



A Care System That Cares:

Lessons for the Independent
Review of Children's Social Care
from young people with direct
experience of it

Artwork by Deanne,
care-experienced young person
supported by Barnardo's



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1. Foreword

by Joanne – A care-experienced young person

Hello. My name is Joanne and I am currently 24 years old. I have been involved with social care since I was a baby when my mother was being supported by Staffordshire. I remember being about seven when I was taken in by Derbyshire social care.

I think it is so important for professionals to take time to listen to those with lived experiences. Everyone experiences things differently and things affect people in different ways. I would like people to take a second to think and ask how someone is feeling. It might just build someone's confidence, awareness and understanding about their mental health. For example, my anxiety was a lot worse until I asked my social worker to take off their badge when in public.

A better understanding of the young person you are working with builds trust, making it easier to work with someone. As a young person if I didn't feel listened to or I knew big things were about to happen, but I had no control or no say in what was happening in my life, I would often resort to running away from the placements I was placed in. In my experience too often young people are told **'your bags are packed you're leaving'** and you have no idea where you are going, who you would be meeting and if you would see your friends again.

Feelings of loneliness and isolation are something me and many others in care feel. Being in care is often being made to adapt to the system. I didn't really have much help and support to deal with separation from family and the changes in day-to-day life. I think for some, the idea of a buddy system may help.

I joined Barnardo's Care Collaborative to make sure that the same mistakes are not made in the system. We need a system that is built to help and that is capable of providing bright futures to the young people in its care. I think that it is important that not only the Care Review, but every manager and social worker should listen to the voice, thoughts, and feelings of young people like myself.

Jo

October 2021

About this report

Jo has been working with a group of other care-experienced young people supported by Barnardo's to develop the recommendations in this report. This group (known as the 'Care Review Collaborative') includes young people with a wide range of experience of the care system, including those who came into care as young children and later on, those who have lived in foster care and those who have lived in residential care. They are all passionate about their desire to achieve a better system of children's social care in England. This report is the result of the joint work of that group, and as Barnardo's we are extremely grateful to the commitment of the young people who shared their stories, experiences, and ideas to make this report possible. Thank you, Jo, Georgia, Macauley, Dan, Jake and Callum and all the other young people who have contributed to this report – we hope your recommendations will be influential in helping to improve children's social care in the years to come.

2. What young people want to change

Recommendation	
one:	There should be better support for families in trouble.
two:	Children in care should be listened to and should be able to have their say in decisions made about them.
three:	There should be activities to tackle loneliness and isolation for care-experienced young people in every local authority.
four:	Children in care should be able to participate in the same activities as those not in care.
five:	Children and young people should be protected from discrimination related to their care status.
six:	Children in care and care-experienced young people need workers who can build stable relationships and want to spend time with them.
seven:	Children in care and care-experienced young people need better access to mental health services.
eight:	Young people leaving care need more support as they become adults, particularly in finding the right place to live.

3. Introduction

In 2019, the Conservative Party manifesto committed to reviewing the children's social care system to make sure children can access the support they need. On 15 January 2021, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care was announced, and Josh MacAlister was appointed as Chair. To date, Barnardo's has produced two other publications to help inform the review. These are *No Place Like Home*¹, which looks at the experiences of care-experienced young people in accessing accommodation, and *It Takes a Village*² which outlines the important role family support can play in helping families early, reducing the need for children to be taken into care.

However, at Barnardo's we believe that to be truly effective a review of the care system must hear directly from those people who know the system best – the children and young people who have direct experience of it. Nobody knows better what it is like to be taken into care, how it feels to have regular meetings with a social worker, or to experience living with foster parents or in residential care than the children and young people who have experienced this first hand.

That is why over the last six months Barnardo's has been working with a group of care-experienced³ young people to discuss their priorities for the Care Review. The aim of this work was simple; we wanted to find out the answer to a key question, ***'if care-experienced young people oversaw the care review, what changes would they recommend?'***

During this project we worked with a core group of eight care-experienced young people to form a group called the Care Review Collaborative. Through a series of themed workshops, with the themes determined by young people themselves, we established what they see as the key challenges in the current system, and the practical solutions they feel are needed to make it work better.

As well as working with this core group, we also undertook a number of initiatives aimed at hearing the thoughts and ideas of young people from across our services, inviting them to get involved in whatever way they felt most comfortable. This included an online survey that could be completed anonymously, an opportunity to submit artwork and getting input from existing participation or consultation groups which exist in our services. For example, our service in Bristol has been working with care-experienced young people on what can be done to improve access to health services⁴.

This report aims to amplify the voices of the young people we support by setting out in detail what they told us – often directly in their own words. We hope that it will become essential reading not only to everyone involved in the Care Review in England but to anyone who is responsible for designing or setting up services linked to the children's social care system in England. This report explores the kind of care system that young people want and the care system that they also very much need.

¹Fortune R and Smith N 'No Place Like Home: a look at young people's experience of leaving the care system available at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/no-place-like-home>

²Smith N (2021) 'It takes a village to raise a child: the case for family support in every community available at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-09/It-Takes-a-Village-the-case-for-family-support-in-every-community.pdf>

³Throughout this report we will use the term 'care-experienced' as the one preferred by young people themselves. Although other terms such as 'being in care' or 'care leaver' are often used to describe those who are in or have been in the care system, young people tell us this suggests that there is nothing more to them or their life. The term care-experienced allows us to recognise a person's previous experience while not presenting it as the defining feature of their life.

⁴Good Day Bad Day – YouTube

4. Report Recommendations

Recommendation one:

There should be better support for families in trouble.

Young people's concern

There is a clear message from care-experienced young people about their encounters with social work before coming into care and that is: **'don't judge us'**.

It can feel like social workers are only interested in the needs of the child, while the needs of the parents and the challenges faced by the wider family, can go unrecognised. This is despite the fact that in practice it is difficult to separate the needs of the child from those of the parent. An effective system of pre-care support should look at the needs of the whole family including supporting parents with the many challenges that can affect their ability to parent as well as they would like. These include domestic abuse, parental mental health and substance misuse.

Currently, parents are often expected to access certain therapies or support services but often these services are unavailable or other underlying problems need to be addressed first, meaning it can feel that families are being **'set up to fail'**. There is a difference between what children's services expect to happen and what adult services, such as mental health, can deliver. This can lead to parents feeling

abandoned and unable to achieve the change that is needed in the time required. As one of our care-experienced young people, who had faced challenges raising her own child commented:

'It often feels like there is no communication, social workers who talk to the child don't always know what parents are actually going through'

As a charity, Barnardo's has long been concerned that a lack of joined-up support services for families is a barrier to them receiving the help they need. In our recent report, *It Takes a Village*⁵, we highlight the need for there to be a family hub in every community. We believe that these hubs can provide families with a **'one stop shop'**, providing a single point of contact and enable support for families to be better co-ordinated and include offers to help with a wide range of socio-economic issues.

Young people's recommendation

The Care Review should recommend better support for families long before there is a need to take children into care. Families should be given the support they need when they need it, free from judgement. Mental health and drug and alcohol rehabilitation services in particular need to be made available to more families to help prevent children from being unnecessarily taken into care.

⁵Smith, N. (2021) 'It takes a village to raise a child: the case for family support in every community available at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-09/It-Takes-a-Village-the-case-for-family-support-in-every-community.pdf>

Recommendation two:

Children in care should be listened to and should be able to have their say in decisions made about them.

Young people's concern

Too often children and young people do not feel listened to when it comes to decisions about their care. Young people told us they felt their thoughts and feelings about decisions were sometimes ignored. One young person talked about how they had had to move in with a relative who they had a very poor relationship with and another explained how when they had entered care they had expressed a preference for living in residential care yet were placed in several unsuccessful foster placements.

Section 22(4) of the Children Act 1989⁶ provides that, before making any decision with respect of a child the authority must, so far as reasonably practicable, ascertain the wishes and feelings of the child. However, despite this legal duty, children and young people feel that too often they raise issues with their social worker or personal adviser, yet this doesn't result in any change – as one young person explained:

‘Nothing changes when you want it to, your social worker sees you as a number not a name.’

Young people said that they often felt that ‘consulting’ is just seen as part of a process rather than a genuine dialogue. Conversations about care often happen too late in the decision-making process. One child was placed for adoption but the child was not told until very late in the proceedings.



Young people also feel they are often given very little support when trying to understand historical decisions made about their care. Accessing care records can be a traumatic experience capable of triggering many past emotions including feelings of abandonment and betrayal.

Local authorities should offer all care-experienced young people extensive support when accessing their past files to help them understand and process what is often difficult information.

Advocacy services can play a particularly important role in ensuring that children and young people's views are listened to. However, several young people had not accessed an advocate and were not aware the service was available to them⁷. Improving access to these services will go a long way to improving overall involvement of children and young people in decision-making processes.

⁶<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/22>

⁷Currently Section 26A, Children Act 1989 requires that Local Authorities make arrangements for advocacy provision for children, care leavers up to age 25 and those who were looked after before they became the subject of a special guardianship order. However there is no requirement that all children are automatically assigned an advocate, meaning some can not be aware of the service or what it could provide them.



Young people's recommendation

The Care Review should recommend that a greater emphasis is placed on listening to the views of children and young people during their time in care. All children should be assigned an advocate whose job it is to speak up for them and ensure their thoughts and views are heard. This service should be opt out, so that advocates are automatically assigned to children when they enter care unless they specifically say they do not want it. Currently advocates are only available to children who request one.

Recommendation three:

There should be activities to tackle loneliness and isolation for care-experienced young people in every local authority.

Young people's concern

Coming into care is often a very lonely and isolating experience. Children can feel cut off from their friends and family and often feel that it is **'my fault'** or **'I have done something wrong'**. This is particularly true of children who don't enter care due to a care order but due to an agreement under section 20 of the Children's Act, where parents voluntarily agree to have their child placed in a foster placement.

'You go into care whatever way you go into care and that initial going into care is the most isolated you ever feel.'

Children and young people can continue to feel lonely and isolated at various times throughout their time in care and as care-experienced young people. Feeling alone can drive some young people towards anti-social behaviours even if they know these are not helpful in the long term. As one young person explained:

'When I keep myself busy, I feel less lonely, less isolated and less depressed and when you are less busy you start to look at other people and compare yourself with them and do the wrong things like drink up, smoke up.'

The stigma attached to **'being in care'** means that children in care do not always want to confide in friends. This can heighten the feelings of being alone and mean that even if there are other children who have been through a similar situation

for example in their school, they cannot reach out to them.

'I never knew anyone who was in care in my school but there were loads.'

Support services aimed at helping children in care or care-experienced adults to meet each other and make friends can make a real difference to how isolated a child or young person feels. Services such as participation and group work activities play a vital role in helping children and young people meet others in a similar situation. Children and young people value activities which allow them to build social networks, including with people from their local area who they share interests with (including children and young people who have not themselves necessarily been in care). Having an independent visitor or 'buddy' can also help ensure that children and young people feel less alone.

These types of opportunities are vital for children and young people's sense of well-being yet it often appears that this work is not prioritised by local authorities. When these services are provided they are often delivered by charities or voluntary organisations.

Barnardo's has been working with Plymouth Council and care-experienced young people in the area to develop local initiatives that are aimed at combating loneliness and isolation for young people. This includes delivering projects such as



People I Tolerate – a youth group that ran in the summer of 2021, which was set up and run by care experienced young people. The group met twice a week for eight weeks and care experienced young people were given the opportunity to take part in a range of social activities such as cooking competitions, DJ masterclasses and life hike sessions. However social group are often the first thing to be cut when there is less money available in the children’s service budget.

Young people’s recommendation
The Care Review should recommend that activities aimed at tackling loneliness and isolation are a key part of all local authorities’ ‘offer’ to children in care and care leavers up to the age of 25. Local authorities should be required to have policies specifically aimed at encouraging young people to get involved, make friends and build connections within their local area.

Recommendation four:

Children in care should be able to participate in the same activities as those not in care.

Young people's concern

Being in care can make it difficult for some children to participate in activities that children not in care take for granted. This includes going on school trips or visiting friends' houses. Even when such activities are technically possible, the rules can mean children can be put in the embarrassing position of having to jump through extra hoops, such as asking a friend's parents to undergo a police check before they can stay over. One young person explained how rules such as this had meant they felt compelled to lie about where they were going and what they were doing:

'I would go round to friends' houses and deliberately not tell my carers where I was going as I didn't want them to be phoning up asking friends' parents for a DBS check, the system encouraged me to lie just to spend time with my friends.'

Bureaucracy can slow down processes and make young people feel anxious that they will end up missing out on activities due to the extra hurdles. One young person explained that they were worried about missing a residential trip organised by the Prince's Trust due to the length of time processes take and while the issue was

finally sorted it was a significant cause of worry.

Being able to take part in activities, to pursue interests and hobbies, is very important to the emotional health and wellbeing of all children, including those in the care system. Those who support children in care should see getting to know the children as a central part of their job. This should include learning about their interests, hobbies and passions and then working with a child to support them in things such as finding a local football team or other social groups relevant to them. It is also important that those in care can meet and hang out with friends just like children who are not in care.



Young people's recommendation

The Care Review should recommend a culture shift in the care system so it feels more 'human' and truly 'caring'. Alongside keeping children safe there should be greater emphasis on workers getting to know children and young people and finding out about their passions and interests. Professionals should facilitate **'making things happen for children'**. Bureaucratic processes should be streamlined so they do not act as a barrier to accessing typical childhood experiences.

Recommendation five:

Children and young people should be protected from discrimination related to their care status.

Young peoples' concern

Children and care experienced young people often experience stigma and are seen as **'having problems.'**

Professionals working with this group do not always take pro-active steps to reduce stigma. Children and young people gave examples of practices they found unhelpful and stigmatising such as workers turning up to school wearing badges making children feel like they stood out and were different.

'He (social worker) would turn up to school with a big badge saying he was from social services, it made me feel like I stood out and showed all the other kids that I was different.'

As they move into adult life, this problem can continue. Care-experienced young people who become parents themselves can feel like the system expects them to fail as a parent simply because they have been in care:

'From the moment I became a dad I felt they were on my back straight away, they didn't want to give me a chance.'

Care-experienced young people can experience stigma when accessing services, from health, to housing, to employment. One young person particularly described their experience



of accessing mental health services as an adult who had been in care:

'They know about your family background and their mental health. It's kind of like your mum had this so I think you may have it – they definitely put a label on you.'

Children are not to blame for coming into care and should be able to access services without feeling that their care experience operates as a barrier.

Young people's recommendation

The Care Review should recommend legislative change to protect **'care-experienced'** young people against discrimination. This would enable them to feel confident that they would be able to get a job or access housing for example without the risk that being in care could be held against them.

Recommendation six:

Children in care and care experienced young people need workers who can build stable relationships and want to spend time with them.

Young people's concern

Staff retention and a high turnover is a serious problem in the current care system. Many children experience multiple social workers during their time in care – some young people we spoke to had had as many as 10. Every time a child is allocated a new social worker or personal adviser, they have to tell their story again and build a new relationship. This can make it difficult for children and young people to know who they can trust.

'It was hard because I constantly had to tell social workers my story and build a relationship with them.'

The problem is made worse when there is no handover and there is no opportunity to say goodbye.

In a Community Care survey of 800 children's social workers in 2021, 79% said that their caseloads were either **'completely unmanageable'** or **'hard to manage'**⁸. These high caseloads mean workers often don't have enough time to spend with children and young people. The experience of children and young people is often that the care workforce is stretched, over-worked and seemingly underpaid and this affects what social workers can do to help the children they work with. Many workers, particularly those working with teenagers, are not offering the type of advice and information they need, for example in relation to sex or relationships. Workers can come across as focused on following the right procedures rather than helping children:

'I know a lot of social workers feel bound by the legislation around this issue, they don't know what they are free to say and what they're not and that can give them a bit of an internal stutter.'

What young people say they need and value in workers is more akin to a 'youth work' approach where spending time with them is a key element of the job. As one young person commented:

'There needs a balance between paperwork – doing it proper – and seeing the young people.'

Skills such as empathy and coming across as someone who really cares are characteristics highly valued by young people but as one young person stated too often it seems that:

'to them it is just a job you know, just something that they are doing to earn a living, it might be called the care system, but it doesn't seem that they always care.'

Often the language professionals use can seem like jargon and make young people feel bad about their situation. For example, young people said they did not like reference to terms such as 'placement' preferring that workers talked about a 'home'. One young person mentioned how when moving on to a Staying Put placement with their foster carer their social worker referred to their foster carers as 'landlords' which made the situation

⁸<https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2021/04/01/caseloads-got-less-manageable-childrens-social-workers-covid-survey-finds/>

feel less about support and more about merely accessing a room:

'I don't like it that they call them landlords- they're my family I've lived with them all my life- they're not my landlords.'

Workers support children and young people best when they are able to spend time with them and when they can get to know them. One young person who had developed a particularly positive relationship with one of her social workers during her time in care commented:

'My social worker took time out for me and valued my family relationships, but it's a lottery for a worker like this.'



Young people's recommendation

The Care Review should have a specific focus on the professionals who support children in care and care-experienced young people. This includes looking at why so many professionals in this field leave their roles quickly (which means that many children and young people have multiple workers) and how workloads could be adapted to allow professionals to spend more time with children and young people. Job descriptions for those working with children in care and care-experienced young people should reflect the importance of spending time together and providing more informal support.

⁸Staying put is an arrangement where young people remain with their foster carers following their 18th birthday. It was endorsed by government and formalised in the Children and Families Act 2014.

Recommendation seven:

Children in care and care-experienced young people need better access to mental health services.

Young people's concern

The current system of mental health support for children in care and care-experienced young people is inadequate, with long waiting lists and high thresholds for those wanting to access support. Despite a Government pilot to look at how to improve assessment of children's mental health when they enter care¹⁰, there is still no general requirement to do this in the same way as there is in relation to physical health. There are also often problems in accessing the right range of therapies for children in care, who often have specific needs relating to attachment. The problem can become even worse as young people get older, and care-experienced young people can struggle to access adult mental health services at all¹¹.

Young people shouldn't be expected to put their mental health crisis on hold while they wait for an appointment and yet waiting lists for support can be very long:

'I have been on the waiting list for two years'

There can also be a reluctance by health professionals to recognise and respond to mental health needs when a problem presents.

'I went to the GP and he said; 'don't worry you're fine, go home and have a cup of tea and a rest' and I told him the same thing 3 times but when I took a social worker he was then all serious and saying 'I'm sorry and we will provide you with medication'

We need to improve access to mental health services for both children in care and care-experienced adults. This should be based on need not on a specific clinic diagnosis.

'A diagnosis is just a label and something else to talk about and judged about and be blamed for it – it is your fault and you are the bad person. Why do people need a diagnosis to get support why can't they just get the support anyway?'

Given the high level of trauma care-experienced young people are likely to have been through, mental health assessments and support, whether clinical or community based, should be guaranteed in a similar way to which the system looks at children in care's physical health.

¹⁰<https://www.annafreud.org/insights/news/2019/02/centre-announces-pilot-sites-for-project-to-improve-mental-health-and-wellbeing-assessments-for-children-entering-care/>

¹¹Smith N 'Neglect minds: a report on mental health support for young people leaving care' available at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/neglected-minds.pdf>



Young peoples' recommendation

The Care Review should recommend that children have (or are offered) a mental health assessment on entering care, and that timely access to appropriate support, clinical or otherwise, is guaranteed. The care system should prioritise young people's mental health by ensuring that all staff working with care-experienced children and young people have training in mental health and how to discuss mental health concerns. Mental health services should have workers who directly support both 'in care' and 'leaving care' teams within local authorities, avoiding a 'cliff edge' at 18, and ensuring support is appropriate for young people's needs. New systems should involve robust monitoring including a requirement for local health bodies to report on access and waiting times for mental health services for children in care and care leavers to be able to accurately assess if changes introduced are making a difference.

Recommendation eight:

Young people leaving care need more support as they become adults, particularly in finding the right place to live.

Young people's concern

Young people need more support when leaving the care system. At the moment they can feel unprepared at the age of 18 (or in some cases younger) to take on the responsibilities suddenly falling on their shoulders.

Some young people value support given to them by their personal advisers, but evidence shows that workloads can be high and this can make it difficult for all young people to access the support they need. One study for example showed that the average case load of a personal adviser is 23¹² meaning that workers can find themselves supporting a large number of care-experienced young people with widely different needs. Pathway plans while helpful can feel like a 'tick-box exercise', and there is sometimes little in the way of practical support for the real-life challenges young people face when they first move out, such as how to pay bills or deal with basic house maintenance.

Housing remains a key concern, with some young people reporting that they have been expected to live in places when they leave care which are unsuitable and feel unsafe. This is particularly true of those placed in 'unregulated accommodation' where the current lack of national standards in the sector means there are examples of some very poor provision¹³. In a Barnardo's report from May 2021 about care-experienced young people's experience of accessing accommodation,

one young person described the accommodation they were expected to live in:

'The amount of antisocial behaviour that was there, my neighbour smoked crack which leaked into my flat, I witnessed knife fights outside my front door... I spoke to the council and the police...they don't think if this was happening to my child what would I do, they don't seem to have that approach'

Young people are too often given little support in finding the right accommodation and the practical skills they need to live independently and they are given very little money to set up home. Young people feel that more needs to be done to prepare them with the practical skills needed to live alone:

'There should be a 2-week course for care leavers where they can go in where they can learn how to change a lightbulb, learn how to change a fuse, learn where to store food in the correct places'

If a care-experienced young person seems to be doing well, for example by getting a place at university, then the expectation can be that they don't need support. This is often not true, and these young people would benefit from help especially as they make the transition, for example with moving or enrolling on courses.

¹²CSJ (2014) Survival of the Fittest? Improving life chances for care leavers, available at <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/survival-of-the-fittest-improving-life-chances-for-care-leavers>

¹³Fortune R and Smith N 'No Place Like Home: a look at young people's experience of leaving the care system' available at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/no-place-like-home>

‘I was never offered anything when I moved into university. I had to do it all by myself and no one helped. Other people had their parents drop them off but I had nobody.’

The care system acting as a ‘corporate parent’ should aim to treat young people leaving care in the same way as any parent would treat their adult child when they first move out of home. There should be an expectation that transition from being ‘in care’ to ‘independence’ is gradual and the system should not assume young people are necessarily ready to live alone at 18. Care-experienced young people value having access to accommodation options which include an offer of support, such as staying with foster parents or moving into supported lodgings. These types of schemes should be expanded so they are available to more young people.



Young people’s recommendation

The Care Review should recommend that more support is provided to young people when they first leave care and that local authorities should be able to offer more care-experienced young people access to accommodation which includes a package of support as they move towards living independently. This includes letting young people stay in foster care until the age of 21 if this is the right option for them. All care-experienced young people should have a minimum offer of practical life skills training before they leave care to help them manage living in their own property independently.

A young person's reflection on positive and negative experiences of being in care.



Artwork by Jordan,
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