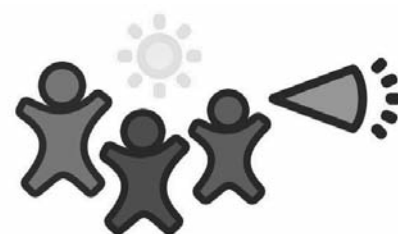


'Say it loud!' – voices from the care system

Clare Edge spoke to a group of care-experienced young people who gave their answers to questions put to them by **cjm**.



a national voice

Young people from care improving the care system

A National Voice (ANV) is an organisation run by and for care-experienced young people; our board of trustees are all care-experienced (aged 18-25 years old). Our main aim is to create positive changes to the care system in England and provide a national platform to hear the voices of approx 60,000 children and young people aged 5-25 years old who are 'Looked After'.

As North West and West Midlands Regional Development Worker for A National Voice my main role is to facilitate a group of young people from care who meet monthly at the 'Say it Loud!' North West and Midlands Forum which currently takes place in Manchester and Liverpool. I myself spent time in care but have since graduated from university with a first class degree in psychology and find myself now working for A National Voice is an immensely rewarding and enjoyable experience.

I was approached by **cjm** to ask the group the following questions about their care experiences. The group of four that took part were: a young person in a friends and family foster care placement (female, 15 years old); a young person in a residential home (female, 15 years old); a young person leaving care in a supported independent living project (male, 18 years old); and a young person who had recently left a residential placement and was currently living in supported lodgings (female, 17 years old):

Question: Did anyone talk to you about how you felt about being in care/being taken into care?

'NO!!!' (The entire group agreed with this response!)

'My worker didn't even explain to me what was happening.'

'I was too young to understand and no one has taken the time to explain since, or ask how I feel.'

The general feeling from the group was that there was very little time for the social worker to even consider asking about their feelings, especially at the time when they first went into care. In the first instance the emphasis seemed to be simply on getting them physically into care by what ever means necessary. Worryingly, there was considerable talk of social services involving the police after a runaway incident either at the time of them being told they were going in to care or some time after. This seems to indicate that the child or young person would

reasonably assume a certain shift in the 'professionals' attitudes to them as 'problems or trouble causers' rather than 'children and young people with difficult emotional needs'. This in turn might dictate their relationship and subsequently the answer to this question.

Question: Did you feel that you took part in the decision to be in care?

'I was only five years old and didn't know what was going on.'

'I didn't want to go in to care and ran away but I ended up getting dragged in the by the police!'

'I was too young, I was only a baby!'

'I ran away from my first placement as I hated it! I was just dumped there!'

Young people's comments around making a decision to be put in care, again reflected that of an uninformed and negative picture, relating to being too young to understand and having their care being enforced rather than having control or influence over the decision.

Question: Do people run away from care often or not? What effect does it have on the person?

'I ran way over ten times and each time I was treated like a problem kid by the police and then the whole neighbourhood see you as a trouble causer getting taken back to care in a police van!'

All of the group have at some point run away from care only to be brought in by none other than the police! I think I can safely say that the group felt strongly that the police are not entirely suitable for bringing runaways back in to care as it only perpetuates the negative public and professional image of children and young people from care being trouble causers.

Question: Did you feel labelled by being in care?

'YES!!!'

Everyone in the group, predictably, felt labelled by being in care and A National Voice as a charity feels particularly strongly about the effects of this label.

Young people from 'Say it Loud!' said they felt particularly labelled in school with references to their

care background being made in class for instance one teacher said:

'Don't think you can get away with things just because you are in children's home.'

Question: Were you able to keep in touch with friends and those who were close to you/family members?

'I moved areas so lost touch with all my friends and my social worker told me it was not a good idea to go back there so wouldn't help me to stay in touch.'

This issue was a particularly difficult issue as it is often very much dependent on the young person's past which would be often by nature, difficult. Certainly one theme is that the area in which young people are moved to is often totally new, therefore making it quite hard for the young person, unsupported, to make that step. All of the young people in the group expressed some difficulty or another in keeping contact with those that were close to them.

Question: What happens to friendships that you make in care?

'I am still in contact with my friends in care; I have made loads of mates in care actually.'

'A lot of the young people that were in my children's home are still quite off the rails so I have chosen not to associate with them now.'

For some of this group, contact with other young people from care seemed a little more within the realms of the young people's control. However, in contrast one young person said that young people who had left their residential unit, then later returned to see friends still living there, were not allowed by staff to come back and were sometimes even threatened with the police.

Question: Were you able to keep going to school/were the school authorities helpful or not?

'I used to really like school, in primary school, the teachers had time for me and the children were nice, now no one has time for me in secondary school and the others in my class are horrible.'

'I felt really picked on at secondary school and the teachers didn't do anything.'

Young people in the group felt they were labelled in school and many felt they had been excluded due to this label. Young people felt the children in school targeted their care history and that teachers thought they were 'problem kids'. They felt more so labelled in secondary school, young people felt strongly that their care history should be kept private and not under the scrutiny of their peers.

Question: What did you like about being in care? What did you not like?

'I like the member of staff in my home that fights for me and breaks the rules sometimes.'

'I liked the member of staff in my home that gave me independence training and spent time with me.'

'I liked getting free stuff, like new clothes and pocket money!'

'We get an allowance!'

What the group liked speaks for itself between relationships with staff and entitlements; you might say these were the two common denominators in terms of value between the

group members. As for the bad things:

'I don't like the fact that the leaving care accommodation is not good enough, I was put in a bed and breakfast when I left care!'

'Friends and family carers don't get paid enough!'

'I don't like some of my carers, I feel threatened by one of them actually'

'There's no privacy!'

Question: Do you think you are more independent because you grew up in care?

A large percentage of the group were young carers and felt they had to learn to be independent from a very early age:

'Yes, but I was also a young carer before I went in to care.'



Edge pictured dressed for a National Voice's catwalk protest: 'THIS IS NOT A SUITCASE' which campaigns to put a stop to the practice of using bin bags to move young people's belongings from placement to placement.

'No, I used to look after my little sister and my mum when I was nine years old.'

'Yes because I had independence training (budgeting and stuff).'

'I used to look after my mum from a very young age.'

Question: What was good about leaving care? What was not so good?

Good:

'All the freedom in the world.'

'My own space and privacy so I can have my mates round!'

'My friend is moving in with me!'

Not so good:

'Not very good at budgeting and handling my own finances!'

'I'm going to miss my nice worker from the children's home!'

'I think I could get lonely.'

Question: When leaving care what support networks were available – what sort of support should be available?

'The "Leaving care service" is currently available.'

'I think we need more help with financial support and especially budgeting as it is really hard to live on the benefits we get.'

'Financial support is inconsistent.'

Young people are consistently telling ANV how they struggle to cope on the benefits they get and that it is especially hard to get on in their education whilst they are struggling financially.

Question: What happened to you when you left care – what are the different experiences?

'I am moving in with my mate, they are getting me a flat of my choice and paying half the rent.'

'I am in supported lodgings.'

'I was in a bed and breakfast and then a hostel.'

Question: Have you ever had the chance to discuss with your carers why you were placed in care?

'They won't discuss it until you are 18 years old, that's when you can see your records.'

Those young people who are too young to remember when they were placed in care feel very much left in the dark by their workers. But it is quite ironic that many of those who are forced to leave care at 17 years old only to be placed in hostels and bed and breakfasts are the same young people that are being told they are not old enough to have a full explanation of why they were in care because they are told they do not have the right to see their files until they are 18 years old. ■

Clare Edge is a Regional Development Worker for A National Voice.



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