the interviews was that at times during their adolescence participants' behaviour spiralled out of control. They all expressed a wish that there had been more boundaries or regret that in getting involved in bad behaviour they had missed education or, in one case, ended up in prison. Young people who had spent time in residential units often (but not always) reported an undisciplined environment. This was the case for many of those who had been in local authority units not for the two participants who had spent long periods in specialist out of county, presumably private, residential care. Several had moved between many units, often due to behavioural problems, but also because local authorities were going through periods of closing down units. Several of the young people mentioned that a group atmosphere of bad behaviour would develop and a couple said that their behaviour declined seriously after arriving in a children's home. Oliver moved to a children's home in a city after several years in a series of foster homes in the countryside:

I went over to them (the other residents), seen what they was doing sort of thing, and I've always been the sort of person I have to go one better than everyone else sort of thing. So I seen what they was doing. Boy, that's minor, like, can they do something else. That's how I was even worse, got caught for it and prison sort of thing. (Oliver)

Rhian said that she soon learned how to misbehave when she started mixing with other young people in care. In retrospect she wishes someone would have helped her stop:

It was just, there was no stability, there was nothing stable – to say right, this is your placement, you're staying put, don't care what you bloody do, doesn't matter who you abuse – you're bloody staying here! You know, there was no kind of authority to.....

Interviewer: Would that have been good?

Rhian: Yeh, because I think if somebody would have said to me – 'Right this is your last straw, your last placement – after this you're off to a secure unit', I think it would have sort of shut me up a bit and I would have thought – oh shit no more placements, I'd better keep my head down.

Stella contrasted the lack of rules in residential care with those in foster care:

But, I mean, the bad thing about residential places is you don't learn nothing, really, no life skills. But when you're in foster placements, I think, like they got more chance of getting them to comply with rules, but like, well in my one foster placement I used to have to do my dishes before, used to have to do the dishes once a week or lay the table or do something – or walk the dog. But when you are in residential you done nothing – you have to keep your bedroom tidy and that's it. You have like your weekly pocket money.

Mike explains that he quite enjoyed at the time having few boundaries in residential care but that ultimately it was not good for him. Although he has held down several jobs as an adult, he often has difficulty getting work without qualifications:

I'd say the majority of my life in care was good, purely – because I did what I wanted, you know what I mean? and I think this is where, this is where the problem is – the fact that all these care kids got so much freedom, they got so many rights and I'm not saying rights is a bad thing, but I'm saying, what I'm saying is you've got to have some sort of system where, you know, a kid can't just decide to get up in the morning and decide – I know what's best for me, so I'm not going to school. This cannot happen, because if it carries on, if this continues then we're always going to have this 70% of care leavers don't go off and get a job, you know what I mean?

For some, the lack of discipline was less than they would have received at home. Mike and Stella each reported that they found it difficult to accept discipline from their birth parents when they had failed attempts to return home during their adolescence after many years in care, much of it in residential homes. Although Stella reported some very positive experiences of residential care, she also felt strongly that there should be more boundaries, suggesting that staff should be allowed to withdraw pocket money and treats such as TVs and play stations, like in a 'normal' home. She recounts how as a pregnant 16 year old, trying to sit her GCSEs, she ended up trying to control residents' behaviour that was keeping her awake at night, because staff appeared powerless.

A more minor theme was over-control. In foster care, and in stark contrast to much residential care, some felt that there were too many rules and that they were applied unfairly. Two young people felt accused of wrongdoings committed by foster carers' children. Several complained about having to have police checks on friends' parents for sleepovers, especially as they reached the age of 16.

Yeh – your common sense would tell you your foster mum would ring up their parents say 'etc. Etc. They're coming around' you know, communication like you would with a normal parent. And there is, for me there is too much regulation. Obviously there's going to be children that need, you know, yeh, more protection, you know and that's just common sense and like I know that. But like I just think there needs to be less, I think there is too much boundaries. I think, you know, young kids in foster care – they're wrapped in cotton wool out of fear of what is going to happen to the adults. (James)

Mike too, mentioned that most parents used their common sense and checked out what they thought of parents before they let their kids sleep over. He said he lost friends because their parents were so put off by all the regulation. Phoebe moved to a new carer about the time she turned 16. She met her boyfriend at this time and had to report to her carer many times a day where she was, her boyfriend and his father were asked to have CRB checks and she resented her carer writing a diary about her daily movements. She felt over-monitored for her age and level of maturity. This issue was reiterated strongly by young people who took part in follow-up consultation events to the research. It is interesting that this is an ongoing issue despite the issuing of guidance in Wales in 2004 noting that CRB checks are not normally necessary for overnight stays in private households and that foster carers and that 'Looked after children should as far as possible be granted the same permissions to take part in such acceptable age appropriate peer activities as would reasonably be granted by the parents of their peers'¹. Most of the young people in this research were confronting these issues after 2004.

Conclusion: Boundaries and discipline

A few of the young people's whose lives were particularly chaotic in their teenage years have mixed feelings about what they needed at the time and what would have helped. There is some contradiction between interviewees and even within single interviews about whether they needed more discipline and boundaries or to have been cut a little slack and allowed some freedom, even to make their own mistakes. This was part of a bigger ambivalence that some of them felt about whether they felt *normal* or not and whether they needed to be treated exactly the same as other children, or differently because their circumstances were so different. In the following extract Oliver expresses this ambivalence:

I think that's one of the big failures; they just don't know, well, like what a kid is sort of thing or what a care kid is, I suppose. And it's like me like consciously singling and picking kids out, yeah, because that's all that's ever happened to me, I've been singled out, yeah. So it's mad for me to like single myself out but like it's like a care kid is a completely different thing to a normal kid, yeah, because I don't know what kid's going to... a family to go home to, yeah. And like they've got that support network around them, yeah; a care kid is on his own, he's in care on his own, yeah. Like the reason a young... like these are kids that are stuck in like an adult sort of situation (Oliver)

Oliver states that he got fed up of being singled out as a 'care kid' but on the other hand his situation *was* different and he did need some specific attention that was related to his situation. Oliver's rather poignant turn of phrase 'a care kid is on his own' also relates to one of the over-riding sense that a reader gets from some of these interviews, that in these

¹ National Assembly For Wales Circular Nafwc 50/2004

<http://wales.gov.uk/pubs/circulars/2004/english/NAFWC50-04-e.pdf;jsessionid=p6JtMW9SYb1KMxhD8KBnGw8FvtIHPxKw8y99tGMTyKymJ187ZQXrl-309001812?lang=en>

battles with boundaries some young people did feel on their own and unconnected to those trying to care for them. Some hinted that they acted up at times to provoke the rejection that they thought was inevitable. In conclusion, there are fewer concrete suggestions to be made about boundaries than might be drawn from some of the other sections. Some of the young people in this study feel that they needed to be treated the same as other children in some ways and yet differently in others. They needed clear boundaries and someone to say 'stop wrecking your life' some of the time, but not bound up by petty rules and over-strict boundaries at others.

Education: achievement, exclusion and stigma

School and further education were important themes in almost all of the interviews. Experiences of schooling and teachers were very mixed. The respondents can be divided into roughly three equal groups of those who would describe their educational experiences as entirely negative, those who were mostly positive and those who had mixed experiences. On the whole, girls appear to have had more positive experiences than boys, particularly in terms of relationships with individual teachers, although there were exceptions to this. Both boys and girls equally reported bullying and stigmatisation from peers. Gendered aspects would warrant further investigation with a larger sample. Cipher the only example of a male respondent who described his educational experience entirely positively. He had also had a *relatively* stable time in care, although he had had a couple of changes of foster carer in his mid-teens. For him, and Phoebe, stable schooling appeared to act as a protective factor when foster care was unstable:

Cipher: Um, I, I did well in school, I did fine in school. I had a maths teacher I got on really well with, and a history teacher. I had lots of friends, I liked school I did. It was good.

Cipher's remarks summarise two of the key issues in educational experiences – relationships with teachers and relationships with peers. There were, however, for most of the participants further, external issues that strongly impacted on their school experiences. Firstly there were changing placements. This often meant either a long taxi ride to school (which marked them out as 'different') or a change of school. Secondly, there was a culture in some residential settings of school non-attendance. Thirdly, there was the impact of negative life experiences on concentration and behaviour in school. These themes are now considered in turn.

Relationships with teachers and the education system

Individual teacher and whole school attitudes could make a difference to young people. There were several examples of teachers (collectively or individually) going out of their way to be understanding of young people's situations. Here is just one example from a young woman who stayed on in school and passed her A-levels and went on to University:

I think because my teachers knew that I was in care, like if I had to go out for a meeting – they wouldn't be like 'oh where are you going, what are you doing?'

They were like understanding if you get what I mean, so like when I was moving around loads I wouldn't have my jumper and my tie and stuff like that and my school shoes and they like – to me they understood. Like when I thought I was going to be moving to my new place – they were like 'oh we'll give you a school dinner ticket and whatever we can do' . And they used to – if they saw me they used to stop and say 'how are things going?' and 'if you ever need any help?' and in the classroom, no they were really good. (Pheobe)

In contrast to this, several young people reported that they felt picked on by teachers who (they felt) singled them out as unlikely to achieve or as troublemakers. A number of the young people felt that they had been put in special classes for those with additional needs unnecessarily and that this had led to them not achieving. For Luke, however, this was the right place for him: 'They built a school on the site (of residential placement). I wasn't allowed in a proper school. Not really good enough. Can't sit in a classroom all the time. Still can't.' Sophia, too, had a good experience of having one-to-one support in the classroom due to her specific mental illness. She went on to pass 5 GCSEs. Michael, an unaccompanied asylum speaker, went to a school with many other children for whom English is an additional language. He had specialist help there and felt that the teachers and fellow pupils were nice and supportive. Others felt that their special educational needs had become somewhat lost in the moves:

Oliver. (My foster carer was) a teacher, yeah. Because I had ADHD, yeah, because like she put a statement on me basically and what that meant was I had to have someone in the class with me. Like which is a good thing at the point I was there, but then when I moved away from here then in different counties, yeah, like because like because for me to get into a school I had to have someone there. It was hard for me to get into school, yeah. All the funding that was going to pay for this person to be in a room was with the council, so I moved from one council to another council. And like, so I went like months of being out of school'.

Stella similarly noted, 'And because I was moving around, they didn't pick up my dyslexia'.

Some of the respondents reflected on how young people in care came to have a difficult time in school. They spoke about how teachers had little experience of the care system and were unsure of how to handle issues arising. James felt that his school over-reacted to his behaviour, calling in his social workers when his parents still had full parental responsibility. He admits that he responded by escalating his bad behaviour. On reflection, he thinks that his school were at a loss of how to deal with him.

I should have been a straight A student but I think they were a bit – I don't think they'd had the experience with it to be honest – people in care, they just....frightened of doing something wrong.(James)

Mike felt that teachers should have one-to-one supervision when trying help young people in care:

'It's not fair on teachers either to have to deal with these care kids and not know what they're dealing. The problem is – is you can't blame the teachers then for letting the student down when they don't know what they are dealing with, you-know-what-I-mean. So I think that they should be, teachers also should be supported more like social workers and foster carers, like social workers got to have one to one with their bosses – support.'

James felt that the school would have been in a good position to help him when things were going wrong at home before he came into care, and that they should have been more involved in the assessment of his family situation:

'They could've contributed to any problems they'd see me having in school because I would literally, you know, my mum sent me to school with, one morning threw a bowl of cornflakes over me, sent me to school, dried milk on me like ... the school should have taken me into the office, you know, not – in front of my friends 'why are you covered in milk?' you know'.

FE colleges were notable in the interviews as being generally reported as being supportive learning environments for young people. College counsellors and individual tutors were reported as having taken a special interest in individual care leavers, checking out that they were okay and supporting them through difficult times. For example one young person had suffered a serious assault in the last year and their college tutor had been the key supporter during this period. Becca noted that college had helped in practical ways and with emotional support:

The college I'm in now has helped me out with - free meals and stuff like ...they can understand the situation I'm in...I see the counsellor in college, so, you know, he tells me if I need to see somebody – I wouldn't speak to them full on but I just say – look I need to go and see the counsellor – 'yeh you can go' – that's what I mean... not too much but not too little, as long as they understand, you know (Becca)

Relationships with peers: support and stigma

Two of the young people (Pheobe and Cipher) experienced relatively stable school experiences, and both talked about how peers and teachers supported them emotionally and educationally. However, a number of young people related some strongly negative school experiences, including Carrie who was the only participant who went to the same primary and secondary schools throughout her childhood, having long taxi rides to ensure this. 'one, I was English, and, two, I was adopted. So those were the two reasons why I used to get bullied a lot' ... I was always bullied and stuff so I didn't have many friends...I was just always on my own.' Cynthia recalled being called names regularly. She ended up punching a girl who called her 'motherless'. The majority of the young people felt that they were bullied to a greater or lesser extent in school.

Stigma: There were two aspects to stigma, issues to do with their birth families and issues to do with being in care. Two respondents spoke about the stigma of being at home or in

kinship care placement and being physically neglected, leading to their stigmatisation in school:

But my Nan wasn't like washing my uniform and it just wasn't really nice at home with my Nan, because it just wasn't working. (Calvin)

Rhian: when I was at home ... my hair was always messy and you know, my clothes were like kind of trampy and was always second-hand, I'd never had new clothes when I was at home... And there was – like I never smelt nice, my mother never bought me deodorant – she never used it for herself – why would she use it for her kids? You know. So, it was just all that sort of thing. I'd already been bullied then anyway. I'd been called Buggy and Smelly and what-have-you and saying that I'd got nits and stuff.

Rhian went on to recount how her first foster carer taught her how to take care of her hair and body and an older foster brother also ensured that bullying ceased. Therefore her school experiences in terms of peer relations at least, improved when she came into care. However, for others, there were clear examples of how the stigma of being looked after led to difficulties in school. These related to subtle inter-personal issues – peers picking up on their 'difference' and exploiting this. There were also institutional practices that could be more easily changed. As has already been mentioned, many respondents spoke of the excluding effect of having to get permission and even CRB checks done on parents, if invited to a sleepover. Other issues were – not having the correct uniform when moving schools and being called out of class for reviews and other meeting.

Layla: That was when I was younger, and still, still in high school and people would ask well, why, why have you got a different signature, and ... I didn't want to lie, to say, 'I live with my parents; everything is all happy', because it's really not. I just turned around and said, well, I don't live with my parents and I [unclear] accommodation. But, um, things got worse, and it ended up bullying. Bullying came into my life because I didn't live with my parents.

Pheobe: Yeh because everyone else, they'd go home and get a form signed, the next day they'd bring it in. But then like mine's like been for a month and then like 'why haven't you handed it in?' and then I'm like 'I can't get it yet because my social worker's not doing it' because I only told like a very few people in school that I was in care. And then like we used to have meetings and stuff in school, they'd like pull you out of class, and then I'd go back into class and they'd be like...Yeh like 'why did you go out of class?' and you know, 'are you in trouble?'. You get to telling fifteen million lies to different people to sort of cover your tracks.

Phoebe was quoted above as saying that teachers were very good at not commenting on her need to go out to meetings (with social workers) from class. However, this did not prevent the inevitability of friends and classmates being curious about where she was going.

Placement – impact on education

There were varied experiences of education when in residential care. Layla, who had had more foster placements than she was able to recall, moved into residential care in year 11. Although she changed schools at this point, she reports that she achieved 8 GCSEs, 5 of which were grade C or above:

I mean, people probably think a children's home is always naughty children; well, the children's home I was placed in was, to be honest, one of the best days of my life, because my confidence went from zero to ten. They helped me with my school work; they helped me with my GCSEs and to pass them, even though it was the roughest time of my life.

She described how a positive attitude in the home, combined with supportive teachers in a new school and good friends, made her feel happy and fulfilled.

Yeah. I made loads of friends. All my friends used to come over the children's home and we used to have, like, loads of buffets and oh, it was brilliant...and then (school) they'd be, like, 'oh, it's great you're here, you know, well done for coming in, we'll always support you'. And they used to give me merits as well for (attendance) ... they just kept me going to make me feel better in myself because I was, like, a little bit less than everyone else, I had less than anyone else. They paid for my prom because of it. .. They paid, they rewarded me with paying for my prom to get...(to school). And then my, um, my prom dress, my hair was done. I had shoes, I had bags, I had, um, the actual transport to my prom from, um, the children's home and they provided that.

Stella, too, had a positive experience in the large residential care setting (now closed), that she was living in aged 16, with help from the residential workers who checked her homework for her and a voluntary agency providing an educational project within the local authority homes.

But they were really good because they helped me, I graduated at (*name of residential home*) I actually done my GCSEs! .. so I'd write it in my handwriting and they'd let me sit in the office (to use the computer) which like that's really big trust, like I'd sit in the office and do my coursework'

This for her contrasted with another home where she'd been allowed to miss school and 'do bugger-all all day'.

Unfortunately some of the others had more negative experiences of schooling whilst in residential or foster care. Although Mike suggests that he was difficult to help in his adolescence, he strongly feels that more effort should have been made to get him to school.

you know you're living in a children's home and there's eight kids, there's two girls you know and six boys. You knows you're going to end up doing what the

majority of the boys are doing rather than, which are probably stealing cars or taking drugs or drinking or something, you know what I mean...The one thing I didn't do was go to school everyday.

Steve-Dave described how he was expelled from school at 13 and then just 'hung around all day' in his children's home until he was 16. He now feels that he has plenty of life skills but not nearly enough formal skills. He later went on to say: 'and I would say it's partly my fault and partly the system's fault – it's a bit of both like.' A few of the respondents commented that carers and local authorities did not have the same drive for them to do well educationally as a birth parent would. Mike, quoted above, feels that a 'good' parent would have simply made him go to school, in the way that foster carers and residential workers felt impotent to do. This has clear implications for the role of the corporate parent. Mike and Steve-Dave both suggested that young people in care might be given rewards for going to school, because of the emotional and institutional barriers they face in getting there. Mike also suggested that care leaver adults might act as mentors to encourage young people to go to school. For Stella, a system a rewards was in place in her final care setting, and she looked forward to receiving these.

Phoebe, who did eventually make it to university, felt that she and her brother were not encouraged, pushed and provided for in the way that her own deceased mother, who had been a graduate, would have done. She waited a year and a half for a tutor to be found to help with an A level subject, with which she was struggling. 'They don't push you enough. And if it is a problem I think they should try to find out how to resolve it.' Both she, and the other university student, James, had had a long struggle of finding a route to university and battles to gain clear agreement from their (different) local authorities to provide the funding to which they are legally entitled. Phoebe was frustrated that she had to find out about university entrance procedures, stating that her leaving care workers lacked knowledge of this asking her simply to inform them where she was going when she had a place. She later found out that some universities have special schemes to help care leavers (The Frank Buttle Trust Quality Marks) and would have targeted these first if she had known. James had to rely on voluntary organisations, Voices from Care and Shelter to help him untangle and gain his rights.

The impact of regular placement changes on education was largely reported as negative. Efforts were often made to keep young people in the same school through long taxi journeys. Others changed school regularly and were as Stella puts it 'always the new girl'. As reported in other sections, statements of educational need were difficult to transfer and operationalise, and there was also the problem of different course work and new uniforms. Rhian spoke about the stigma of not having correct uniform for the first few weeks, and Calvin spoke about completed course work being lost in the moves. However, for a few, a school move could mean a fresh start, as is seen by the first extract in the next section.

Negative life experiences – impact on schooling

Finally, several young people commented on how difficulties in their lives meant that school became a low priority. They found it difficult to attend or to concentrate when they did attend. Rhian noted that she was too preoccupied with contacting her siblings and pending court cases to prioritise school. Calvin was too unhappy for much of his teenage years to make the most of schooling. Oliver summarises how it is possible to get into a negative cycle with home and school:

Oliver: And it's always, like, things like I never really got, um, a chance to sit down, do what I had to do, get my qualifications and then think about like that. It was never like that. It was always, ah, if I was going around school there was something going on at home and if there was something going on at home I'd just think, fuck, I'm leaving and then I'd just do something to kick off this mood actually. That's exactly what happened there for a whole... My whole foster life was just dabbling around

Summary of school experiences

1. Being recognised and encouraged for particular skills was affirming and encouraging
2. Where young people were enabled to have a long experience at the same school, peer support *could* be an important positive experience
3. Schools could be in a prime position to notice when young people are troubled, either when living at home or after becoming looked after.
4. Residential units can play a key role in either encouraging a positive or negative group culture regarding education to emerge in the peer group.
5. Individual teachers who pay particular positive attention (in a discreet way) to young people made a significant difference to their school experience.
6. A positive, stable experience at school with good peer and teacher relationships can help to mitigate the more damaging effects of placement changes and emotional upheavals in young people's lives.
7. Moving school was generally negative, but for one or two of our respondents it allowed a fresh start and chance to build a more positive friendship group.
8. Bullying and stigmatisation was a common experience across most of the interviewees. Some of these involved institutional practices that could be changed, such as ensuring a simpler, quicker system for obtaining permissions for trips and attending sleepovers and avoiding meetings during school hours.
9. Although only two of our sample had by this point gone to university (both were about to begin at the time of the first interviews), it was notable that both had faced long battles to obtain funding and work out their entitlements.
10. FE colleges were generally noted in the interviews as being supportive learning environments. Individual tutors and college counsellors were reported as taking a special interest in helping care leavers.

Relationships with professional helpers and carers

Calvin: It's a big thing, becoming a social worker, taking on a young person's life – I would say is as important as someone who's going to adopt or someone

who's going to foster because you become a part of that person's life and you can't just walk in and walk out....

Although some aspects of what worked in relationships with 'helpers' (social workers, keyworkers, foster carers, mentors, etc.) were mainly related to specific roles – e.g. there was more emphasis on action from social workers and caring from foster carers, there was more that was common across all types of 'helping' relationships. Therefore the analysis of what worked and what didn't work in these relationships is brought together in this section.

The findings in this section can be roughly divided into two main themes: **Action and connection**. Action is about making things happen, knowing their stuff, sorting things out. Connection is about being human, warm, caring, like a parent, treating them special, having a connection.

Action: Some workers appeared more able than others to 'make things happen'. They knew the system well, listened to what the young person wanted and made an effort to help them fulfil it. They were also prepared to 'fight their corner' and advocate for the young person. Here are a couple of illustrative examples:

Becca: Yeh – again, yeh she (*leaving care worker*) did support me in college, because I said like you know – kept saying it – saying I'm going to do college this year – another year gone by – yeh I'm going to do college, another two years gone by. So, she said 'right we're going to make this happen' so she did make it happen. So, yeh, she's fantastic, I like her.

James: Like, I was living, I was thirteen, so I was about thirteen when I got him (*student social worker*), living on top of a mountain – we had a farm – we had two retired people (*as foster carers*). That's when I started smoking and stuff...And this guy like really, fought my corner and got me into like pupil referral home tuition as well and, you know, I was getting onto my GCSEs because of him.

For Michael, an unaccompanied asylum seeker, one social worker stood out for being proactive: 'She was always ringing on the phone like how I am, what I need'. His only other experience of this kind of helpfulness was with a couple of voluntary agencies.

However, an even stronger theme than 'action' was 'connection'. **Connection:** Residential workers, foster carers and social workers were categorised by young people in terms of how much they seemed to care, their approach and the level of connectedness with the young person. This was sometimes exemplified through large acts, other times by brief 'off the cuff' remarks. One important aspect was demonstrating commitment to the young person, even when they had done something wrong. This was symbolically and practically important to young people who had often experienced serial rejections.

Carrie: I just went off the rails. I stole from them (foster carers), took off and then like a couple of, well, weeks later they, um, all had a meeting because they wanted me back, I wanted to go back there. They all had a meeting, took me

back, my mother [unclear] wasn't doing so well and said, don't bother having her back, she's ill in the head, she needs help. And like they basically stuck up for me and said, no, she's not ill, she's just got a few problems. Like we all sat down and helped sort it out.

Carrie's description of commitment was a common one, with many of the participants admitting that they had done something wrong, but gained from carers or workers who were prepared to give them another chance.

Another way that workers could show commitment and connection was through treating a young person in a special way. For Carrie this meant being allowed to use hostel staff facilities and getting a better room when she had a baby. For Luke, his former residential unit 'always drop everything – no problem' when he needs help.

Sticking up for a young person and being prepared to bend rules for them is the sort of role that a parent might be expected to display. At least three of the participants said that their best social workers ended up being like a parent figure for them. Mike explains 'like a parent' and how it differs from being a parent (in residential care):

I mean it's like, 'ask the staff'. I don't know, it needs to be more like mum and dad do you know what I mean? but not to the point where you're literally becoming mum and dad, because that would cause problems ultimately in the end. Em, a sort of more em, I don't know a caring approach.

In words that echo almost exactly a quotation from one of the participants in our earlier study (Holland, 2009), young people were able to give an example of how small acts demonstrate care and interest.

Cipher: I remember my foster parents in *town*. Whenever I used to come if from school they'd say, 'have you got any homework?', straight away. Um, they didn't ask me like, have you had a nice day? Whereas my foster parents in *other town* would always say when I came in, 'did you have a nice day?' You know, 'what happened today?' They'd be interested, and we'd chat about the day.

Similarly Rhian said about one of her first foster carers:

eh, she was different like, and she was more – she was caring, like she would sort of sit down like, when I was going to school for the first couple of days that I was there like I'd come home and she'd be like 'how has your day been, what did you do?' like and 'what lessons did you have?' It was just like basic conversation which I never had when I was at home

In yet another echo of those words: 'How was your day?', comes a recent Cabinet Office report:

When care leavers looked back on what made the difference to sustaining their participation in college, it was having someone, whether it was a Personal

Adviser, former foster carer or teacher, who kept in touch and asked how their day had been. (Cabinet Office, 2009, p.19)

Stella explained how keeping in touch with her baby's former foster carer had made a difference:

But for Mother's Day like she done me a big massive food hamper. But it's just having somebody there like – to know - know that I'm worth something to somebody.

Similarly, social workers and key workers could show that they cared by showing that they liked the young person, taking them out for a treat and going beyond the call of duty by getting in touch out of hours or on a special occasion.

Mike: we were a match made in Heaven anyway, because we got on really well. He (residential worker) used to come up, in his own time he used to come to the hospital, and see me while I was ill in hospital

The following extract is a humorous tale of a young woman's correspondence with the leaving care team. Beyond the humour, it is an important tale because it showed that they had an ongoing relationship, they treated her like an individual, even an equal, and showed a human face behind the bureaucratic machine. In other words, it was a relationship that went beyond the basic statutory obligations and demonstrated a connection.

Rhian: *her social worker had a rusty old car and she wrote to her manager asking him to give her a pay rise. She wrote: She's wrecking my street cred – would you advise that I wear a paper bag or she wear a paper bag over her head? Well the letter he wrote back – I was rocking! Well, he said 'I've got another social worker here named Dave, he's got a beautiful car but you may be even more embarrassed because he wears bright red lipstick, a big blond wig and wears stilettos!' He said – another solution is I could be your social worker but I don't have a car – I only have a tandem but it is a good job it is a tandem and not two separate bikes because otherwise I could ride off in one direction and you could go in the other – oh he was really funny and I kept the letter for years....*

Lack of connection and action

Most participants had stories of being let down by workers, feeling forgotten or a low priority.

I know what it feels like – you know – hoping and praying they're going to show up and then – you know, apologising the next day and then they don't, I don't – I've heard it all before – d'you know what I mean and you know, but, yeh that's my advice. If you're going to do something – stick to it and I do believe that. (Becca)

If they takes that young person away from their family for something.... serious responsibility to be there until like – well until the situation is resolved like, and not just dump them there and just show up once in a blue moon like. (Carrie)

For Calvin, this lack of attention means that you may need to provoke a crisis to get attention:

And what I had learnt from Social Services was that they are not going to help you until it's a crisis and if you are in a hospital bed, it's a crisis. If you're, you know, if you're – if your foster mum kicks you out – it's a crisis, if your house burns down – it's a crisis. (Calvin).

A lack of connection could mean that relationships with some social workers felt cold or uncaring. Participants wanted someone to spend time with them and to help them understand their situation rather than concentrating on procedures.

Pheobe's mother had recently died. She recounts that she was informed by her social worker that her father had emigrated in the following way:

She had come to visit for something and she was on her way out and she goes 'oh yeh, I told you about your dad?' and I was like 'no' and she went 'oh yeh, he moved to (*country*) – a couple of months ago' and I was just like – she just totally – on the way out, you know, like – a last comment like.

A summary table of helpful and unhelpful relationships is included at the end of this report.

D .Care leaving

All of the participants left care between the ages of 16 and 18. 4 moved into supported lodgings or B+B, 4 into flats on their own, 4 into hostels,/shared accommodation for young homeless or care leavers, the remaining three variously went to a mother and baby hostel, to live with a partner and to prison. Experiences were very varied at this time, with many experiencing moves and periods of homelessness. However a few had excellent care from charities or supportive landlords. Several struggled to continue education through unstable accommodation, with the two who went to university experiencing moves during exam periods. Some found hostels to be impossible places to study or hold down a job.

It is difficult to typify leaving care experiences because they were so varied across the interviewees. A few reported excellent services from leaving care teams. Some had relatively straightforward moves from foster care to supported lodgings to having tenancy or their own small flat or bedsit. A few had moved in with partners, some with more success than others. One was settled in halls of residence and had the option of returning to her

former supported lodgings in university holidays. Leaving care supported living run by charities such as the Church Army, Action for Children (formerly NCH) and Llamau had been successful for some. However, several had very poor experiences in hostels and bed and breakfast accommodation. These were particularly difficult for maintaining study or employment due to noise and chaos by other residents. This was noted by Michael, an unaccompanied asylum seeker: 'because people, they make a noise when you are in a hostel. You can't sleep, and if you can't sleep you can't go to college either'.

The following three themes are highlighted below, out of many that were spoken about by participants: age, maturity and skills, employment and the support of Voices. It should be noted that FE colleges and university were an important part of the picture for around half of the participants, but these have been briefly discussed in the earlier section on education.

Age, maturity and life skills

There were many issues regarding age thresholds and maturity, many of which are familiar in the research and policy literature on care leavers (Stein, 2006, Cabinet office, 2009, Rich, 2010). Whilst many participants felt they had maturity and life skills beyond that of other young people, several also felt that they were too young to live alone.

Carrie: Well I think it should be like up until twenty one really because then when that person's twenty one most people have already have moved out and it's giving them – what two years? Moving it from eighteen to twenty one, in that two years they could have a job, move out – by the time you are twenty one I think you should be.... ready to set off like basically.

Both Luke and Layla had to leave residential units in which they were happy when they were 16:

Luke: Left on my sixteenth birthday.

Interviewer: **And did you have to leave when you were sixteen – was that....?**

Luke: Yeah – that's when my placement ended.

Interviewer: **Yeah.**

Luke: I cried all the way up.

Sophia was allowed to stay in her specialist unit until the day before she was 18, but found it a shock being driven back to the city and, from her point of view, just left in a hostel.

Three participants insisted they were ready for independent living at 16, but when they regretted it, found that they couldn't return to foster care. As Calvin puts it, 'I wanted to go back to foster family – but it was a one way system and once you've gone in the hostel – you couldn't go back that way.'

Hard when you're still young:

I signed two pieces of paper to say I agreed to live in this property. She sat down for ten minutes saying about the rules; what I can't do, what I must and what I need to prove to, to be a good tenant. And she never showed me how to use the gas, the electric, nothing. So the electric was working, I found that out myself. The washing machine, all this I had to figure out myself and I'm only 17.
Layla

Stella felt that she didn't know many basic practical skills that she needed, such as how to turn off the stopcock.

(they) give us our £2,000 grant, or different rates in different authorities, give us a property to live in and don't teach us the basics for living in a property. I think there should be a lot more of that going on. They shouldn't judge us, like when we ask

Several of the young people mentioned that they were either lonely or scared when living alone after leaving care.

Several contrast their situation to other young people of the same age, of which the following quotation is one of many examples:

all the other students in my class were young – the same age as me but they were going home to their families and like it was harsh because I had to realise that five pounds was no longer money for going to the coffee shop, it was electric money and I had a whole different meaning to life and it was so fast.
(Calvin)

Similarly to Calvin, Steve notes that he is much more independent than his peer group and, unlike, Layla and Stella, notes that he was taught the practical skills he needed in a residential unit:

I think when I was in, in the children's home as well I had em, I started my life skills quite early like, independent living and things like that. I mean when I was fifteen I was going out and buying my own food and cooking meals for myself and doing things like that, so I think preparing me, yeh preparing, they, they didn't do everything, but they just started it off like and I think if it wasn't for them em, well I mean, I got friends now living at home with their mum and they can't cook beans on toast like...I do all the cooking in my house! (Steve).

Another issue to do with age was the cutting off of support at the age of 21 for those not in education. For two of the participants, both of whom had mental health difficulties but did not appear to have reached the threshold for adult services, this was a difficult time after many years in care and receiving support. One of these was receiving continuing support from Mind and Voices, but both of these participants would have liked more contact with helping professionals or volunteers after the age of 21.

Employment

Wade and Dixon (2006) in a study of care leavers in England, found that positive employment and career progression was intricately linked with delayed transition from care, stable housing and positive mental health. In this study, finding work appeared to make a big difference to some young people's self-esteem, stability and of course, income. Steve-Dave had been helped to find a Saturday job when he was 15 in an area that he was interested in. Although he had been out of school since he was 13 he had a fair employment history, although he regretted his lack of qualifications held him back. Layla had a job in fashion retail at the time of the first interview and gave her hope for the future, 'I want to pursue that and do something with it'.

For Mike, working has been vital for his identity and self esteem. He said that the only worker role models he had seen in his childhood were social workers and key workers, which didn't seem like real work, not 'the type of people who were getting paid for doing their job'. So he felt he had to develop a work ethic himself. His first job helped him turn his life around.

I sort of went through the leaving care and then I started, actually, got my current – my girlfriend at the time – pregnant and went through a really hard time – we obviously split up and I wasn't equipped to deal with all that – my head went, so I didn't eat, drinking all the time and taking drugs – just rotting away basically and then one day I spoke to my friend and his father owns a company –and I ended up working – doing piece work – getting in excess of £1,000 a week ...Just lagging, piece work – about £4.50 a square metre, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. So, I got my life together again, still involved with Leaving Care but I was working so I didn't really see them.

Unfortunately none of the participants were in long-term stable work at the time of the interview, although some, including Mike, had spent most of their time since leaving care in employment and five were in further or higher education. Two lost their jobs in the few time between the first and second interviews.

In England, the Cabinet Office report (2009) on education and employment for care leavers noted that consideration was being given to making the offer of an Apprenticeship to suitably qualified care leavers a statutory requirement by 2013. The report also recommends a phasing out of the use of hostels and B+B's as unsuitable environments for study or employment and more flexibility with housing options so that care leavers might be allowed to make mistakes and have 2nd and 3rd chances. The report also notes difficulties with Pathway Advisors for Care Leavers having enough specialist knowledge of education, training and employment issues. All of these recommendations would fit with the experiences of young people in this study. The Best Chance programme for organising work placements and training for care leavers in businesses in Wales appears to have had a successful pilot phase (Business in the Community, 2010) and it is vital to maximise opportunities for employment, training and education for care leavers, with pathway advisors being fully informed of opportunities.

The role of Voices from Care, Cymru

The participants in this research were contacted through Voices and other organisations that Voices have a relationship with, such as advocacy teams and care leavers' forums, and interviews took place in Voices offices, therefore it is probably not surprising that Voices as a redemptive experience is a strong theme. Nonetheless, the clarity and detail with which participants are able to explain HOW Voices has helped them is instructive. What Voices from Care appears to provide is several aspects that are needed by young people in care or as care leavers, that they do not get from family and they cannot get from formal services. These are informality, an open door policy, including access to workers' mobile phone numbers for out of hours emergencies, a forgiveness or second chance when they breach rules and possibly most importantly being with others who have been through similar experiences. Staff members at Voices, who are all care-experienced, can provide clear advice and strong advocacy on entitlements. They are also important role models for pro-social behaviour. Young people can gain skills and a sense of pride in becoming established as representatives for Voices by giving talks or taking part in consultancies and meetings. Participants reported that workers took them to other locations in England and Wales to look at case files, attend job interviews and to go to court. Here are just a few of many examples:

When I met other people who had gone through the same things as me it always made me a little bit stronger or a little bit more thankful (Calvin)

Yeh, I took that opportunity really, to relocate back to Cardiff. I came back, and I had quite a lot of support, not really from Social Services at all – from, you know, third sector voluntary, from Shelter and Voices from Care, especially Voices from Care. To help me gain funding and stuff and now – that's where I am, and like, you know, I've got somewhere actually I never thought was possible (James)

when you speak to the social workers you have to make an appointment with them but in Voices you don't have to. You just have to, you can come in like without the mention. (Michael)

So, like, they appealed more to me (*because all staff were care leavers*) – so I started doing a lot of things with Voices and they gave me a voice. And I've got to be fair to them – they've also helped me an incredible amount. Because like, things like public speaking, because I know – having the confidence to go to a University and speak to people who are training to be social workers (Mike).

E. Into adulthood and looking back:

Current situations of our participants were as follows: five were in college or university, two were working and one was the full-time carer of a child. The other 8 were currently unemployed, although 2 had significant employment histories. Several had significant life changes between research interviews, including changes of partner, job and housing

situation, suggesting that for some, stability still eluded them.

Forming new families

Although one of two had had fairly negative experiences of adult partner relationships, including one young woman who had experienced violence and a young man whose partner had denied him contact with his child, it was notable that for several, relationships with partners had been positive turning points in their lives. Several had managed to establish long term, sustaining relationships. Rhian, who had had an unconventional and unstable childhood at home and adolescence in care had married, successfully parented a young child and found employment as a young adult. For Rhian and others, there was an opportunity to create a successful new family that was deliberately in contrast to their own families of origin. Both she and Layla had found a new sense of 'family' in their partners and their partners' families. Becca had found that her relationship with her adoptive family had substantially improved since she had had her own child. Unfortunately three of the participants (two men and one woman) were not living with their children for a variety of reasons.

Hindsight and learning about the past

'Nor knowing' about aspects of their past, such as why they came into care, why they moved away from early foster carers, or information about their birth families was missing for very many of the participants. Several had sought information from case files. For some of these, this was a straightforward process, several others had battled for access, and one participant deliberately declined to look at her file as she felt that her birth family would be unfairly portrayed. It was striking how many gaps there were in young people's information about their pasts and how few material possessions they had in the form of photographs and family mementos.

Written records:

Becca's story was fairly typical in that she came into care at a young age, was aware that she had been abused, but was vague about many aspects of her past and even what had happened to all of her many siblings. She had first heard some distressing stories about the abuse she and her siblings had suffered by knocking on the door of a former neighbour when she was a young adult. She now was gearing herself up to reading her files. Like several of the other participants, she felt blocked from accessing much of the information as it concerned other members of her family, but she felt the need to access the information and 'move on'. She was not aware of ever being offered any life story work or other help with coming to terms with and understanding her past. She was also frustrated with various members of her birth family for refusing to discuss the past with her.

they're in the middle of doing it, because I've been on and on and on at them and now they've eventually got around to doing it because I keep telling them I'll never be satisfied until I see it and then I ain't exactly going to go to my mum or

dad saying 'oh you've done this or you've done that' that's where the time is to let go and to relax and obviously need to move on (Becca).

Stella had decided not to look at her files. She was not confident that it would give a balanced account and also feared that new information would destroy the already poor relationship she has with her mother. She had always wondered about her father and was disappointed to find recently that social services had always had an address for him but never given it to her. She had recently bumped into one of her first carers by chance, and was enjoying hearing positive stories about her past:

I imagine it's nice when you know where you come from It's nice to be able to sit with that foster carer and say 'what was I like when I was little?' Like they say I used to have my tantrums and that. They would sit there and laugh about it. (Stella)

Several participants commented on the power of reports (negative or positive). It is vital that those writing reports think about current and *future* audiences for reports. This does not mean that reports should be sanitised, but rather that the practitioner should be confident that their description of a child or adult is balanced, fair and evidenced.

Calvin: there was 'abnormalities' in me like sleeping on the floor and just things that weren't normal about me and – one thing that really annoyed me was that in one of the files it actually said something like 'Calvin is very feminine' and 'he likes drama and Calvin is very feminine' so they've dismissed what my emotions and my feelings were for –and when I read that it made me really angry

Reflecting back on time in care:

For Oliver, reflecting on his time in care was mainly negative.

my outlook at like, um, social workers and all that palaver really is, it's always never been good enough. Like I said, they started being employed, they're meant to be helping kids. There we go. They're meant to be helping kids, yeah, like taking them out of certain environments and putting them in better environments but that's not, like, I just think that's madness. I was taken out of a bad environment, yeah, but then like they put me somewhere then which was, like, I don't know, it like they never really, it wasn't like their aim was always to help me. It was about their aim was to facilitate me and that sort of thing. They never wanted to help me. They just wanted, like, to put me somewhere and, you know, just forget about me sort of thing. (Oliver)

For others, the assessment was more mixed, with some stating that they were glad they spend time in care, either because it was better than their birth family, or because it had toughened them and, for better or worse, had made them the person they were. Rhian's statement on this reflects her ambivalent feelings. She knows she needed to come into care, but wishes her experience in care had been more positive:

I just felt as if I'd been singled out, I mean not through any fault of Social Services, so I can't blame them – it's not their fault, kind of thing, it's not their

fault that my mum was the way she was or that my brother did what he did and things so. Like, I don't point the blame at them, but I think they could have done a hell of a lot more, to help me get through care comfortably rather than hitting the spikes all the time (Rhian).

It is notable that only one participant seemed to have some regret that he didn't live with his birth parents, although even he also said at times in his interviews that he had gained a lot from being in care. The others all clearly stated that their birth parents were unable, or unwilling, to care for them for reasons of abuse, neglect through substance misuse or mental illness.

I met a lot of good people through the care system and I don't knock it for everything, in fact if it wasn't for being in care I don't think I'd be half the person I am now, to be honest with you because it opened my eyes more to the World and what goes on in the World. (Mike)

F) KEY TURNING POINTS AND CRITICAL MOMENTS – WHAT HELPED AND WHAT DIDN'T HELP

a) positive turning points

Most of the young people were able to identify at least one positive turning point in their lives, after which their experiences got better, either temporarily or permanently:

- Coming into care (and hence escaping abuse)
- Moves from abusive/unhappy foster home to happier situation. For some moving into a residential unit was a very positive move, where they made constructive relationships with staff and were encouraged with schooling and moving towards independent living. Two participants moved to specialist out-of-county residential units where they had stable, long term positive care. For others, moves to residential units marked the beginning of a decline in behaviour due to peer influence and lack of boundaries (see below).
- A particular achievement making a young person realise that they are a worthwhile person (or to show others that they are worthwhile): this included getting into university, successfully caring for a baby, going on an adventure holiday, doing voluntary work, passing GCSEs.
- Taking control of a situation that had seemed out of control (e.g. demanding a move).
- Working and earning money.
- Meeting a partner and/or having a child were positive turning points for several participants. For some this marked one of their first opportunities to experience and create a loving, close, sustained relationship.

b) negative critical moments

Many negative moments in young people’s lives that seemed to spark a spiral of downward experiences, could be characterised as involving a lack of control, things being ‘done to’ the young person and a sense of isolation or even abandonment.

- Bereavement and other sudden losses of parents, carers, siblings or children
- Being abused (nearly always in birth family, but there were one or two concerning incidents in care settings)
- Finding out negative things about birth family as adults.
- Being rejected by carers
- Moving into residential units – getting involved in crime or just disorderly behaviour and truanting
- Committing a crime and being sent to prison (two participants only). These were described by participants as being to do with being involved in the ‘wrong’ crowd after negative placement moves.

Helpful and unhelpful relationships with professional helpers and advice on how to improve system

Supportive and helpful	Unsupportive and unhelpful
<p><i>All helping relationships</i> Sticking by through thick and thin Treat you a bit special – above others – like a parent would Go beyond call of duty (e.g. doing things out of hours or day off). Spend time with you. Have a sense of humour Understand because they have been through stuff themselves</p> <p><i>Particularly social workers and key workers</i> Notice your feelings: e.g. that you are unhappy in a placement. Make things happen. Do what they say they’ll do. have been with you long enough to be part of your history/life. Give space and don’t push too much Let you get to know them a bit Fight your corner Not too official – not just doing stuff out of ‘the book’. Listening, not just filling in forms. Someone to chat to when you need it – informal Give you the information you need (esp. after care). Explain about your situation. (esp. when young).</p>	<p><i>Particularly social workers</i> Not turning up Not doing what you promised Saying your view is important then ignoring or arguing against your opinion Inconsistent support – e.g. over-attentive when YP pregnant, but no support at other time. Just turn up in a crisis Judgemental written reports When bureaucracy /formality is the predominant communication from social services Workers who just leave without any explanation or saying goodbye Not knowing or not explaining the system, e.g. for university applications and financial support. Problems with service boundaries and out of county issues. YP lose out in these disputes (particularly in relation to education)</p> <p><i>Particularly foster carers</i> Carers who seem more interested in their money than your welfare Breaking confidentiality</p>

<p>Treat you as an individual, find out what you like doing and do it with you. Tell it to you straight if you are ruining your life, but also show that they care about the fact you are ruining your life.</p> <p><i>Particularly carers</i> Small acts that show care, warmth and affection. ‘How was your day’. Teach you things: self-care, practical everyday tasks, managing money, being polite</p>	<p>Not believing the looked after young person, always favouring the foster carer’s own child in a dispute Intrusive monitoring and recording Not staying in touch Lack of explanations</p>
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Summary

This report has highlighted many important issues for looked after children in Wales and beyond. Several of the findings reflect recent and past research and enquiry reports. In particular, we find a repeat of earlier findings that young people are experiencing many moves in care, struggling with education and having a high turnover of social workers. Many are unclear about their entitlements after leaving care and have had to struggle to gain access to higher education and access to information about their past. What is important about this research is the detailed and reflective accounts provided by young people, which give human resonance to the statistics on looked after children's and care leavers' experiences. It is also striking that many problems persist despite the length of time since the implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2001 and subsequent policy initiatives.

We have also included many positive findings. Many young people have displayed extraordinary resilience through life's difficulties and some have been helped in this by excellent carers, workers and specialist projects. The following recommendations aim to build on these. The recommendations have been compiled from young people's recommendations for policy, a question that was asked in each interview, and evidence from the interviews as a whole.

NB the recommendations should be cross-referenced with appendix iv. In appendix iv, each recommendation is listed, and below each recommendation is a report of the discussion from the round table event on 14th June 2010. These discussions will be further analysed and results included in the dissemination events listed in appendix ii.

Recommendations

1. Relationships

- Social workers are needed who are prepared to be committed to the young person over a period of time, who can engage with the young person in a direct and friendly way, who can be clear about boundaries but also prepared to bend rules and be flexible on occasion and to actively advocate and get things done for a young person, as they would for their own child.
- Foster carers and residential carers are needed with exactly these same skills as the social worker and who are also prepared to spend time with the young person, be interested in the small details of their daily lives and help them develop interests and life skills.
- Local authorities could consider how current staffing arrangements work against continuity of relationships with social workers.
- WAG/local authorities could consider how more decision-making powers (including use of budgets) could be delegated to front-line workers and carers to enable a speedy, flexible and individual response to young people.

- Similarly, some structural aspects of how placements are organised (commissioning some as emergencies/28 days only) also creates a culture of moves.
- Young people should be enabled and encouraged to keep in touch with former friends, foster carers, residential carers and social workers.
- Access to opportunities to meet and socialise with other young people in care should be offered, particularly for young people over the age of about 12. This should run alongside opportunities to develop interests and contribute to society more generally, such as through volunteering or joining clubs and doing sport.
- Consideration of contact arrangements should actively consider sibling and extended family contact. Impact on non-adopted siblings of children being placed for adoption should be taken into consideration and post-adoption contact (by letter or in person) should be actively encouraged.

2. Education

- Schools should work to ensure that a child or young person has at least one teacher in the school that they know they can talk to who understands their situation. The designated teacher role should be clarified and positive practice shared between schools.
- Foster carers, residential carers, teachers and social workers should work hard to get children and young people into school/ engaged in education – raising expectations; providing rewards, keep trying and work with their motivation
- Local authorities need to be more pro-active in providing help and support for young people to access further or higher education or training. This should not be just a one-off offer on leaving care. It should be easier to return to education. Personal advisors need to be more knowledgeable about routes to higher and further education and to actively enable young people to apply for courses and access their FULL entitlements. This might include coming along on open days and pouring over course prospectuses as a parent might.
- Young people need a combination of practical and financial help and support within the context of a caring and supportive (and preferably long term) relationship with someone from the local authority (inc. foster carers) to be enabled to make the most out of educational opportunities

3. Routes to successful post-care experiences

- More clarity and training needs to be given to the role of personal advisor.
- Care leavers need easy access to a clear list of their rights, entitlements and where to access help. Independent support services should also be available and accessible.
- LAs to extend standard provision for care leavers to aid routes to employment and training. All who want it could be offered an apprenticeship. All offered driving lessons.
- Routes to be flexible enough to allow for the fact that YP will vary in their ability to be ready (e.g. for employment, further education or training) and may need second or third chances.
- The transition to adult services for those who need it should be clear and pre-planned. Some who do not meet thresholds for adult services may still need to know where they can get help with everyday living after 21. Some access to services for

those who do not meet current thresholds may prevent problems escalating. Loneliness is a key problem that needs tackling.

4. Emotional and mental health

- Key question in reviews and everyday practice should be whether the young person has been given adequate explanation of their situation. This may need to be revisited at different life stages.
- High quality and specialist counselling and therapy, including bereavement therapy, should be actively offered to many young people in care, at different stages of childhood and early adulthood. This would not of course entail any compulsion to accept counselling or therapy.
- Life story work should be offered to all children, with appropriate level up-dates as they grow older. Local authorities should consider where and how boxes of mementos and photographs and running records of young people's life stories are kept, that may be accessed by care leavers.

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Appendices

- i. research methods
- ii. Dissemination and further development
- iii. Notes from feedback session with participants and other care leavers
- iv. Interview schedule
- v. Information and consent forms

i) Research methods

Research Aims:

- 1) To draw on the experiences and knowledge of Welsh care leavers to inform policies and practices relating to early intervention and prevention for young people who are accommodated or at risk of requiring accommodation.
- 2) To identify positive or negative key moments in care leavers' life histories when the intervention or actions of informal and formal networks affected their life trajectories, outcomes and ability to achieve their goals, from their perspectives.
- 3) To build on recent research work carried out by some of the applicants in order to further develop promising lines of enquiry from that work.

Research questions:

- 1) Looking back over their life histories, can care leavers identify critical moments which impacted on their life trajectories?
- 2) How did the intervention (or non-intervention) of formal structures and networks (social services, health, education, etc.) impact in these critical moments?
- 3) How did informal structures and networks (friends, family, acquaintances) impact around the time of those critical moments?

Sampling and access:

The study aimed to capture a variety of experiences of living in care, and therefore purposively sampled an equal number of a men and women and ensured ethnic diversity in the sample. There was also an attempt to include in the sample care leavers who had lived in a range of care settings, were parents, who had engaged in further and higher education and had gained a variety of employment experiences. The final sample was as follows:

- We interviewed 8 men and 8 women who had a wide range of experiences.
- 12 were white and 4 from black or mixed race backgrounds. One was an unaccompanied asylum seeker.
- At least two young people identified as gay or lesbian.
- Between them they had experienced foster, kinship, residential, adoptive, secure, mother and baby and hospital based care.
- After care they had experience of university, college, employment and unemployment, prison, homelessness, marriage and parenthood.

All potential interviewees were contacted by Carol Floris, the grant holder and an employee of Voices from Care, Cymru, a user-led organisation. Most of the sample were currently or previously involved with Voices from Care, although some were contacted through other organisations such as advocacy services and care-leavers' forums. The involvement of young

people who are still in touch with services might lead to a bias in the sample. This bias might be in favour of those who have experienced more difficulties since leaving care, and therefore have needed to stay in contact with helping, advocacy and campaigning organisations. On the other hand it might exclude the most isolated, who are not in touch with services. However, as the report will demonstrate, the sample included those who might be deemed 'success' stories – those who have entered higher education, for example - as well as those who find everyday life more challenging.

Interviews:

Interviews were designed to be as open as possible, enabling the participant to talk about their own life story in the form and order that was easiest for them. Once they had told as much of their life story as they felt able, the researcher prompted on areas of interest to the research study, where these had not occurred already. Areas explored through secondary questions included questions about key critical moments and turning points in the person's life, formal and informal helping relationships, experiences of education and understandings of the notions of family and care. The interview style might be likened to the 'biographical interpretative method' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). This method uses open-ended questions, attempts to elicit a story, avoids 'why' questions and uses respondents' ordering and phrasing in order to ask follow up questions. The question-guide can be seen in appendix 1. Like the biographical interpretive method, we recognised that the interview may prove to have therapeutic elements for the interviewee, but the interviewer did not attempt to offer therapy in the session (Clarke, 2002). Unlike the biographical interpretive method, the researchers did not draw overtly on psychoanalytic theory for analysing the interview transcripts.

All interviews were carried out by one member of the research team, Anne Crowley. Anne is an experienced social worker and researcher, who was until recently policy director for Save the Children, Wales. She is currently a doctoral student at Cardiff University. At the first interview, she discussed the implications of taking part with the interviewee. They were asked to sign a consent form which reiterated their right to withdraw at any point in the research process (appendix 2). The participant was then given the opportunity to reconvene at a later date for the main interview, or to commence straight away, following a brief refreshment break, again giving them the opportunity to withdraw. All participants opted to commence the main interview on the same day. There was a variety of responses. Many of the interviews could be described as very articulate and reflective accounts showing great emotional maturity and insight. Several found it hard to explain the course of their life events, particularly but not only those who had had multiple moves, and a few were unwilling to discuss long chunks of their lives, such as their lives at home before coming into care. Nonetheless, the data set as a whole contains rich and detailed accounts of these young people's experiences.

Following the main interview, the interview was transcribed and the researcher wrote notes about the main issues that had arisen in the interview and those she wished to follow up. The follow up interview had the purpose of allowing the respondent to elaborate on what they had said in the main interview, to raise new issues that they had thought of since and to confirm, amend or correct the interpretation of the researcher of the key issues they had

raised. They could also withdraw any information they had later regretted sharing (this happened on one occasion). Some of the follow up interviews were fairly brief. Others were almost as long as the main interview. In some, young people had done more reflecting and told new stories or further reflections on the same stories. Others were just used as a checking out that the interviewer had understood correctly, a summarising of key points and the young person mainly agreeing. This was important ethically to show that the young person had been listened to. It also gave them an opportunity to withdraw or alter what they had said.

Several of the participants had had major life events between interviews, including seeking out and meeting a birth parent or previous foster carer, becoming homeless, splitting with a partner and gaining or losing a job. The researcher was unable to contact one male participant and it is assumed that he was sent to prison following the main interview, as he had predicted. It appears that some of the participants had discussed their life story with their partners or thought deeply following the interview. Two had had life changing revelations between interviews. One had met her father for the first time in over 20 years. Another had traced his first and longest lasting foster carers and learned a lot more about his past. In both cases it is not clear if these reunions was triggered by the interview, but the second interviews show how new information can change their perceptions of who they are and where they have been. For example, the young man who had contacted former foster carers had learned that the carers had wanted to care for him long-term, and felt less rejected as a person.

The interviews were almost wholly concerned with talk. Although, interviewees were invited to bring material objects of importance to them, such as photographs none (check) chose to do so. This may have been because this request was not made clearly enough or because many participants had almost no records of the past such as photographs, or because these objects were too personal to take along to an interview with someone they had not yet met. One participant brought some of her own poetry to the follow-up interview. During the interviews the researcher sometimes sketched out on paper what she could understand of the participant's genogram or social network, or their main changes and moves. This was done spontaneously to help clarify when she was concerned that she was not fully comprehending the story being told, or to help move the interview forward. All but one of the interviewees agreed to the interview being taped and fully transcribed. The researcher wrote contemporaneous notes during the interviews with the interviewee who did not wish to be recorded.

Research governance:

The research design was approved by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. All interviews were carried out by an experienced practitioner and researcher, Anne Crowley. All interviews were carried out in the Voices from Care offices. Interviewees were offered alternatives to this, but none wished to be interviewed elsewhere. One participant asked for the Voices from care worker who was supporting her at that time to accompany her in the interview. All potential interviewees were given an information leaflet (see Appendix 2). All were given at least a week to consider the leaflet. Those who wished to take part were interviewed at a time and date of their choice. Transport costs were reimbursed. Great care was taken to ensure that the emotional needs of participants were met. The interviewer regularly asked interviewees if they wished to

stop or take a break when they became upset. The advantage of having the interviews take place in the Voices from Care offices was that workers were on hand should any have felt upset following the interview. The researcher was concerned about the mental health of one interviewee and with her permission discussed with Voices from care the possibility of obtaining counselling for her. All participants were given leaflets detailing sources of help and advice.

All participants were given a shopping voucher of £25 on completion of the research. This gave a strong signal that their time and expertise is valued. In our view this over-rides potential objections that the payment may have acted as an incentive to potential participants who may otherwise not wish to take part.

Data Storage: all data were securely stored in password protected computers or locked filing cabinets, in accordance with the Data Protection Act. Research interviews were anonymised on transcription, as soon as possible after the interview takes place. Participants chose their own pseudonyms.

Analysis:

Analysis incorporated both thematic, cross-case and within-case narrative analysis. Gubrium and Holstein (1998: 165) call this 'analytic bracketing', concentrating at different times of 'what' is said and 'how' it is said. All data were coded and analysed on qualitative software NVivo. Each person's life story was analysed individually at first, with close re-readings of the text to identify the key themes arising from each person's life story. The second stage involved a comparison of themes between participants, looking at themes that were in common as well as exceptional or contradictory cases.

Life history and life narratives research: methodological issues.

A number of problems have been raised in relation to the understanding of social phenomena (such as the experiences of looked after children) through enabling participants to tell life histories. Firstly there the issue that memory is selective and participants will choose to tell their life history selectively, either consciously or subconsciously. Most people will tell a story that is more coherent and rational than it may have been at the time. Asking individuals to tell their life narratives can lead to the telling of a story that glosses over the disruptions, contradictions, reversals and complications of life (McLeod and Thomson, 2009). But, perhaps because our cohort was young their stories often do emerge in the interviews with ruptures, contradictions etc intact?

Secondly, it has been noted that individual and societal experiences in the present will affect how life stories are told. For example, if someone's life is going particularly well at the moment, their life narrative may be shaped around how their life circumstances led to the current success story. This might be particularly explored by our approach to analysis, which attempts to understand the whole life history as a narrative about how the participant has made, or is making, sense of their past in order to live in the present and envisage a future. We are aware that they may have told a very different life history if we had interviewed them a few years ago, and may well tell a different story again in future years. Our participants are aware of that, several of them spoke of how they understand their lives differently now, perhaps because they have met others who have gone through similar experiences and therefore are developing a more politicised view of their experiences. Some express anger about the experiences of others they have met through

Voices, or have come to realise that certain things shouldn't have happened to them. A few feel lucky that they have had fairly stable experiences compared to other. Many are now able to look on events from hindsight. For example several say that they realise in retrospect that people were trying to help, particularly foster carers. One young woman said that as a teenager she would have clearly stated that she wanted to go home but that she now realises that this would have been disastrous for her. As McLeod and Thomson (2009: 38-9) argue, 'past memories are always also personal constructions within the present....The central issue becomes not whether memories are verifiably true or false, but what memories reveal about collective and individual contexts and experiences'. Thirdly, the interviewer's subjectivity will impede on the story being told and also on how it is selectively analysed and re-told (Clarke, 2002, Hubbard, 2000).

'At the same time, we must also be sensitive to issues of narrative collaboration. Listeners are not simply narrative depositories or passive receptors. Neither are they discursively homogeneous. They collaborate in both the whats and hows of narrative practice, invoking cultural meanings and expectations and supplying biographical particulars of their own, all in relation to the local auspices of narration.' Gubrium and Holstein: 181.

In our case there has been at least a two stage process of research subjectivity, with a different person taking on the role of interviewer and data analyst. Other members of the research team and wider groups with whom we have consulted have also offered insights and interpretations. With marginalised groups there is a responsibility to report life histories responsibly and not impose an interpretation on their life events that has been carved out of a selective understanding of their lives (Thomson and McLeod, 2009). Nonetheless, it should be noted that these are not straightforward factual accounts of 16 people's lives. Instead they have been recalled and interpreted in a form that makes sense to the person telling the story in collaboration with those listening to them.

Validity:

The sample size and the manner in which it was selected means that the findings are not generalisable across the whole population of looked after children. Young people in touch with Voices from Care Cymru and other advocacy groups and care leaving forums may be said to represent a particular element of the looked after population. They are unlikely to be those who have had the most stable and positive experiences (such young people may feel no need to be in touch with an advocacy, support or campaigning group). On the other hand, they are young people receiving some support through an organisation, therefore they are also less likely to be representative of those who have slipped through the net entirely and are, for example, street homeless or severe substance misusers, or in prison. Nonetheless, as described above, our sample represents a very broad range of care and post-care experiences and outcomes.

The aim therefore is not generalisability, but to produce qualitative findings that have been systematically generated and analysed, using robust methods. It is hoped that the findings therefore will achieve goals of plausibility, credibility and recognition amongst those with care or practice experience as well as the general public (McLeod and Thomson, 2009).

ii) Dissemination

- As this report has been drafted, the findings and recommendations have been discussed with two groups of care leavers and a 'round table' forum with care leavers alongside policy makers, politicians and other key figures was held on 14th June 2010.
- There is web-site, sign-posted from both Voices from Care and Cardiff University web-sites with reports and events listed.
- There will be a further discussion and dissemination as follows:
- Seminar for practitioners late 2010
- Training day for carers and practitioners in association with BAAF, 2010.
- Findings have already been used in teaching on the MA Social Work in Cardiff University.
- We will seek the opportunity to present the findings to the all-party group for looked after children in WAG
- We will send the report to the WAG members' research library
- We will discuss the findings at the all-Wales Care Leavers' forum in Oct. 2010
- Voices will use the report findings in their regular workshops with looked after young people.
- There will be at least two academic articles published in social work and social policy journals and plans for future academic development are discussed next.

Plans for further analysis and writing

1. With such a rich data set there is space for further analysis beyond this first stage of analysis which has been carried out for reporting reasons and which has mainly concentrated on policy and practice issues, which are likely to be of priority to the funder and policy, practice and user-led groups. The next stage of analysis will concentrate on more sociological and psycho-social analysis, including a close analysis of the life narratives in the interviews. Such analysis is likely to have practice as well as theoretical application because ways in which individuals make sense of their life story and 'package' it for an external interviewer may provide some insight into the development of emotional coping strategies and other aspects of resilience for life-long psychological health.

2. The second major plan is to reanalyse this data set in conjunction with the data set from the earlier 'Extraordinary lives' study conducted by two of the researchers (Renold and Holland) and to combine these findings into a book provisionally titled: *(Extra)ordinary lives: learning about relationships, families and living from the experiences of young people in care*.

iii) Group discussion 15th April 2010: Feedback session with participants and other care leavers.

Findings and recommendations made sense to these young people as they had had similar experiences.

One young man had had carers who just asked 'have you got any homework' and nothing else when he got in form school. They also broke confidentiality by speaking about his problems in front of their children and grandchildren.

One young woman did not have many PEP (personal education plan) meetings in school as she should have. She wished there had been a designated teacher to talk to. They might have understood that her behaviour was related to her home life. She found a very caring teacher herself who gave her time to talk and she felt this helped her reach university. Where there are good designated PEP teachers this could make a difference.

Several felt they had had wrong or confusing info about entitlement after care, especially around university and FE college funding. Things are not clear enough. 'everything feels a bit random'. The YP present supported the idea of having all information about rights and entitlements in one place and clearly spelt out.

There are problems about getting trapped by rigid rules. E.g. one young woman was having to move half-way through A-levels because she was going to be 18 and her funding would be changed.

Another was in expensive, supported accommodation, making it hard to get to get a job or do training as his rent would not be covered if he changed his status.

All the young people felt it was wrong that there were different rules and ways of working in private and local authority foster homes (for example levels of pocket money, foster carers being required to open and maintain a savings account). They don't choose which type they go to.

One young woman said that because of all their experiences the draft recommendations were 'mega-good'.

We should do research with young people still in care to make sure it's still relevant. You could send out the leaflets and then postcards for them to fill in.

The way the media shows people in care is not good.

We should send the research findings to all agencies including job centres, police, DSS, etc.

We should be told about our changing rights. There are new rules and changes all the time.

Most of the young people could relate to the leaflet of findings and recommendations, but we do need to recognise that everyone's experience is different.

Be nice to have consistent leaving care services across the country.

There should be a designated PEP teacher in all schools. PEPs are good.

There should be more flexibility about rules.

Other comments written down by YP:

'I think it's bad that if you've been in long term care i.e. from childhood to adulthood local authority social services use PAST ISSUES when you have your own children.'

'Corporate parents should act the right way!'

'safeguarding for 14,15,16 year olds is important as well as older young people'.

'should do a comparison study with children living in ordinary homes'

'cycle of deprivation – take children away from that and then put them straight back to it as young people.'

NB some recommendations were adjusted following this session.

iv) Report of discussions at Round Table, Cardiff University, June 14 2010.

Young people who are care experienced, politicians, civil servants, practitioners, funders, practitioners, voluntary sector representatives and academics.

Present: Rachel Warmeant, Dan Butler (Voices from Care), Anne Crowley (Cardiff University), DA Jones, Zoe Evans, Siobhan Galvin (Caerphilly CBC), Ann Young, Nadia Lovell (NYAS), Rhiannon Nicholls (Tros Gynnal), Sarah Austin (Welsh Assembly Government), Liz Newton (Peter Black's office, WAG), Helen Mary Jones (Assembly Member and Chair of Children and Young People's Committee), Viv Cornelius (WAG), Patrick Harper (WAG), Sean O'Neill (Children in Wales), Sally Holland (Cardiff University), Carol Floris (Voices from Care), Claire Turner (all-Wales care-leavers' forum), Lindsay Kearton (Consumer Focus Wales), Freda Lewis (The Fostering Network, Wales), Hillary Hill (WAG), Peter Hosking (Office of Children's Commissioner for Wales, Andrea Parker (BBC Children in Need), Marc Philips (BBC Children in Need), Rhian Williams (Voices from Care), , Keith Towler (Children's Commissioner for Wales), David Melding (Assembly Member and Chair of Special Interest Group for Looked after children).

Record of round table group discussions by theme and related to recommendations are included below. Recommendations are in **Bold** type, record of group discussions are below each relevant recommendation. In general there was agreement by all participants with the recommendations. Discussion revolved around the following: adding personal experiences which backed up those in the research, discussing examples of good practice around Wales and beyond, highlighting forthcoming legislation that may tackle some of the issues, discussing other practice and policy measures that may address some of the findings, discussing possibilities for further dissemination of the findings.

RELATIONSHIPS

- **Social workers are needed who are prepared to be committed to the young person over a period of time, who can engage with the young person in a direct and friendly way, who can be clear about boundaries but also prepared to bend rules and be flexible on occasion and to actively advocate and get things done for a young person, as they would for their own child.**
- **Local authorities could consider how current staffing arrangements work against continuity of relationships with social workers.**
- **WAG/local authorities could consider how more decision-making powers (including use of budgets) could be delegated to front-line workers and carers to enable a speedy, flexible and individual response to young people.**
- **Similarly, some structural aspects of how placements are organised (commissioning some as emergencies/28 days only) also creates a culture of moves.**

- Enabling social workers to *stay*, and have a continuous relationship:
 - Pay more, pay the same in each LA, have a career structure that keeps them on the front line, try to avoid agency social workers.
 - Look at Hackney and IFST models for looked after children teams
 - End culture of switching cases around the team.
 - The culture of participation and positive working relationships needs to be led and filtered down from AMs, directors, elected members etc.
 - Small SW teams mean that YP get to know all the staff and can speak to anyone of their social worker is away and vice versa.
 - Need to establish relationships beyond the box ticking. This would be helped by better admin support.
 - Social workers need support, regular debriefing and counselling if necessary. They are dealing with very difficult situations almost every day.
 - Need for *multi-disciplinary* approach. Placements are not always social services' responsibility (e.g. some YP are receiving services and accommodation through the youth justice or mental health services).
- **Foster carers and residential carers are needed with exactly these same skills as the social worker and who are also prepared to spend time with the young person, be interested in the small details of their daily lives and help them develop interests and life skills.**
- Foster carers need more delegated powers, and local authorities and fostering agencies need to pay attention to existing government advice in this.
 - Consistent Wales-wide policies on many matters are needed, including when CRB checks are needed for adults YP may wish to be in touch with/stay with (and when foster carers can use their judgements as reasonable birth parents would).
 - Young people need role models to learn how to form trusting relationships.
- **Young people should be enabled and encouraged to keep in touch with former friends, foster carers, residential carers and social workers.**
- Out of county placements can make continuing relationships at all levels difficult.
 - Relationships with other young people in care have a big impact on young people and need to be considered and matched in placements properly.
- **Access to opportunities to meet and socialise with other young people in care should be offered, particularly for young people over the age of about 12. This should run alongside opportunities to develop interests and contribute to society more generally, such as through volunteering or joining clubs and doing sport.**
- Relationships with other young people in care have a big impact on young people and need to be considered and matched in placements properly.
- **Consideration of contact arrangements should actively consider sibling and extended family contact. Impact on non-adopted siblings of children being placed**

for adoption should be taken into consideration and post-adoption contact (by letter or in person) should be actively encouraged.

- There are anxieties for foster carers, residential workers and social workers about keeping in touch with young people over the long term,. They are not clear what is allowed or advisable re boundaries. Are there data protection issues? This might be addressed in some practice guidance.

EDUCATION

Forthcoming changes

- 'In Our Hands' guidance to be issued in September.
- Vulnerable Children's LCO, forthcoming, to extend LA responsibility for all young people up to 25 years-old.

1. Designated teacher role

- Making sure that young people and foster carers (etc) know who the designated teachers are, making sure all teaching and pastoral staff in each school know who the designated teacher is.
- Core training for all teachers, or within INSET days, or support from the designated teacher to other teachers (e.g., Fostering Network Amy's Diary).
- A role for peer support, supported by designated teachers.
- Good examples from in-house counselling to mitigate stigma.
- To be accessible for adopted children.

2. Professionals promoting young people's engagement in education

- Support for extra curricular activities as well as academic (e.g., RAISE funding, 'Fostering Achievement' Northern Ireland).
- Targets set for young people that reflect their potential, both in the immediate term and in the longer-term.
- Accrediting as much of a young person's efforts as possible, e.g., life skills training.
- Motivational examples that represent all levels of education and possible routes to achievement.
- Sharing of good practice, with a view to achieving best practice across all LA.

3. Pro-active Local Authorities

- Clear info from LA as to exactly what support is available to enter FE/HE. The Frank Buttle kitemark has been achieved by every HEI and there are now FE pilots.
- Outreach by HE and Widening Access teams to target LAC, target early to promote engagement.
- There are active groups looking at educational needs, e.g., LACE co-ordinators in every Local Authority and the LAC Educational Stakeholders group.
- Continuity of staff or at least continuity of staff responsibility for educational attainment through school and afterwards, up to 25.
- Work experience schemes from Local Authorities (examples from RCT).

4. Practical and financial support from within a continuous long-term caring relationship

- As many as possible permissions obtained in advance, or delegated to the primary carer. Where permission is sought, all professionals to be informed and chased up with phonecalls.
- Practical support during the holidays for work and accommodation.
- Corporate Parenting role in raising expectations. The profile of the role has been raised by recent guidance and training, the process is ongoing.
- Designated mentors/responsibility for specific young people drawn from elected members and senior servants. Taking a personal interest in a young person's achievement.

Routes to successful post-care experiences

- **More clarity and training needs to be given to the role of personal advisor.**
 - Social Workers and other roles (incl Personal Advisors) need to be encouraged to stay in post. The role needs to be bolstered. The importance of developing continuity of relationships needs to be empathised in the role.
 - Team approach to working with young people. Discussion had about how this can minimise lack of continuity in relationships (i.e another of the team who knows young person can stand in). Discussion had about how this can be assumed to be ok when in reality the stand in person may not really know the young person or the young person know them. There is a need to prevent situations where all the professionals around a young person change at once – e.g social worker, carers, health, education. Staggering of change.
 - Young person should be asked who their important, significant person is.
 - There should be choice of personal advisor – the role requires them to work with the young person for a number of years so the young person and the personal advisor need to get on. Young people should be able to ask for a change of personal advisor or to suggest who they might like to be their personal advisor, for example if they have had a social worker for several years and get on – they should be able to ask for that social worker to become their personal advisor if they want to. Group discussed how this could be difficult for workers – i.e. working with some young people in a different role.
 - Young person should be at the middle and we should build structures around the young person that give choice.
 - There is some confusion in Leaving Care Teams – the social worker and personal advisor can be seen as interchangeable. There has to be a divide between the two which maintains their clear roles. The group discussed the pitfalls of the two roles being based in the same team / organisation, although if they are in separate teams it needs to be ensured that the personal advisor has some influence with the social worker.
 - Some young people say there are too many people – system needs to allow for roles to come in and out as needed. The young person should be able to say who is going to be most useful for them to have more contact with – this may change. Consistency of the personal advisor should be key.

- Personal advisors should go out to young people, not expect young person to come to them.
 - Does this role fit better in a 3rd sector organisation?
 - There is a balance between being supportive and imposing. Sometimes the role will require being hands off / sometimes reactive. It is the personal advisor's responsibility to be checking in with the young person.
 - Personal Advisor has a key role in terms of supporting young people.
 - Foster carers and others should have a brief of having to teach / encourage self advocacy skills (Training needed for foster carers around what self advocacy is)
 - There should not be sudden changes in support for young people. There needs to be flexibility in where and when young people move or support changes – someone needs to have responsibility to monitor the consistency of support networks, both formal and informal.
 - Loneliness – young people need to be able to opt in and out of support, depending on what is going on for them at the time, through their own choice but with protection and support (a minimum level).
 - Continuity of care – if wanted, should a social worker then be able to become personal advisor?
 - Make sure every young person has a copy of their personal plan and personal education plan in some format.
- **Care leavers need easy access to a clear list of their rights, entitlements and where to access help. Independent support services should also be available and accessible.**
 - A booklet of rights is not enough. A card with useful numbers can be helpful – good practice example.
 - Advocacy has a role in helping young people know their rights.
 - Discussion around problem of definite entitlements – for example driving lessons. These may be a priority for one person but not for another. Some entitlements may be universal, others have to be decided individually.
 - Care leavers have no savings. This should be an entitlement – which would help with some things like driving lessons if young person wanted. Would mean young person could choose their priorities. Young people in Caerphilly are lobbying councillors. Good practice example.
 - Information needs to be targeted at care leavers – use of multiple formats (word of mouth, leaflets, IT)
 - Make sure every young person has a copy of their personal plan and personal education plan in some format.
- **LAs to extend standard provision for care leavers to aid routes to employment and training. All who want it could be offered an apprenticeship. All offered driving lessons.**
 - **Routes to be flexible enough to allow for the fact that YP will vary in their ability to be ready (e.g. for employment, further education or training) and may need second or third chances.**

- Supported housing – rent and support costs are too high. This means young people can't seek work or if they secure employment have to leave supported housing. If young people have been in supported housing for a year or two and not worked then this does not look good on their cv. Chicken and egg situation that young people are forced into.
 - We need an audit of how many young people are in this situation? We need creative thinking of ways around this issue? It is not enough to let funding organisation get in the way. How much money would be needed to enable young people in supported accommodation and who secure employment to stay in their housing and keep work.
 - Influence of Welsh Assembly Government on Westminster?
 - Funding is needed in each local authority to fund a worker(s) to organise / manage apprenticeship scheme.
 - Discussion around problem of definite entitlements – for example driving lessons. These may be a priority for one person but not for another. Some entitlements may be universal, others have to be decided individually.
- **The transition to adult services for those who need it should be clear and pre-planned. Some who do not meet thresholds for adult services may still need to know where they can get help with everyday living after 21. Some access to services for those who do not meet current thresholds may prevent problems escalating. Loneliness is a key problem that needs tackling.**
 - Need developed protocols between children and adult services to improve transition. The corporate parenting agenda needs to incorporate transition issues. Importance of Pathway planning and anticipation of needs.
 - Personal advisors should go out to young people, not expect young person to come to them.
 - Does this role fit better in a 3rd sector organisation?
 - There is a balance between being supportive and imposing. Sometimes the role will require being hands off / sometimes reactive. It is the personal advisor's responsibility to be checking in with the young person.
 - There should not be sudden changes in support for young people. There needs to be flexibility in where and when young people move or support changes – someone needs to have responsibility to monitor the consistency of support networks, both formal and informal.
 - Loneliness – young people need to be able to opt in and out of support, depending on what is going on for them at the time, through their own choice but with protection and support (a minimum level).
 - **Other points raised**
 - Children and Young People's Act 2008 allows for re-engagement in education – this is something which could be mirrored allowing for re-engagement in the care system
 - There needs to be more availability of supported lodgings. The tax allowance is currently £4,000, this needs to be raised to be on par with fostering tax allowances. This would encourage more people to become supported lodgings providers – the pool of potential people could be fairly significant and should be tapped into

- There needs to be monitoring of **Right 2B cared 4** and **Staying Put** pilots in England. These pilots are working to achieve a reduction in the number of young people leaving care between the ages of 16 and 18. and are working to enable young people 18+ to remain in placements. www.scne.org.uk
- There needs to be thought given to how foster carers manage keeping in touch with a number of care leavers (accumulation of this number over time). Any approach would need to be flexible – for some care leavers a more formal arrangement might suit, others would be more suited to an informal arrangement. It may be that a contact once every few months is all that is required – we shouldn't make things so formal that this kind of arrangement can't happen but on the other hand we need to recognise the skill and time given by carers. Carers can be at risk of emotional burn out.
- We need to change the culture which equates the extension of support as bed blocking.
- The skills learnt in foster care can be variable. The system is obsessed by age and is not guided by the skill/ ability/ readiness of the young person. Discussion had about how young people in pre- teenage years are discouraged from learning independence skills and then at age 15 everyone is in a panic to get young person to learn skills.
- Social work practice / issues need to be linked into corporate parenting agenda – this needs to be tangible. Example given of good practice in Denbigh where senior members of the council are acting as mentors for care leavers in regard to education.
- Discussion around 'systems' and 'regulation' and fitting 'individual' into that.
- In Neath they are undertaking a systems reviews to find out which processes are wasteful and which have value. Group were interested in looking into results.
- Need to focus on 'the life journey' for the child – whose responsibility is this to take this overview?
- 'Flicker' - Photo and document storage system – could be used to keep photos, certificates etc for young people.
- Foster carers and others should have a brief of having to teach / encourage self advocacy skills (Training needed for foster carers around what self advocacy is)
- Lack of social housing. No move on accommodation. This needs addressing.
- Private renting – rents are high and support pulls out at 21 leaving young people vulnerable.
- Housing options need to be more thought out – not to be placed out of town making it difficult for young people to access support
- FSA and RBS money management courses – could be used to prepare for independent living (many Las are signposting young people to similar courses). Which works best?
- Sheltered housing schemes – could these be replicated for care leavers.

Emotional and mental health

There was general agreement amongst all groups at the roundtable with the recommendations. Participants reflected that emotional and mental health issues are most important and often get overlooked. The outcomes of **not** doing something about this are very poor. Young people often blame themselves. More training is needed for foster carers

on meeting the emotional and mental health needs of young people and the Welsh Assembly Government should issue new Guidance on emotional health. One participant however pointed out that the research only involved a small sample of cases (16) from one region of Wales. They would like to see representation of more positive stories suggesting that too much research on young people in care focuses on the negatives. Things in Wales have improved for young people in care and care leavers and there is some good practice happening out there. Comments from the roundtable discussions on the specific recommendations are included below:

Recommendation: Key question in reviews and everyday practice should be whether the young person has been given adequate explanation of their situation. This may need to be revisited at different life stages

Recommendation: Life story work should be offered to all children, with appropriate level up dates as they grow older. Local authorities should consider where and how boxes of mementos, photographs and running records of young people's life stories are kept, that may be accessed by care leavers

- Children coming into care should be enabled to access support (sometimes specialist) to help them make sense of what's going on from Day One of their care episode. Life story work, memory boxes need to be done as the child grows up.
- Technology – easy systems now for storing life history information - can scan in certificates etc.
- Young people should have ownership of how their mementos are kept, e.g. memory boxes but as in a 'good' family, foster carers and social workers should take some of the responsibility for safe storage
- The research illustrates how family identity is important for the whole of your life – however bad your experiences with your birth family)
- We need a culture change – the information is the young person's. Barriers of issues around 3rd party information and information sharing between agencies are not acceptable. If young people are kept in the dark – they fear the worst. Need to explain why some information can't be shared. Everything else falls out of this culture change.
- Effective communication with children and young people. Sometimes foster carers or social workers avoid telling young people about difficult issues because they don't feel confident. They need training and support in that role and access to specialist counselling for young people when needed.
- We've become too risk averse. Need to re-enforce the place of professional judgement.
- Foster carers should not be kept in the dark – they should be appraised of the information about the young person's birth family and their journeys in care – foster carers have important relationships with children in their care
- Recommendations should talk about 'discussion' of the issues rather than 'explanation' which sounds too passive. The young person should be involved fully. Such discussions need to be re-visited frequently particularly at key stages.

- Social workers and Personal Advisers should be pro-actively checking that the young person has sufficient information about their background and life history and help young people to fill in any gaps in their knowledge and/or clarify misunderstandings.
- Independent Reviewing Officers have a key role to play here too; they should be checking with young people at each statutory review that they are able to sense of what has happened in their lives and their life histories and that they are getting support with this.
- Keeping in touch and storing information is easier now for young people with social networking, flicker, mobiles etc. We should support young people to use with safety precautions
- If the young person wants to keep or get in touch with foster parents this should be encouraged although some times foster carers don't always have enough emotional capacity because of demands from children they are currently caring for.
- When young people leave care this is often the time they want to try and make sense of their lives (as the research illustrates) – young people need support with this and it should be built into the role of the personal advisers/leaving care teams and relevant voluntary organisations (e.g. advocacy service providers) who along with Voices from Care have an important role in supporting young care leavers.

Recommendation: High quality and specialist counselling and therapy including bereavement therapy should be actively offered to many young people in care, at different stages of childhood and early adulthood. This would not of course entail any compulsion to accept counselling or therapy.

- Counselling services should be available speedily – specialist counsellors should be part of the social work and leaving care teams. And counselling should be offered regularly to children and young people throughout their time in care and post-care to help them make sense of things as they go along.
- Some participants suggested there is no longer a shortage of counselling services for under 18's especially with school counselling now available. But others were not so sure, school counselling doesn't cover all children as some have a poor relationship with school and there are still lots of gaps or inadequate service provision, e.g. longer term therapy for young people who have been sexually abused; bereavement and loss counselling; and therapeutic services for young people aged 18+ - a problem. Not much available and that is the age and stage of their life (e.g. leaving care) many young people feel they need it.
- Need to raise young people's awareness of the counselling services that are available.
- Peer support should be encouraged as should young people's participation in their care and after care planning.
- Need to ensure training on attachment disorders for counsellors, foster carers and social workers continues
- Emotional literacy work needs to start early.
- The Black Bag campaign should be re-visited

V) Interview schedule: **Learning from experience: life history research with care leavers**

1. Tell me about your current living situation? Where do you live? Who with? Are you working? Etc.
2. Explain that we'd like to learn about their life history. As much as they feel comfortable telling. Have you brought anything with you? (photos, important souvenirs, etc).

Offer to draw it like a road map, or spiral or time line.

3. When they have said as much as they wish, start to prompt for key turning points. E.g. Who was around? Who helped? Who didn't help? What did you need? What made a difference? How did it help? What did you do?

Remember to ask about formal and informal help. Remember that relationships are two-way and note when they provided care or help to others.

4. Explore some of the following if feels appropriate to keep going and they haven't yet been covered. It may be too much to cover all of them.

What does care feel like? By this I mean being cared for and cared about? Who has given you care over the years? Have you cared for others? Can you give an example of something that was caring?

Ask about social workers and other helping professionals. When did they help? What did they do? (and when did they not help, etc).

You have lots of experiences of families and living with others. Who is 'family' to you now? What makes someone family? (if feels ok, may draw a genogram and/or eco map here).

Can you say something about relationships with other children and young people? (friends, peers in school, siblings, foster siblings etc)

Ask about school experiences. What helped? What didn't? Who was influential in school? Did being in care make a difference to how you experienced school?

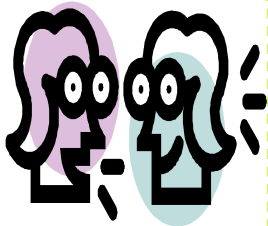
Was there anything else in your time in care that was helpful for you? People, places, activities, etc?

5. What messages do you have for people whose job it is to help young people in care and care leavers?

Check how they are feeling and that they have someone to talk to/be with after the interview. Give list of sources of help and advice. Arrange to meet again for final meeting.



Learning from experience: life history research with care-leavers



This is Anne Crowley who will be doing the interviews. You can phone her on (

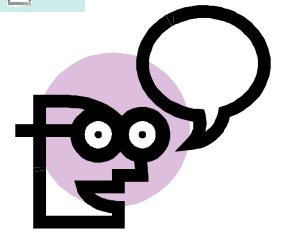


The research is approved by a university ethics committee. If you are unhappy about how we have done the research then please contact the ethics committee chair Professor Soren Holm:

02920875447.

What is the research?

We are a team from Voices from Care and Cardiff University who want to learn more about the lives of people who have spent time in care. We want to learn what has helped and not helped in getting you to where you are today. For example, who has supported you? When did you most need help? What advice would you give others in your situation?



How do I take part? If you want to take part, tell the person who has given you this leaflet. Your name will be given to our researcher Anne. You can choose where and when to meet Anne.

Lead Story Headline

What will I be asked to do?

Anne will meet with you 2 or 3 times and listen to your life story. You can tell her as much or as little as you want to. The last time you and Anne meet, she will check that she has understood what you wanted to tell her and you can change anything you want to.

Who will read my life story?

Your story will be recorded and written down, but your name and other people's names will be changed so that you keep your privacy. We hope to collect 15 life stories and to use them to help politicians and professionals understand how to support children in care.

Will it cost me anything?

No. You can claim back travelling expenses and at the end of the research we will give you a shopping voucher to say thank you for your time.

Remember! You can decide not to take part. Even if you decide to do an interview you can withdraw your story at any time. Everything you say will be kept confidential, unless you tell us that someone needs protection. This information may need to be passed onto the authorities, but we would first discuss our concerns with you and put you in touch with someone to support you.

