

Cheshire West & Chester Council

Young People Living in Care in Cheshire West and Chester Findings from workshop at Chester Zoo, August 2009



**Cheshire West and Chester Council would like to say a
BIG THANK YOU to the young people that took part in
this project!**

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Background

Members from the 'Every Child Matters Select Panel' wished to undertake informal discussions with looked after children, aged 12-18, to find out, from a young person's perspective, their experience of the care system. This report outlines the views of the young people expressed at a specific event designed to understand their needs and aspirations.

Please be aware that the views represented in this report are those of the young people involved in the research. For a variety of reasons, there may be instances where actual Council policy differs from the young people's perspective.

Introduction

The Event

The event took place on the morning of the 5th August 2009 at Oakfield Manor in Chester Zoo. The aim of the event was to bring together young people living in care, to discuss in a fun and informal way how the care system impacts on their lives.

Taking Part

In Cheshire West and Chester there are currently 335 young people living in care (as of June 2009). All young people in care are allocated a family support worker. It was via these family support workers that the young people were invited to take part in the event. In total, 14 young people agreed to take part, with 12 taking part on the day. Of those who took part 4 were from a care home, 8 were living in a foster home, 5 were girls, 7 were boys, 6 were aged 16-18, 3 aged 14-15 and 3 aged 12-13.

Method

The event lasted approximately 3 hours which included frequent breaks and lunch. During the event the young people were split into 3 smaller groups to carry out a number of exercises. One group consisted of young people living in a care home, a second group consisted of those aged 14-15 living in foster care and the final group consisted of those aged 12-13 living in foster care (except for one individual). The exercises were facilitated by Research Officers and Cheshire West and Chester Councillors.

The exercises undertaken aimed to find out what the young people:

- like about the care system and being in care
- think the key issues are that young people in care face
- would like to change about the care system
- hope and worry about for the future
- would say to someone going into care

Summary

At the event the young people revealed what they would like to change about the care system.

Those living in a foster care home told us that:

- Young people in foster care want to be treated as one of the family and want to be cared for and given attention
- Foster carers and foster homes need to be inspected and checked thoroughly before hand so that it meets all standards
- Young people in care should be matched to their foster carers and more people should be encouraged to become foster carers
- Social services should ensure they keep the young people informed and reconsider how they carry out review meetings, CRB checks, safety checks and permissions
- The young people need more support with school work and preparing to leave foster care when they are older
- Young people in foster care want to be treated the same as other young people and not be judged or labelled.

Those living in a care home told us that:

- The young people in care and the staff working in the care homes need to get along better, have fun and respect each other more
- When it comes to leaving the care system, young people need to be prepared, informed of their options and entitlements and be given continued supported
- Young people living in care homes need more privacy and independence over their bedrooms, their lives and their possessions
- Social services should review curfews and punishments in the care homes, procedures in relation to possessions, the amount of paperwork care staff have to do and paying care staff after 11pm when required
- The young people would like to have more choice over the food and activities in the care home and how funds are spent.

What do you like about being in care and the care system?

1. Young people living in foster care

Key Points

- 1) Being 'normal' is important and being able to do 'normal' everyday things and activities such as watching a film and getting some sleep.
- 2) Living in an environment that is comfortable, with people who care and spend time with the young people is essential.

Foster Carers

The young people were, in general, positive about the people they lived with and said that they like their foster carers. Comments included:

- 'they are kind'
- 'they help you'
- 'they spend time with you'

'Normality' and having a 'normal life'

The importance of having a 'normal' life and carrying out 'normal' activities were talked about by the young people:

- '[I enjoy] playing sport'
- 'going food shopping'
- 'eating when I want'

Leisure time

The young people liked spending their leisure time partaking in activities that other young people do and consider 'normal':

- 'watching films'
- 'listening to music'
- 'using the computer'

A Nice Environment

Many of the young people spoke about their foster home being a nice environment to live in and a number of them have their own room. Comments included:

- 'clean'
- 'no smoke'
- 'change in lifestyle'

Peace

Of particular importance to the young people is the peacefulness of the foster home:

- 'quietness'

- 'sleeping'
- 'peace'

Choice

The young people like having a choice of what they do with their time and what they eat:

- 'Being able to make food when want'
- '[do] what want to do'
- 'Where live to some extent'

Help from people

The young people talked about the help they receive from foster carers, social workers and the council. They had received help for different things, including support with school work and planning social and personal events (e.g. getting ready for prom):

- 'with homework'
- 'Shopping'
- 'Doing hair and make-up'

Food

A number of young people commented upon having nice food and a choice of food:

- 'good food'
- 'food when want it'
- 'get to go food shopping'

Holidays and trips

Day trips and holidays that the young people had been on with their foster carers were talked about:

- 'holiday for the first time'
- 'opportunity to go abroad'
- 'days out'

Treatment

A number of young people spoke about the foster carers treating them like part of their own family:

- 'part of a loving family'
- 'treated like part of the family'

Possessions and money

Some of the young people said that they have pocket money and others spoke about things that had been bought for them by their foster carers:

- 'buy you things'
- 'laptop'
- 'computer'

Other

The young people also like feeling safe, meeting new people and seeing family members:

- 'not going to be homeless'
- 'friends you meet'
- 'can still see your family'

2. Young people living in a care home

Key Points

- 1) The young people living in a care home were generally positive about being in care, particularly about the:
 - Activities
 - Qualifications they undertake
- 2) They feel lucky that they get to do qualifications that sometimes other young people do not get to do.

Leisure Time

The young people living in a care home enjoy taking part in a range of activities:

- 'watch DVDs'
- 'go on holiday'

Training

The opportunity to do training courses is seen as an advantage that young people in care have that sometimes other young people do not. Courses available included health and safety and food hygiene. Comments were:

- 'go on courses'
- 'get qualifications'

People live with in the care home

The young people talked about the connection they have with other young people in the care home and how they are all in a similar situation:

- 'more connected to other people in care'
- 'know each other'

Staff

It was commented that the staff are always around for the young people in the care home:

- '[staff are] always there'

Other

The young people also mentioned having an allowance and that they like the food:

- 'allowance for clothes'
- 'nice food'

What are some of the issues for young people living in care?

1. Young people living in foster care

Key Issues

- 1) Having to leave their home and go to a new environment and live with people who they may not like
- 2) Having to deal with going to a new school where they may face bullying if perceived as being 'different'
- 3) Missing their family and friends
- 4) It can be too much to cope with resulting in sad thoughts and feelings

New home and new people

Many of the young people spoke about moving to a new environment away from their family and friends. They had to adjust to a new home and living with people who they may not like or may not have been appropriately matched with:

- 'hard to settle and adjust'
- 'not liking foster family'
- 'they don't understand [the foster family]'

Bullying and school

Bullying was a key concern at school as other young people sometimes treat them differently because they are in care. The young people talked about the impact of having to change schools and also the difficulty of school work, particularly if they receive no support:

- 'difficult school work'
- 'thoughts of missing school as unhappy'
- 'not getting any help'

Family

The young people said that missing family members and worrying about when they will get to see them is an issue for those in care:

- '[they] feel like [they are] losing their family'
- 'don't like [their] family but scared of leaving'
- 'will they see [their] family in the future?'

Made to feel different

The young people felt that they were treated differently from other young people. Certain aspects of the care system supported these perceptions, making it more difficult for the young people to fit in, such as having CRB checks for sleep overs and safety checks of vehicles if want to go in a friend's parent's car (the young people explained that this varies depending on the type of care plan):

- ‘people think you are different’
- ‘having to get CRB checks’
- ‘[problems with] sleep overs and camping’

Friends

The young people talked about missing their friends and the difficulties of making new friends, particularly when they are made to feel different by having to get CRB checks and safety checks:

- ‘having to make new friends’
- ‘not having any friends’
- ‘not seeing friends’

Dealing with ‘the system’

The young people spoke about the difficulties they experience with elements of the care system. These included the young people not being told why they are in care, not being kept informed or asked their opinion and having to deal with changing contracts, social workers and other changes within the system:

- ‘system keeps changing’
- ‘are not kept informed’
- ‘not told why in care’

Mental well-being

It was thought that young people in care have a lot to deal with and that it might result in them having negative or sad thoughts affecting their confidence:

- ‘ashamed that in foster care’
- ‘feeling hopeless’
- ‘low self-esteem’

Leaving care

The young people talked about having to leave care when they are older and the worry this created. It was felt that there are regulations and protections for young people living in care that other young people do not have, so that when the young people leave care they are not prepared for the real world:

- ‘have nothing when leave’
- ‘in a safety net’
- ‘needing a job so will have money’

The future

The young people thought that negative feelings and experiences at school might impact upon their future and their opportunities:

- ‘not smart enough to go to college’
- ‘will things be worse’
- ‘no confidence’

Drugs and alcohol

The young people talked about drugs and alcohol being an issue for some young people in care and felt there is not always enough help for this. It was thought those who are unhappy are particularly at risk:

- 'get into alcohol and drugs'
- 'no help for this'
- 'unhappy [so take drugs and alcohol]'

2. Young people living in a care home

Key Issues

- 1) Leaving care when they are older and the support available to cope with this
- 2) Lack of privacy in the care home, particularly from staff
- 3) Missing their family and friends

New home and new people

The young people spoke about having to leave their home to live with people they do not know and the worries they have about who might live with them. There were also comments that young people going into care are not able to choose where they are placed. They also spoke about having to adjust to a new environment with rules such as curfews and prohibitions:

- 'worried about who might be living with me'
- 'Curfews of 11pm even if 18'
- 'no choice of where live'

Privacy

The young people felt that there is a lack of privacy in care homes with everybody knowing information about the young people, particularly the staff. It was commented that staff are told details about the young people before they arrive, including personal information and that they get too involved in personal issues:

- 'everyone knows stuff about me'
- 'given every detail before move in including bank details and NI numbers'
- 'get too involved in your personal issues'

Staff issues

As well as issues around privacy, the young people revealed other concerns about staff in care homes. These were particularly around issues of communication and staff not being consistent in what they tell the young people:

- 'need clear communication from staff'
- 'staff give different messages'
- 'staff know information about you'

Leaving care

The young people talked about concerns over leaving care when they are older. Worries included being alone, being independent, being lonely, having to leave in the middle of studying and losing support from staff. They also stressed the importance of knowing what support is available and what they are entitled to:

- 'will be very lonely'
- 'want to finish college first'
- 'dreading leaving and being independent'

Dealing with 'the system'

As well as issues around leaving care and privacy, the young people talked about other concerns with the care system. Comments were made about young people not being told why they are in care and review meetings being intimidating:

- 'why are they in care, been told?'
- 'review meetings, too many people'
- 'talk about you like your not there'

Mental well-being

The young people talked about the distressing thoughts and feelings that young people in care have:

- 'lonely'
- 'scared'
- 'paranoid'

The future

The young people talked about being unsure of the future, particularly in getting a job. They worried that being in care might affect future choices:

- 'will it affect getting a job?'
- 'unsure about what will happen in the future'

Friends

The young people spoke about young people in care missing their friends and lack of contact with friends if they are moved far away from their home:

- 'not able to see their friends'
- 'any contact with friends'
- 'can be moved far away'

Being judged

The young people worried about people judging young people living in care:

- 'being judged for being in care'
- 'paranoid [about] being judged'

Family

The young people thought that young people in care have to deal with the loss of or perceived loss of family and issues around family contact:

- 'losing their family'
- 'contact with family'

School

Having to change schools was also an issue:

- 'moving school'

What would you like to change about the care system?

1. Young people living in foster care

Key areas of change

- 1) Social services to reconsider key areas of the care system such as review panels and keeping the young people informed and involved
- 2) Ensure young people living in care are treated the same as other young people
- 3) Ensure foster homes are appropriate and inspected
- 4) Provide support for the foster carers

Change of approach

The young people suggested that social services:

- think outside the box
- listen and change
- think about the impact changes have upon the young people before they put anything into place
- ask young people for their opinion on matters

The foster home and carers

Foster homes and foster carers should be inspected thoroughly before hand:

- ensure young people in foster care are treated as part of the foster family
- ensure there is more than one inspection (as potential carers can plan for one inspection)
- check foster carers are not just doing it for the money
- ensure all standards are met all of the time (i.e. they may clean up the house for inspections but generally unclean)

The right to choose

Young people in care should have the right to choose and be given more choices in what they do, including:

- own clothes
- how spend pocket money
- how spend their time

Permissions regarding activities

The young people suggested that the permissions and regulations needed to take part in activities should be reviewed as they can take too long and make young people in care feel 'different':

- CRB checks

- Vehicle safety checks
- Parental permission versus social services permission

Treatment

Young people in foster care should be treated the same as other young people:

- those in care are in a safety net, ensure they can cope with real life
- social services are inflexible with foster carers resulting in the monitoring of the young people in care very closely
- young people in care do not want to be labeled or called 'care kids'

Keep young people informed

Always keep the young people in care informed, particularly if there are any changes:

- must be told why they are in care
- keep young people informed of their rights and how it affects contracts
- young people need to be told that although the leaving age has increased to 21 they can still leave care at 16 if choose to

Support the young people

- support the young people with their studies, for example help with spelling
- support the young people in preparation of leaving care and once left
- the leaving age should be 21 for those who want this

Supporting foster carers

- foster carers should be given sufficient information about the young person they are going to foster before they take them into their care
- foster carers should be paid appropriately
- foster carers have many concerns and need support. They worry about something going wrong and the consequences of this

Review panels

Change the approach to review panels:

- make review panels less boring
- make review panels shorter
- post out the paperwork to be filled in beforehand so the young person can think about it in detail and save time

Time and attention

All people working with young people in care need to recognise that the young people may need care and attention:

- give young people in care additional attention
- take extra time with those in care
- care for young people in care

Social workers

With regards to social workers:

- ensure social workers are not changed too frequently
- young people should be able to keep their social worker for longer

Privacy

- young people in care should have their own bedroom as need a private space

Encourage more foster carers

There are not enough foster carers particularly experienced foster carers. More people should be encouraged to foster:

- review criteria for being a foster carer

Match foster care with young person

Young people must be appropriately matched to their foster home:

- those from non-smoking homes should be sent to non-smoking foster homes

Other

It was also suggested that:

- there should be a priority system so that severe cases are considered first
- young people should not be taken out of class as this raises questions by classmate

2. Young people living in a care home

Key areas of change

- 1) Staff and young people in the care home need to learn to respect each other
- 2) Ensure young people have support when leaving care
- 3) Give the young people in care homes more privacy
- 4) Review the care homes rules and regulations

Staff in the care home

The staff and young people in the care home need to get along better together and respect each other:

- staff sometimes stick together
- staff should listen to young people's reasons for their behaviour i.e. if a young person does something wrong, find out why or listen to their side of the story
- be more friendly and fun
- spend more time with the young people on social activities
- do not hold a grudge if a young person does something wrong
- the young people are told to call if they are going to be late, so if they do ring, staff should not be angry and threaten to call the police to report the young person missing
- ensure facts are written in the 'sanction book'

- staff should not turn off the electricity in the bedrooms as a punishment

Support when leaving care

When the time comes for a young person to leave the care home there must be more support:

- the young person will need help deciding what they want to do when they leave care
- support is vital as the young person will be lonely and scared. If there is no support the young person will make friends with anyone for company which places them at risk
- ensure young people are ready to live independently
- there needs to be more information about the options available
- have 'moving on'/ 'supported living' accommodation as a stepping stone that is preferably with other people so they are not alone
- in 'supported living' accommodation the young people need their own room and bathroom but suggest a shared kitchen and living room
- have a care support worker for longer than 3 years

Privacy

Young people living in a care home would like more privacy:

- the internet is already restricted so the young people do not need further supervision (if they need to look for certain information such as sexual health it is not possible as staff sit with them the whole time)
- staff should not see the young person's e-mails or passwords
- the young people would like no room searches as they are not warned and staff go through their private things

Choice

Young people should have more choice of what happens in the care home:

- the young people would like to get involved in food menus
- have take away meals occasionally like 'normal' families do
- activity choices need to be fair if there are more boys than girls (vice versa), as if activities are voted on, they may always be more male (or female) centred

Staff duties

In relation to staff the young people also suggest:

- staff should be paid to stay out with the young people after 11pm. If the young person has an event and needs to stay out longer with staff support (e.g for a family party) they cannot
- consider the amount of paperwork staff have to do. Staff have to record a great deal of detail about the young peoples day so do not have time to socialise with the young people
- stop staff complaining about not being paid enough

Independence

Young people living in care homes would like more independence over their possessions and lives:

- young people should be allowed aerosols in their bedrooms including deodorant and shaving foam to prevent others using their belongings.
- the young people would like to be allowed to sleep in their bedrooms during the day, particularly in certain circumstances such as having been to a sleep over

Other

The young people also suggested:

- young people in care homes be allowed to get travel insurance so they can go on holiday with staff
- there should be more funds available to make improvements to care homes

Hopes and worries for the future

1. Hopes for the future (answers were similar for all in care so grouped together)



2. Worries for the future (answers were similar for all in care so grouped together)

Worries:

- 1) Being alone
- 2) Exams
- 3) Specific fears e.g. heights, disease, robbery
- 4) No worries!
- 5) Getting hurt and death
- 6) Concerns about family members
- 7) College
- 8) Other fears included not getting the job they want, being bored and taking a driving test

Being on your own

Failing exams

death

If my wife had a miscarriage

To struggle though college

Boredom

Someone might rob your garden and your house

Electric shock

Worry about my mum

You may not get the job you want

No worries!

If I get chucked out of college I will have to move out

Heights

Loneliness

Moving out and living independently

Swine flu

Driving test

Words of inspiration to other young people going into care

1. **Young people living in foster care** (note: one group, those aged 14 to 15 living in foster care, did not take part in this task)

The young people were asked what words of inspiration they would give to other young people going into foster care. The young people living in foster care were more negative in their words of inspiration, however this could be due to age as they were 12-13 year olds (those living in a care home 16-18 year olds)

Key points

Words of inspiration to other young people going into foster care focused upon:

- 1) Speaking up and telling someone if something is wrong
- 2) Give being in care a chance
- 3) Forewarnings of some of the negative issues e.g. school

Speak up

Some of the young people would tell other young people going in to care to speak up if something is wrong with either their foster home or something else:

- 'don't be afraid to speak up if it is a horrible house'
- 'make sure it's a good environment'
- 'if there is something wrong you tell someone it can be difficult sometimes, you can be worried about people's reaction, speak to social worker (this is who they would speak to first) or sometimes you can speak to someone from your foster family'

Forewarnings of negative issues

Several young people would forewarn other young people going into care of issues they may find difficult:

- 'you will get treated differently'
- 'you might not see your family much'
- 'you might have to move school'
- 'it's worrying'

Give it a chance

Some of the young people would tell other young people going into care to give it a chance and give it time:

- 'you will get used to your new home if you give it time'
- 'give it a chance'
- 'you will meet people you might not like – try and get on with them'

Other

One comment focused upon a positive:

- 'you'll get more presents (from family and foster family)'

2. Young people living in a care home

Key points

Words of inspiration to other young people going into focused upon:

- 1) words of comfort and reassurance about being in a care home
- 2) offers of help and support in the care home

The young people living in a care home were more supportive in their words of inspiration to other young people going into care. However, this could be due to age as they were 16-18 year olds (those living in foster care were aged 12-13).

Reassurance

The young people's words of inspiration were of reassurance:

- 'you will like it here'
- 'it's alright because I haven't hurt myself yet!!'
- 'they're all nice'
- 'it's not normally like this! (when someone else kicks off)'
- 'don't worry'

Help and support

Words of inspiration also told of a willingness to help and support other young people going into, specifically, the young person's own care home:

- 'I'll introduce you to the staff'
- 'let me show you around'
- 'do you fancy coming out'
- 'I'll stay with you a while until you tell me you're comfortable enough for me to leave'

The staff perspective

Three family support workers became a group and were asked the same questions as the young people.

1. What do you like about the care system?

The support workers felt that:

- the young people were in a safer environment
- the young people were given boundaries and structure to their lives
- the young people receive feedback about what is happening via regular reviews and a quarterly newsletter
- the system aims to keep siblings near to each other and their families
- the system tries to use kinship carers whenever possible
- that the review structure works for young people and staff
- that the young people are being listened to and it is easy for them to get involved.

2. What are some of the issues for young people living in care?

a) Staff

- Staff are changed too often making it difficult to build and maintain relationships
- Too many professionals come into contact with the young people including social workers, family support workers, teachers, school support workers, mental health professionals etc
- Young people are asked the same questions many times by different people. There needs to be more joined up working across council departments and organisations.
- Staff need emotional support and a team spirit

b) Schools

- No consistent approach across schools in dealing with looked after children
- Do not always accept looked after children or can take a long time to accept them in
- The statemating process is long winded and is not started early enough
- Teachers can be insensitive and may highlight the fact the young people are in care

c) Placements

- The young people are moved around too often making it difficult to build and maintain relationships and feel that nobody wants them
- Can be moved with very little notice e.g. when Redsands closed the young people and staff got less than 24 hours notice of where they were moving to

d) Young people in care perceived as different

- The young people are pre-judged as their background file goes with them to schools etc
- Young people living in care want to be treated the same as other children
- Young people living in care should not be taken out of class as it raises questions by their peers

e) Review meetings

- Review meetings are too formal and intimidating to the young people
- The young people have to repeat their histories each time

f) Foster carers

- Must reassure the young people and explain to them the 'rules of the house' e.g. can they help themselves to food etc

g) Processes

- Need to clarify ways of working and harmonise former district areas ways of working to speed things up

3. What would you like to change about the care system?

a) Clarity after Local Government Reorganisation

- There needs to be clarity of new structures and procedures
- Ensure have the required staff numbers
- Ensure staff are trained up on how things work including administration and financial procedures

b) Improve transition service

- Need joined up working between outreach service and placement service so the young person keeps the same outreach workers once placed
- Longer handover period while young people build a relationships with family support worker

c) Family support workers

- Match young people with the staff that work with them
- Encourage family support workers to engage in informal general chats with the young people as a means to discussing issues
- Make it easier for the young people to contact their family support worker e.g. give young people their mobile number so can text when need to speak to them
- To overcome the issue of multiple contacts, have the family support worker act as the young persons advocate and speak on their behalf if the young person prefers

d) Reduce the red tape

- Review when need to do formal risk assessments, other young people do not need such risk assessments when going places with their family
- Review the health and safety regulations to make life as normal as possible for young people living in care
- Have one consent form that covers everything for at least a year rather than forms for each individual event

e) More staff

- Encourage staff to stay or join by lobbying for more positive media
- Let people hear about the good work social workers do

f) Pre-planning

- Need better pre-planning when making arrangements so that young people can be informed