



BECOME.

THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

Perceptions of Care

June 2017

"We are expected to fail and it is a stigma. I hated telling people I was in care because it feels like people judge you."



LOTTERY FUNDED

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Introduction

From the minute that children enter care, they are considered different. They don't live with their parents, they are cared for by professionals, and they have a new legal status. They are living in a situation that is not the societal norm.

We – Become and Voices from Care - didn't presuppose that children in care and care leavers thought that there was a stigma associated with being in care, but we did want to find out how acutely children in care and care leavers feel that difference, and how it impacts on their lives. We wanted to find out what those children feel about other people knowing about their different home life and experiences, and what they thought people thought about children who grow up in the care system.

This report is part of the 5 Nations, 1 Voice project, funded by The Big Lottery Fund. 5 Nations, 1 Voice is a project between five charities across the UK and Ireland, that are working together to connect and support young people to influence policy and effect change. Become, the charity for children in care and young care leavers in England, and Voices from Care, Wales' national independent organisation dedicated to upholding the rights and welfare of children and young people who are or have been looked after, chose to work together to produce this work – recognising the similarities across both our countries.

We asked children in care and care leavers in England and Wales to complete an online survey and we commissioned Leeds Beckett University to run seven focus groups across England and Wales. Forty-nine children in care and 61 care leavers completed our online survey, and 60 children in care and care leavers attended the focus groups – to whom we are grateful for giving up their time to share their views.

The report is themed around the main points that were raised in the focus groups and gives the voices, thoughts, and opinions of care-experienced young people. It is supported by statistics from the online survey.

Chloë Cockett
Policy and Research Manager, Become

How do children in care and care leavers feel about telling people that they are in care?

"I can't say go on Google, go and research it if I don't want to talk about it, because it's all bad statistics, and that's not going to help, is it?"

Young people told us that they were worried or anxious about telling people that they were in care. They said that they were worried that people would judge them, or treat them differently once they found out that they were in care. Being treated differently was a particular concern in relation to their friends, as they worried that telling them about being in care would encourage lots of personal questions about their life. They also were worried that they would lose friends or their peers would only be their friend because they pitied them.

"People are friendly to you just because you're in care like, I don't want anyone to do that for me. Like be my friend or don't be my friend. Don't be my friend because I'm in care, it's not, you know, like it's the end of the world."

Young people told us that they can feel out of control of who knows that they are in care. Some of this is exacerbated by the actions of professionals. Young people said that when they are taken out of lessons for meetings and reviews, people ask what they're doing and where they've been, and when social workers come to school wearing their badge, young people don't have control over who knows that they are in care.

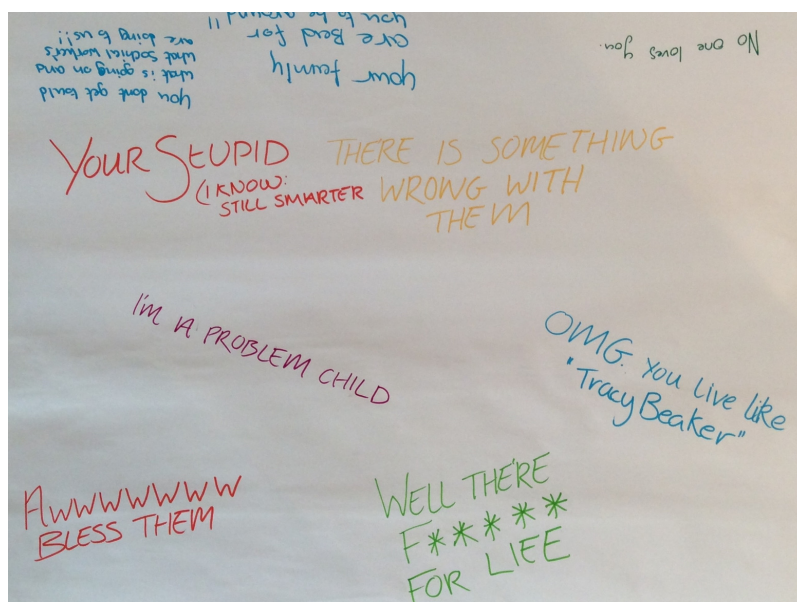
Most recognised that when they are in care, there are some professionals who know, like social workers and teachers, but they would like to have more control over who knows in their personal life. However, some young people said that the nature of being in care makes it hard to keep the fact that they are in care private; moving around a lot, having to have risk assessments done before they go to stay at a friend's house, are all things that mean that they have no control over whether their friends know that they are in care.

"In my old school, you had a designated LAC teacher, so someone would look over the cases of looked-after children, and they specifically had 'LAC co-ordinator' on their door, so everybody knows whoever went to that teacher, they were 'looked after'."

What do children in care and care leavers think other people think about care?

Young people told us that they thought that there was a perception that children in care and care leavers had family issues, were trouble, and were uneducated. They made particular mention of the Tracy Beaker television programme, and its spin-off 'The Dumping Ground', with many young people saying that they think that it gives a negative portrayal of what being in care meant.

Lots of young people told us that they thought that they were seen as 'trouble', perhaps perceived as having done something wrong or likely to get into trouble in the future. We were also told that they thought that people thought that they were emotionally unstable, had drug or alcohol addictions, or that it was their fault that they are in care.



Evidence from focus group activities

They also told us that people assumed things about their birth family. They said that they thought that people thought their birth parents or family were bad; that their parents didn't care about them; couldn't cope with them or that they were unwanted.

"Her mate found out I was in care and she was like, you're in care, your family must be well bad then!"

One focus group talked about how they thought that people's views on care might be affected by the media and the negative statistics that are shared about care leavers and their outcomes, and how many people don't look beyond a child's behaviour or the statistics, but make sweeping assumptions and believe the stereotypes.

Some told us that if someone was a foster carer or had had some experience of care before, their views might be different. However, young people gave examples where they felt that the professionals who work with them assumed that they were 'bad', 'unintelligent' or destined for a poor future.

"I got told that I was a little hooligan and that I'd be in prison by the time I was 19. By a police officer. I ran away, and I went for two nights and the police caught me. They sat me down and they went 'Do you know what? You're a little hooligan. You'll be in prison by the time you're 19, if not sooner.' All because I was in care."

A very small minority of young people said that they thought that people might think positively of children in care. They suggested words like determined, emotionally strong, humble, loyal and special – because someone has chosen to care for them.

"I put 'chosen' because obviously a foster carer, at the end of the day, they choose to have you in their house or not when they get the phone call that we have this child, they have to go through the background details so a foster carer that's willing to take you regardless of your background. I think you're chosen, they want you for a reason, you're seen as special maybe."

As part of the survey, we also asked children in care, and care leavers, about what they felt that others may think about them.

50 per cent of children in care and 51 per cent of care leavers agreed that 'People think that it is children's fault that they are in care.'

39 per cent of children in care and 43 per cent of care leavers disagreed with the statement 'Other children's parents do not treat children in care differently to other children.'

30 per cent of children in care and 42 per cent of care leavers agreed with the statement that 'Where I live, people would not like it if someone opened a children's home.'

What influences whether children in care and care leavers would tell someone they were in care?

Unsurprisingly, children in care and care leavers told us that they want to tell someone with whom they feel safe. They want to tell someone who they can trust and who is a good listener.

They told us that they want people to be open-minded and accepting of the fact that everyone has different things that they go through when they're growing up. They told us that they want to tell people who are non-judgemental and who aren't going to change their behaviour or attitude towards them, just because they are in care.

"They have to be empathetic, not sympathetic. Someone who is sympathetic is just trying to say ahhhh diddums and empathetic is being genuinely concerned for you."

Many young people said that they wouldn't tell strangers, and would only tell people that they were close to that they were in care, or professionals with whom they come into contact with a lot. This seems to be linked closely with trust – many young people said that they wanted to tell people who they were sure would keep the information confidential.

"I'm comfortable with it [telling people] but it just comes out sometimes because of that. Like I mentioned it at school to someone and it went all around the school in no time. It was like it was everyone's business! So, yeah I'm comfortable with it, but you've got to be careful."

Where young people told us of positive experiences of telling people, they said that they felt relieved, that they were better understood, and accepted for who they were. However, they also told us of examples where they told friends or peers who then told other people; of being asked intrusive questions; or people deciding to no longer be their friend.

No one wants to tell personal information to strangers, or people who are unreliable, unsupportive, uncaring people. However, in reality, this is a situation that many children in care and care leavers find themselves in due to the transient nature of the care system.

What do children and young people think teachers think and know about them?

School and teachers can often be the constant in a child in care's life. With the requirement to attend school for 190 days a year, they spend over 50 per cent of their year in a classroom. It's where they learn, develop ambitions and plans for the future and spend time with their friends.

Some young people said that at their schools, teachers who didn't need to know knew that they were in care, and those who should have known didn't. Young people told us that given teachers' professional role, they have a responsibility to know what it means to be looked after and how to act when they know or are told someone is in care, and that they should be able to be non-judgemental.

We were told in some of the focus groups that young people felt that many teachers didn't know what being in care was like and that they need better training. We asked young people who took part in the survey if they thought that teachers understood what being in care means. Worryingly, only 24 per cent felt that they did.

"Especially teachers at school like, they should be notified of that. In my school I feel like a few of my teachers knew but others didn't and like, you should know these things. If there's a kid in your class, children in your class that are in care you should know it."

Young people told us that they wanted teachers to treat them the same as other pupils who are not in care. They told us that some teachers are patronising, or become more lenient with them, or expect them to need extra help. When we asked young people whether they thought that teachers expected children in care to do well at school, only 48 per cent felt they did. One young person said that teachers should use the knowledge that a child might be in care to understand why they may be acting in a certain way, for example why their homework may be late or why they may be angry on a particular day.

"You know there are those teachers in school that just want to treat you differently or they act nicer than they have to act and I don't like it because you want to be treated as everyone else, you don't want to seem different or some kid may say ah she's getting that because she's in care blah blah blah."

Some young people told us that the actions of teachers aren't always appropriate, for example asking them in class where they have been, talking loudly about a child in care in the corridor when people can overhear. One group talked about how professionals use the acronym 'LAC' and how they didn't like the use of it, "cos they make us all feel like we're lacking summat but we're not."

While this applies to all professionals, not just teachers, it shows that there are things that professionals do, accidentally or with the best of intentions, where the implications and repercussions for children in care are greater than teachers may realise.

What do children and young people think social workers think about them?

Thirty-five per cent of children and young people said that they think that social workers think children in care are not as clever as other children. Only 56 per cent of children in care and care leavers said that they thought that social workers are ambitious for children they work with. They felt that social workers have low expectations of children in care and care leavers. They talked about being given extra tuition when their grades were fine, and social workers not encouraging them to apply to university.

"I was a straight A student, whose teachers wanted me to go to do a law degree, my social workers told both me and my foster parents that children in care don't go to university and to stop encouraging me. I did go to law school though!"

Some young people felt that social workers hold the power and limit young people's opportunities to make their own choices - one young person told us about wanting to do a high-level drama course that was expensive. Social services suggested a cheaper one - but it was a course for those without qualifications. While budgets and other constraints may impact on the social worker's ability to grant requests, this is not what a child necessarily sees – they will see consistent rejections of their wishes and dreams.

Only 31 per cent of children in care and care leavers thought that social workers understood what it means to be in care, while young people in the focus groups also felt that there was a lack of understanding by those working in social care about the realities of daily life for children in care and care leavers. However, there was an understanding on the part of some young people that social workers were constrained, or indeed worn down by the limitations of the care system itself.

Some young people said that they felt that the pressure that social workers were under meant that they didn't have the time to work with young people and build the relationships that are key to helping young people, or the time to be aspirational for individuals. Some young people felt that social workers saw children in care as cases and made assumptions about them based on written records, as opposed to getting to know the young people.

"They come into the profession with the right intentions but after so many cases and being constantly put under pressure from case loads and other pressures they begin to become immune to the children and young people they are dealing with."

We also heard from some children in care and care leavers about positive experiences with the professionals in their lives, saying that their social workers or personal advisers (PAs) were helpful and supportive.

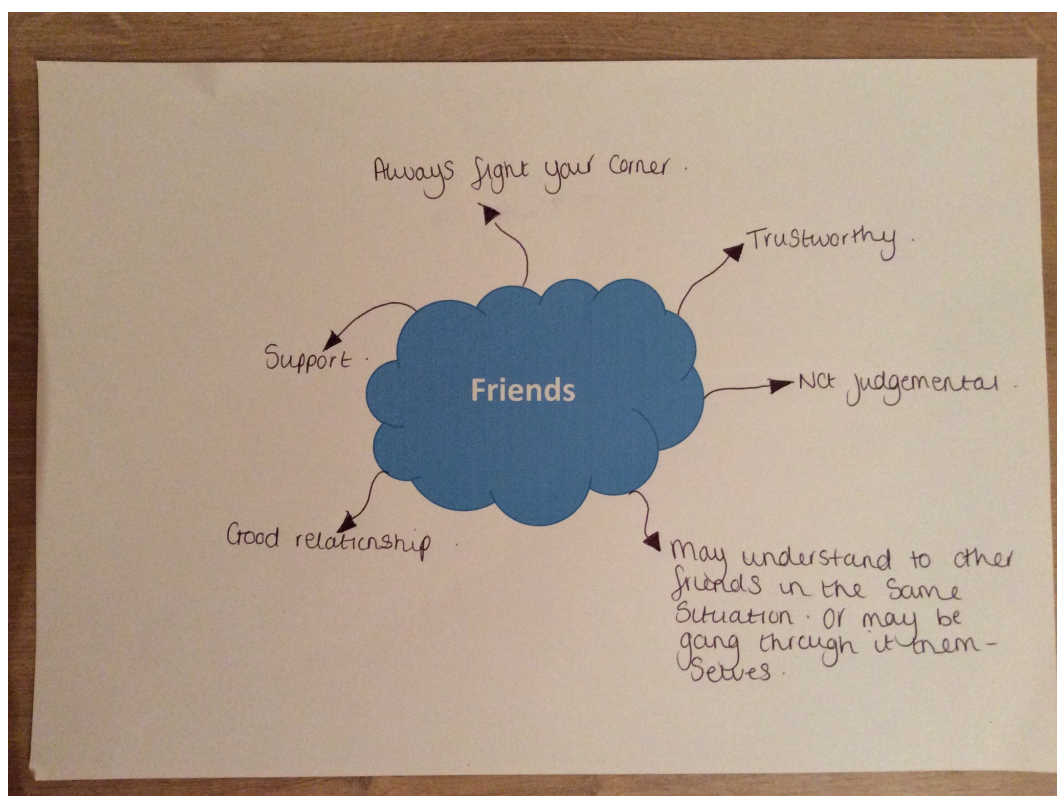
"The person that helped me the most was definitely my PA. She deserves a medal!"

What children and young people think about telling their friends that they're in care

Young people told us that they thought that Tracy Beaker influences people's views on care, and particularly those of their friends. They said that their friends often think that being in care is living in a large house with lots of children, or that children in care behave in the same way as the children in the television show.

Many young people told us that when people found out there were in care, they would ask if it was like Tracy Beaker. They talked about how some friends don't know how to react, or react by patronising or being pitying.

"People think you're bad, trouble, no good, going to steal stuff ... basically, they think 'Tracy Beaker'!"



Evidence from focus group activities

Friendships are an important part of any child's life. Young people talked about the importance of their friends and how their friends knowing that they are in care can help. They felt that their friends could be people they can talk to and who would fight their corner and in some cases, give advice.

Just like with their teachers, young people told us that they didn't want to be treated differently – they wanted their friends to treat them the same as anyone else. Young people said that they wanted to be able to trust their friends and feel that they wouldn't judge them. No child likes to be different, they want to be valued for who they are, not feel that things that are beyond their control are influencing their peers' behaviour. Friendships can be volatile and insecure at the best of times as a child grows up, and a lack of friends can impact on a child's self-esteem.

"I feel like people treat you completely different. So, when my friends are nice to me I feel like they're just my friends because they feel sorry for me or something like that."

Generally young people were wary about telling their friends, as they were worried about young people 'spreading their secret'. They gave examples of telling their friends or peers, who then went on to tell others. This then resulted in people finding out, whom they didn't want to share the information with. They often drew a distinction between professionals and their responsibility to not share the secret (although they did say that this was not always the case) and the unreliability of friends and peers because they didn't have a similar ethical or professional duty not to gossip or spread rumours. However, some young people felt that telling friends was inevitable, as friends would want to visit their houses and families are a general topic of conversation among friends.

"It actually depends on what kind of friend it is, so if it's like a really understanding friend then you can tell them cos they'll understand and there might be a little bit of questions but they won't be that personal, but on the other hand there might be some friends that are gossipers so they then, they can say, when you tell them, they can gossip about you and then spread rumours about you."

Some young people told us that being in care affects friendships. We heard stories from young people about not going to visit friends' houses because they wanted to shield their friends and their parents from the process of being checked; not taking part in afterschool activities for similar reasons; losing friends after having to share that they are in care with a friend; and being bullied for being in care.

Friendships can also be affected by moving from school to school, or home to home. This can make it hard to build the relationships and trust that we were told young people want in order to feel comfortable telling their friends.

"I got bullied in school mainly for saying I was in care, cause they kept saying my mum couldn't look after me, no one could look after me."

Conclusion

We wanted to find out what children in care and care leavers think other people's views are about care.

Care-experienced young people clearly experience being treated and thought of differently, and often negatively because they are in care or a care leaver. While this may not be the intention of people in their lives, this does not invalidate how young people feel.

This is shown through the feelings that children in care and care leavers have about friends 'spreading their secret'. Secrets are weighty – they imply that the person who holds them carries a burden. For a secret to be shared, it requires trust, and it requires the person to whom the secret is told to understand the responsibility that comes with it. It is therefore inevitable that we were told that trust is massively important between care-experienced young people and their friends, and the professionals that know they are in care.

Growing up in care is hard enough without feeling that unfair assumptions and judgements are made about you, by your friends, your teachers, social workers and the general public. Care should not be such a burden carried by children and young people that they feel it is a secret they cannot share.

"We are expected to fail and it is a stigma. I hated telling people I was in care because it feels like people judge you."

Headlines like 'The Worst Place to Grow Up Is In Care'¹ and the frequent repetition of statistics - like 31 per cent of women prisoners and 24 per cent of male prisoners have spent time in care as children² and 25 per cent of homeless people have been in care at some point in their lives³ - all further reinforce these negative stereotypes. Children in care and care leavers in general do have poorer outcomes than their non-care-experienced peers. However, children are products of their environment and are shaped by the adults in their lives. If they are faced with adults who think that they are less likely to academically achieve and more likely to go to prison, why should they believe in themselves?

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3563317/The-worst-place-to-grow-up-is-in-care.html>

² <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/why%20focus%20on%20reducing%20women's%20imprisonment%20BL.pdf>

³ K Reeve with E Batty, The hidden truth about homelessness: Experiences of single homelessness in England, Crisis, May 2011.

Statistics are helpful; they illustrate problems that must be overcome and outcomes we must avoid. But those who generate and use statistics – civil servants, journalists, policy makers, researchers, charities – must approach them responsibly so that they do not facilitate generalisations or encourage people to make unfair, sweeping assumptions about children in care and care leavers. Equally, people reading these statistics must look for context and maintain the belief that these outcomes are not the inevitable destiny of the children currently in the care system.

When a child is in care, care is pervasive. It affects every aspect of their life. It is messy and affects every aspect of their life – spilling across health, education and social care. But professionals don't spill across these siloes in the same way – they don't necessarily think beyond the limits of the professional sphere in which they work. And so professionals must be aware of the way a child's life crosses these siloes when they work with children and young people.

Consistently being the child who is taken out of class for 'meetings' or being given extra help may seem supportive, but impacts on their relationships with their peers and their ability to control who knows that they are in care. It affects their friendships, their education and ultimately their childhood.

Children in care shouldn't think that they are trouble. They shouldn't think that where they live must be a secret because if someone found out they would think that they are unwanted, unloved and live somewhere called 'the Dumping Ground'. Everyone has a responsibility to change the narrative, to encourage children in care and care leavers to be the best they can be, to believe in the potential of each individual child. Care can be transformative, it can save and change lives – and it must be seen as such.

Chloë Cockett
Policy and Research Manager, Become
June 2017

Recommendations

Schools should teach children and young people about what it means to be in care as part of the PSHE curriculum.

Everyone in the team around the child should sign a written commitment to believing in, aspiring for, and working with and on behalf of that child – so that the child knows that those around them expect and want the best for them and from them.

Initial teacher training and continuing professional development for staff in educational settings should reflect the need for teachers to have a greater understanding of the experiences of children in care.

Professionals should stop using acronyms when referring to looked after children and care leavers, particularly LAC and CLA, because it risks encouraging generic assumptions about these young people and viewing them as a homogenous group, rather than as the individuals they are.