

Echoes Through Time: The Story of Care

CARE SYSTEM FACT SHEET

Compared to the era of the Foundling Hospital (1739-1954), there is greater understanding today about how children thrive. Many traditional ideas about caring for children have become outdated and children's emotional needs are much better understood. A major change came with the 1953 Children Act, which said that children in care should live like other children. This meant living with foster families instead of in orphanages or children's homes, keeping in contact with their families where possible, going to local schools, and wearing ordinary clothes instead of special uniforms.

In the UK today, the care system is based on the Children Act of 1989. The Act says that the wishes and feelings of children should be at the centre of the care they receive and that their views should be included at every stage. This does not mean children always get what they want, but their thoughts and feelings are an important part of the plans for their care.

The UK's laws reflect the aims of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child and the European Convention of Human Rights. They include the right to private and family life, and to an education. The laws protecting children in care have been updated frequently since 1989 – often because of scandals. For example, the death of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié in 2000 led to the Children's Act 2004, which brought all local authority children's services under local Directors of Children's Services.

Local authorities and the law

Local authorities are generally responsible for children in the care system. This means the local authority takes on the role of a parent. The law says that local authorities must safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need in their areas and, in some circumstances, local authorities have a duty to find the children somewhere to live.

Children may be taken into care as a result of abuse or neglect. Abuse can be physical, sexual or emotional. It can happen in person or come from someone online. Neglect is the term used to describe a lack of love, care and attention. This can mean not giving a child a safe and secure home, failing to give food or clothing, not protecting children from harm, failing to look after their health, or not making sure they go to school.

There are various ways children can be taken into care. A court may make a Care Order, an Emergency Protection Order (when a child is at immediate risk of harm and is removed for a short time), or a Supervision Order (when a child remains living with their parents or family member, under supervision of a social worker).

The court issues a Care Order when a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, harm because their parents would not be able to care for them properly, or because the child is beyond their parents' control. A Care Order can last until the child is 18 years old, unless the court decides to end it sooner.

A Care Order means that the local council takes on legal responsibility for the child. The local authority must decide where the child lives – with parents or other family members, with foster parents, or in a children’s home. Once a Care Order has been made, the local authority must quickly make a care plan. This is a document written by social workers and sets out where the child will live, the nature of contact with their family, and how they will be educated.

Some children are looked after under a voluntary arrangement which does not involve the courts. One example would be for children with disabilities who need extra support or services, to help them have what the law describes as ‘a reasonable standard of health and development’. A voluntary arrangement might also apply when a child is abandoned, when their parents are sent to prison, or when the person who usually looks after them cannot give them a home.

A child can be taken into care at any time up to the age of 18, the age at which the law says a person becomes an adult. From the age of 16, children are assigned a new social worker to help them prepare to leave the care system, which takes place on their 18th birthday. A local authority may continue to provide support for them as adults, sometimes up to the age of 25, to help them live independently.

Housing

There are various living arrangements for children in care. Here are some of them:

Fostering

Fostering means giving a child a home while their parents cannot take care of them. In the early 20th century, the UK passed its first laws ensuring that people who wanted to foster or adopt children were fit to do so. Today, foster carers are trained and their homes are inspected regularly, to make sure they can give a child a safe and secure place to live. Foster care is about living as part of a family: foster parents bring children to live with them in their own homes and set their own rules. Foster parents are paid to look after children in their care. Fostering can be for long or short periods. Different types of foster care include ‘short break’ fostering – for a weekend or a few days – and specialist care for children with particular health or emotional needs, or with new-born babies. Sometimes children are fostered by other members of their own family (known as kinship care).

Residential care

Some children live in a children’s home with other young people. A team of social workers and other staff are there all the time to supervise and support them. The lounge, kitchen and bathrooms are usually shared, but each child has their own bedroom.

Disabled children

Residential special schools are staffed and equipped to help children with special educational needs and disabilities. Residential settings are required when a child’s needs are particularly complex.

Secure children’s homes

Secure children’s homes are for children aged between 10 and 17. A child may be placed in a secure unit for their own safety, because they might harm themselves or someone else, or because they might run away and be at risk of further harm.

Semi-independent living

Older children may live on their own with support from people who help them to move towards fully independent living.

Education

Children in care go to school the same as other children. However, going into care can disrupt a child's education. For this reason, each looked-after child has a personal education plan and each local authority has a 'virtual school'. The virtual school is not a building. It is a service provided by professionals in a local authority who promote and co-ordinate educational support, from nursery to university, for looked-after children and care-leavers.

School life is an important factor in the well-being of looked-after children. In 2022, Coram published the report [10,000 Voices: The Views of Children in Care on their Well-being](#), which found that a larger proportion of children in care (81%) liked school, compared with their peers in the general population (70%).

In 2015, [The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England](#), the first major UK study on this topic, was published. It said, 'Young people who have been in longer-term care do better than children who are "in need" but not in care, and better than those who have only been in short term care – so it appears that care may protect them educationally'. It suggested that 'teachers need better understanding of children's social, emotional and mental health problems; social workers need better understanding of the education system'.

Issues affecting young people in care

Stigma

The charity Become, which works with children in care and care leavers, asked care-experienced young people about other people's perceptions of care. The charity said, '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'.

In addition, the young people reported that other people often assumed things about their birth family: that their parents did not care, could not cope, or did not want them. One young person Become spoke to said, 'Her mate found out I was in care and she was like, you're in care, your family must be well bad then!'

The research published in Become's report, [Perceptions of Care](#), showed that

- 50% of children in care and 51% of care leavers agreed that 'People think that it is children's fault that they are in care'.
- 39% of children in care and 43% of care leavers disagreed with the statement 'Other children's parents do not treat children in care differently to other children'.
- 30% of children in care and 42% of care leavers agreed with the statement that 'Where I live, people would not like it if someone opened a children's home'.

In 2020, the [Bright Spots research](#) by Coram Voice and the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford reported on stigma in the care system. It found that 12% of young people in care aged 11-18 said adults did things which made them 'feel embarrassed about being in care'. A care leaver reported being 'refused renting a house due to the bad reputation of all care leavers (3 plus landlords and counting)'.

A child in care (aged 11-18) told Bright Spots researchers, '[They] tell me I can't do certain things because I am in care. Tell my school to segregate me and my other peers who are in care because apparently, we are less academic'.

Multiple placements

In 2020, the [Stability Index](#) published by the Children's Commissioner for England showed that just over 1 in 10 children in care (8,000 children) were moved two or more times in 2018/19. Older children were more likely to be moved around several times in a year, changing their home and their location. This issue interacted with the tendency towards long-distance moves – many of these moves led children to be placed outside of their local authority boundary. The lack of stability caused by frequent moves can cause significant disruptions to well-being and attainment. The number of children moved from local authority care to privately provided care has also increased.

Moving away

Ideally, children going into care should be able to continue to live locally so that they stay at the same school, keep in contact with their wider families, and see their friends. In practice, however, this does not always happen. Sometimes moving away is for the child's own safety and well-being. For example, a child might be involved with a gang and might be under threat because of this. In many instances, however, out-of-area moves occur because of a lack of locally available services and support. In 2019, [Pass the Parcel](#), a report by the Children's Commissioner for England, found that over 11,000 looked-after children were living more than 20 miles from home, with over 2,000 further than 100 miles away.

Shortages

The care-experienced young people who helped devise the script for *Echoes Through Time* talked about how appointments and meetings with social workers are often rushed. Shortages and turnover of staff in social work are growing problems. Figures from the Department for Education showed that in 2022, 5,400 social workers left the profession – a 9% rise on the previous year. Vacancies are also at a record high. One third of local authorities say they have problems finding and keeping staff.

In 2019, [Children's Voices](#), a report by the Children's Commissioner for England, said, 'Having many different social workers can reduce the child's ability and/or willingness to make the effort to get to know and trust the next social worker. It can feel frustrating, boring, repetitive, and exhausting to build that same relationship over and over'.

Barriers to attainment

Become's report, [Perceptions of Care](#), found that 35% of children and young people believe that social workers think children in care are not as clever as other children. Only 56% of children in care and care leavers thought that social workers are ambitious for children they work with. They felt that social workers had 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.

One said, '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!'

Trusted adults

A single good relationship with a trusted adult can transform a child's life. According to [Harvard University](#), the 'single most common finding [from] decades of research in the social and behavioural sciences' has found that children who do well in spite of experiencing 'significant adversity' in their lives had 'at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver or other adult'.

During Social Work Week 2024, [Ryan Branson](#), a care leaver now training to be a social worker with Wakefield Council, said, 'I had a few foster placements and moving around was always tough, but the one constant that remained throughout my childhood, was my social workers. Whatever else was going on in my life they would always be there for me, a calming presence to steady the course and help me through. What I took from them, was first and foremost, kindness and honesty'.

Ryan's social workers offered practical support, like supporting him both to write his personal statement and apply for financial support at university. But the human, emotional support was also fundamental to his development. He said, 'There were also words of encouragement and reassurance; little things which made a huge difference to me, like praising me when I'd done well on my assignments, because I didn't have any parents who could do that for me'.

Glossary of terms

The care system has its own jargon – acronyms, words and phrases used by local authorities and people working in the services. Here are some of those terms which occur in the play script.

Care plan: This document, written by social workers, sets out where the child will live, the nature of contact with their family, and how they will be educated.

Corporate parenting: The corporate parent is the council responsible for a child in the care system. It includes council members, staff and other agencies who provide the care for a child.

Eligible Child and Relevant Child: These terms describe older children who are preparing to leave care.

- Eligible Child is anyone aged 16-17 in the care system, or who has been in the care system for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14. An Eligible Child is given help to prepare for leaving care which means having a Personal Adviser, a Needs Assessment, and a Pathway Plan.
- Relevant Child is anyone aged 16-17 who has left care, who had been in the care system on the same terms as an Eligible Child and in addition, had been 'Looked After' for at least one day after their 16th birthday. A Relevant Child is entitled to the same services as an Eligible Child and is also entitled to Housing Benefit.

Former Relevant Child: Someone aged between 18 and 25 who has been an Eligible Child, a Relevant Child, or both. A Former Relevant Child is entitled to a Personal Adviser; a Pathway Plan; help with money for education, training or employment; and financial or other assistance. If in full-time further or higher education, they will be given accommodation or funds to pay for somewhere to live during holiday periods.

Foster care: Most children in care live with a foster family. Foster carers can be carers who have been recruited and trained by the local authority, or by private agencies, to become foster carers. They can also be relatives or family friends who are approved as foster carers by the local authority (known as kinship foster carers).

IRO: The Independent Review Officer is independent of social services. Each child who is in the care system under a court order has an IRO. The IRO monitors the care a child is getting, chairs the LAC meetings, and tries to resolve any disputes about the child's care plan with children's services.

Key worker: The key worker ensures the child's needs are met. Their role includes assessing a child's needs, being a good role model, and supporting the child's links to their families and community.

LAC: 'Looked After Children' is the official term for children in care. Children say they prefer to be called 'our children', or individually, by their names.

LAC Review: A regular meeting to monitor the child's care plan, attended by the child (if old enough), professionals, family and foster parents. Typically, meetings will review contact between the child and their parents, where the child is living, their health, their progress at school, and any legal issues.

Needs assessment: Care leavers have an assessment to see what advice, assistance and support they need to become independent and fulfil their plans for their future. The needs assessment looks at their achievements and abilities, and is used to write the Pathway Plan.

NEET: A young person who is 'Neither in Employment, Education or Training'.

Pathway Plan: The contract between the care leaver and the local authority, setting out how a young person leaving care will live independently. It includes help to stay in contact with family and friends; help for further education or to find employment, and other practical skills to live independently; somewhere to live; help for physical, emotional and mental health needs; and help to manage money.

Peers: The friends of a child in care.

Personal Adviser: The person who ensures the Pathway Plan is followed. The adviser organises services and other support for the young person.

PEP: A Personal Education Plan. Every child in care of school age has one.

Placement: The home of a child in care, whether with birth parents, with a foster family or in a children's home.

Qualifying Care Leaver: Someone aged 16-25, who was looked after by children's services on or after their 16th birthday but is no longer in the care system, and has spent less than 13 weeks in care since their 14th birthday. This time frame means they do not meet the criteria for Eligible or Relevant Child. A Qualifying Care Leaver can get advice and support from children's services, help with living expenses and, if they are in higher education, may also get help with accommodation in the holidays.

Social worker: A social worker assesses the risk to a child who may go into care, and builds a relationship with them. If a child cannot live with their parents, the social worker finds a safe home and family they can live with. This may be temporary, through fostering, or permanently, through adoption.

Stigma: Negative beliefs and attitudes towards a disparate group of individuals. Children in care often come up against prejudices about all and any child in care.

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