

St George's House Roundtable Briefing

A Family for Life: Rethinking our approach to older children in care

Home for Good is a UK-wide charity with an ambitious vision to see a home for every child who needs one. Our vision is of a care system where children are thriving within homes that are havens and where every child always has a family by their side.

Older children make up the fastest growing and largest cohort of children in the care system in England¹:

- 63% of looked after children are aged 10 or over.
- 1 in 4 children in care are aged 16 or over.
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) make up 6% of all children in care. 86% of these children are over the age of 16.

The vast majority of children in care reside in foster families (n=57,380)² with 7000 children and young people living in residential homes. Among young people aged 16-18, a significant number live in independent or semi-independent provision which ranges from supported lodgings, to foyers, to bedsits. Media coverage over the last couple of years has given attention to the poor quality of some of this provision, often used as a last resort because of a lack of other options available to social workers when making decisions for older children in care.

All young people unable to return to their birth families are heading towards the point of leaving the care system at some point between the age of 16 and 21. The way the care system currently operates means that many young people are entering adulthood without a family by their side, which profoundly impacts their ability to thrive.

Background

Every year, 13,000 young people age out of the care system in England.³ While some go on to employment, higher education, or training, we know that a significant number of care leavers struggle and lack the support around them to thrive. For young people living in foster families, Staying Put has been introduced to delay the point at which young people move on from their foster

¹ Department for Education. (2020) *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. Available [online](#).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

family, up to the age of 21. For those living in residential care, a similar pilot project, Staying Close, is aiming to provide the same sense of continuity for a young person beyond the age of 18.

However, these schemes are sadly not fulfilling their potential, as while 58% of young people were still living with their foster carers three months after their 18th birthday, only 28% of 19- and 20-year-olds were still living with their former foster carers through Staying Put.⁴ Furthermore, one survey showed that 55% of those who moved on from their foster family around the age of 18 did not receive any support to stay in touch with their foster carers⁵. The reasons behind these patterns are multiple; some foster carers report feeling pressured to take on new children when their spare room becomes 'available' as a child turns 18 due to a shortage of foster families nationally and an increase year-on-year in the number of children entering the care system. In addition, the lower payment offered and lack of national standardisation around payments⁶ provided to foster carers who participate in Staying Put means that the scheme is financially unviable for some foster carers who are reliant on their fostering allowance. This therefore disincentivises foster carers from choosing to allow a young person to remain living with them, which in turn means that less priority is given to the importance of continuity in relationships for the young person. Furthermore, this option to continue the relationship and support in this way is only applicable to young people living in foster families and not the increasing number of young people being placed in semi-independent or independent accommodation. These reasons mean that many young people are unable to remain living with a family whom they may have built a strong relationship with, even when they want to.

We know that transition points can be challenging for every child and young person to navigate, but particularly for those who have experienced trauma and instability. The transition to adulthood and independence can be particularly daunting as young people leave behind the structures of formal education and receive greater autonomy to make decisions about their lives. In terms of the general population of young adults, the average age for moving out of home is 23, with the vast majority of young adults continuing to draw on support from their family for the rest of their life. How can we expect young people, many of whom have experienced trauma and instability, to be prepared to face life on their own by the age of 18?

Fundamentally, the care system in England has become accepting of young people ageing out of the system without a family by their side. But not all countries are resigned to such outcomes for their young people in care. In the United States, there are innovative models emerging which promote adoption

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Fostering Network. (2016) *Keep Connected: Maintaining relationships when moving on*. Available [online](#).

⁶ Action for Children. (2020) *Giving care leavers the chance to stay: Staying Put six years on*. Available [online](#).



for looked after teenagers as a way of ensuring that no child leaving care is without a family.

The independent Children's Social Care Review in England

The Government recently announced the launch of the Children's Social Care Review in England, a 'once-in-a-generation' opportunity to consider how the needs, experiences, and outcomes of children interacting with this system can be improved. The terms of reference for this review can be viewed [here](#).

The review will *"focus on what is needed to meet these children's needs, starting with the contribution that children's social care can make to these children's lives – keeping them safe, improving their lifetime outcomes and reducing the impact to children and to society of failing to provide effective support"*. Crucially, part of this work will include a focus on the support available to children leaving the care system. Increasing recognition has been given to the existence of a "Care Cliff" for young people around the age of 18 who face the disappearance of care services around them as soon as they reach their 18th birthday. Not only does this include the loss of material and practical support, but many of them face a sudden end to stable and supportive relationships with trusted adults and role models in their lives.

This roundtable will consider whether a provision similar to adoption could enable the continuity of relationships into adulthood and beyond for teenagers who are currently facing the prospect of beginning their adult lives without a family by their side.

While there is broad ambition to improve the poor outcomes in homelessness, criminality, and unemployment associated with care experience, too little attention has been given to the importance of the transition between childhood and adulthood in impacting these outcomes. While the state holds parental responsibility for most of these children up to the age of 18, many of these poor outcomes occur beyond this age and therefore, a shift is needed to consider how the care system can set children and young people up for life, not just for 'living independently' at the age of 18 or 21.

Being part of a family, where the other members are wholeheartedly committed to your wellbeing and flourishing, is widely acknowledged to have an enormously positive impact on every person, whether child or adult. A family can provide a safe place to fail, a gracious place to learn, and an ongoing place to belong. No person 'ages out' of the need for these elements in their life. Yet the system as it stands conveys a message that the need for a family disappears for our most vulnerable young people when they reach adulthood, by its lack of emphasis on long-lasting, stable relationships. The care system should work to enable this at all costs for a young person heading towards leaving care.

While it will not be right for every young person, adoption, or a similar provision, holds the potential to cement a young person's relationship as part



of a family in a way that endures beyond the transition to adulthood, unlike many other forms of provision. For some it may provide the connection to an individual or family for life that makes a real tangible difference. Currently, only 1% of children adopted every year in England are over the age of 10.⁷ This means that for the vast majority of teenagers in care, adoption is not even offered to them as an option.

This roundtable will seek to answer the following questions:

- What has been the impact in other countries of prioritising adoption for older children leaving the care system?
- What new provision, drawing on the principles of adoption or guardianship, could be developed in England to enable every teenager leaving the care system to be part of a family?
- What would be needed for the implementation of this provision in terms of legislative and policy changes and wider societal and cultural shifts?



⁷ Department for Education. (2019) *National tables: children looked after in England including adoption 2018 to 2019*. Available [online](#).