

After care

Young people's views on leaving care

Reported by the Children's Rights Director for England



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Introduction

Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England



As Children's Rights Director for England, the law gives me the duty to ask children and young people in care for their views about their rights, their welfare, and how they are looked after in England. The law also gives me the duty to ask children getting any sort of help from council social care services, as well as care leavers and children and young people living away from home in any type of boarding school, residential special school or further education college.

As well as asking children and young people for their views and publishing what they tell us, with my team I also give advice on children's and young people's views and on children's rights and welfare to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the government. I have a duty to raise any issues I think are important about the rights and welfare of children or young people in care, getting children's social care

support or living away from home. With my team, I do this both for individual young people and for whole groups of young people.

This report gives the views of young people, mainly from among those who have left care, about their experience of care and leaving care. As well as looking at what young people have said, we have also tried to see whether they have been getting what the law says that they should be. This report should give an important insight into how well the care system is doing for children and young people, and how it prepares them for their own future, through the eyes of those leaving care for independent adult life.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Morgan'.

How we asked the young people for their views

We asked for views from care leavers, both those who had recently left care and young people still in care but preparing to leave care. We invited them to take part by writing to their local social care councils, asking them to pass on our invitations to young people leaving care or receiving after care support. The survey, discussion groups and voting sessions ran throughout October and November 2011.

We held two voting events for care leavers to answer questions for us about their views and experiences of leaving care. We held these at West Bromwich and London. We also invited young people to attend discussion groups to share their experiences with us, or to send in questionnaires with their views.

In addition to the voting sessions, survey and discussion groups that we carried out ourselves, we were also supported by 16 local children's rights and leaving care services who consulted their own groups of young people. They each agreed to complete and return questionnaires, or to ask their groups some additional questions we gave them to discuss.

In this report we have set out the answers young people actually gave to every question we asked them. Where we asked an 'open question', without giving options to choose from, we have given all of the answers that came from more than one in 10 of the people answering that question. Where we have given percentages of all children who answered a particular question, the percentages do not always add up to exactly 100, because we have rounded off the figures to whole numbers.

We did not identify who said what, but have tried to pull together collectively what most reflected the messages that young people were giving us about care and after care. We also wanted to know whether particular experiences or views were different from the typical. So, where we found big differences, we have tried to say so in this report. We have given direct quotes in the young people's own words wherever possible.

As with all our reports of children's views, we have done our best to write this report so that it can be easily read by young people themselves, by professionals working with young people and by politicians.

You can find and download copies of all our children's views reports on our children's website: www.rights4me.org.

The young people who gave us their views

Altogether, **a total of 308 young people gave their views** on leaving care and on life after care.

- 128 took part in the **'interactive' voting sessions** (these took place in West Bromwich on 15 October 2011 and in London on 10 November 2011).
- 88 young people took part in **discussion groups**.
- 72 young people completed **questionnaires** based on what we discussed in our groups.
- 20 young people completed **additional question sets**.

Because views came in from many different groups of young people, including consultation work done outside the Office of the Children's Rights Director, this report sometimes repeats the replies we received to the same question. Generally, this would not be necessary, but in this case it is interesting to see where young people's views are consistent, on particular issues, regardless of the method they chose to give us their views.

The young people came from **34 different local authority areas** in England. They had mostly left care, although some were young people still in care or being 'accommodated' in a placement by their local authority but who were preparing to leave care. We have used the words **'care leaver'** to mean both those who had recently left care and those still in care but preparing to leave.

In this report, we have used the words **'children in care'** to include all children being looked after by their local authority, whether they are in care under a court order (Section 31 of the Children Act 1989) or being 'accommodated' with their parents' agreement (Section 20 of the Children Act 1989). This is because young people themselves most often spoke about being 'in care', rather than being looked after by their local council.

The 214 who told us their age were between 16 and 23, and the **average age** was 18.

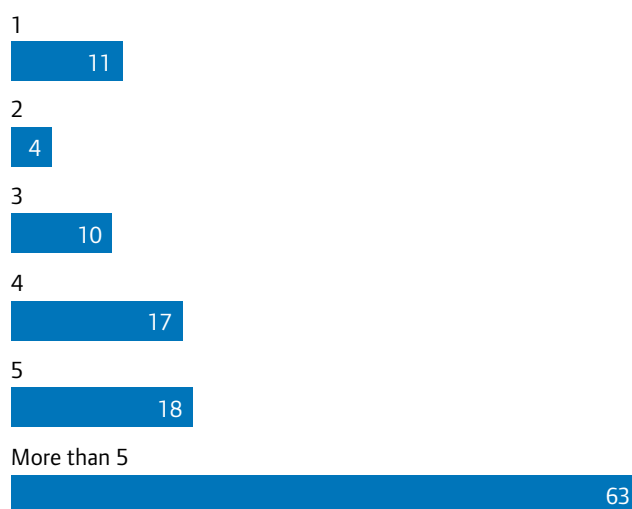
Out of the 260 who told us their **gender**, 148 were female and 112 were male.

Of the 107 young people who told us about their **ethnic background** (mainly through completed questionnaires), 80 said they were white, nine that they had a mixed background, six that they were black, another four that they were Asian, and five that they had other ethnic backgrounds. Three left their answer blank.

Of the 236 young people who told us about their current **care status**, 219 had left care, 15 were preparing to leave care and two said that they were not sure.

Young people at our two voting sessions told us how many years they had spent in care. This is set out in Figure 1.

Figure 1: How many years have you spent in care altogether?



Numbers of years in black; numbers of young people in white.

Based on answers from 123 care leavers.

The young people who took part in the voting sessions for the *After care* report had between them at least **522 years' experience of living in care**. Added together with the other 185 young people who also gave their views, in the voting sessions or through surveys or discussion groups, the overall experience of care represented in this report is very significant indeed.

The discussion groups and surveys

Here are the questions we asked our discussion groups to give us their views about, or received views about from our survey questions.

What were the best things for you personally about being looked after in care and what has improved over time?

Here are the most common responses. It was clear that the two things that most young people had valued most about their experience in care was the support that they were getting, and the opportunity to be part of a family.

Support from carers or workers

Issues relating to improved support were raised by 29 out of 72 young people in the survey and in four of the discussion groups. Here are some examples of what they said.

‘Had lots of positive attention and support from carers’

‘Being given support to ignore the bullying that was happening at school’

‘Knowing I had someone to talk to – someone there for me’

‘Could have gone down the wrong road’

‘It was nice having support from social worker and about a year before you get a Personal Adviser’

Interestingly, 13 young people (around one in five) who filled in surveys said that **the support they received had got better** for them as care leavers.

‘I got more help than I would have done if I was at home and the older I got then the more support I got to learn to live alone’

‘You got more support while you were in care than a normal child would’

‘I used to think that I couldn’t do this or that, but I listened to them and things started to change’

Three groups mentioned things they had been helped with such as **education**.

‘I didn’t have a school and then I got one that I had to travel ages to – but then they listened to me and I got a better school’

‘I could not do work at home because I was beaten up and my brothers wanted to pick a fight’

In two of the groups young people talked about what **social workers should do for young people**.

‘Every place will work differently. It’s all about the workers and how they interact with young people’

‘Moves are planned more now rather than people just being dumped on the doorstep. My placements lasted an average of eight months, but when planned it lasted four years’

Whilst 12 young people (around one in six) thought that **things had generally improved over time**; nine (one in eight) felt that **it hadn’t improved at all**.

‘Things got better after my placement changed. There was more involvement from Social Services’

‘Being in care has made me think more about what’s right to what’s wrong in my life’

‘Getting rid of bin bags for when you moved houses’

‘Having sleepovers at friends had got easier’

Other examples of good support included **getting help from an advocate** and **getting help for learning difficulties and mental health**.

‘Learning difficulties and health issues are picked up on earlier, but you can also get picked on – the extra help you get can cause jealousy’

In total, 35 of the young people who filled in our survey (just under half) were able to identify positive improvements during their time in care. Clearly, for many they associated this with the amount of support they received and how much say they were given in their lives.

Having a family

Twenty-seven young people completing surveys (around two fifths) said this was one of the best things about being in care.

‘Better looked after than at home’

‘I feel cared for and loved by my foster carer and her family’

‘Being in care has created great memories’

‘Meeting my foster parents – so glad I met them, they have had such an impact on my life’

‘Knowing that I can see siblings regularly and more often than if I wasn’t in care’

‘Felt part of a family’

‘Becoming part of another family – they welcomed me and I was part of their family’

Being part of a family also featured strongly in our discussion groups. It was raised as a ‘best thing’ about being in care in all 10 of the groups.

Feeling safer

This was a ‘best thing’ raised by 12 young people (about one in six) in the survey.

‘Reading my files now makes me realise how bad things were at home for me and my sisters. I feel lucky that Social Services intervened and do not know what would have become of us otherwise’

‘I was worried about what would happen when I got older and if I would get kicked out the house. But I felt that coming into care got me away from everything that was happening’

‘You are away from the hassle’

Making or living with new friends

This was also mentioned in 12 (about one in six) of the survey responses and was also raised in seven of the groups.

‘People that you meet’

‘I’ve always liked the people that I lived with’

‘Enjoyed my time in care and like the fact that I have been in care and can help other young people who are in a bad situation’

‘Getting to know different cultures – I lived in a children’s home with an Afghani boy and learned a lot over the time’

‘Meeting new people and people who are in a similar situation. When I went into care I was all alone’

Getting involved in doing things

Eleven young people (just under one in seven) talked positively about **getting involved with things** in their survey responses.



‘More opportunities to get involved in groups for care (like with the NSPCC)’

‘I get better opportunities compared with friends of mine. I have been involved in many activities such as being involved in a youth council. I have been able to travel to London as part of a group I was involved in’

Also, from the discussion groups, it emerged that young people wanted to get **more involved themselves in helping to improve things**. The work of local groups, like Children in Care Councils, was mentioned in three of the discussion groups.

Other positive things

These are some other important positive things that were mentioned.

- **Better education or getting into college** (this came from eight young people in our survey)

‘I also get things given to me as I am in care. As I did well in my GCSEs, and am planning to go to the university in a few years, I will get my university fees paid for me; and I will not have huge debts when I graduate. There are other financial benefits such as getting money for going to Sixth Form’

- **Having money and things that they wouldn’t get if they weren’t in care** (mentioned in seven groups)

‘Being able to go out, and having money – my own money’

- **Having good activities, trips out and holidays** (mentioned in seven groups).

‘Have been on some really good holidays and places that I would never have been to if I had continued living with my family’

‘We got to do things that we’d never done before – like holidays, birthday and Christmas celebrations’

- **The importance of feeling settled and stable** (mentioned in five groups).

‘It’s good when people stay through the system with you (having the same social worker or at least having contact with same social worker throughout)’

‘Having somewhere warm to go at night’

- **More freedom and independence** than when they had been at home (mentioned in five groups)

‘Survival, independence, parents can’t teach you that. We have an advantage over normal young people who live with their parents’

- **More say, and felt listened to** (10 young people said this in their survey responses)

‘More chance to [voice] opinions through “Care4Us Council” and Children’s Rights Service’

‘As I got older, I learnt that I’d got a mouth – and used it’

‘Work with the Youth Council, in our authority, improved outcomes. We have seen things improve in the care system’

‘Young people get a bit more of a say, it’s a bit better’

Importantly, safety also came into a number of discussions, with some young people saying how they felt safer in care, getting away from the things that could harm them in many ways; and quite **a number of young people felt that their lives had been better for being in care.**

‘Because my dad can’t be here to batter me’

‘You pick up on abuse earlier, so young people get less damage’

There weren’t any big differences between young people in how they felt that the care system had changed during their own time in it. This probably reflects their own very personal, and different, experiences of care. For some, it cared for them and those around them very well indeed. Many young people expressed their gratitude, through this consultation, for what the care system had done for them. The care system has been doing very well, and even exceptionally well, for many children and young people in care.

However, it is not possible to avoid the reality of other young people’s experiences of care, which from what young people told us in this consultation can be very poor indeed. There are many things we were told that children going into care may have to tolerate, such as less contact with family and friends, many changes to where they live, and being given little say in decisions. The one thing that should never happen is that they find themselves in even worse circumstances than if they hadn’t come into care. From what some of the young people we consulted told us, the care system had not been able to make sure of that.

What were the worst things for you personally about being looked after in care and what had got worse over time?

These were the most common replies to this question from our discussion groups and surveys.

Missing family and friends

What many young people had found hardest to come to terms with was the loss of contact with their family and friends. Twenty-one out of 72 young people (around one in three) completing surveys said this. It was also mentioned in six out of 10 groups.

‘Being split up from siblings and lack of contact’

‘Hard to see siblings because we are placed all over the place, only allowed to see them three times a year – and they don’t know who I am’

‘I’m not allowed to see my mum’

‘I didn’t get enough time to spend with my family members’

‘I don’t get to live around my family and I don’t see them as much as I need’

‘There can be a lot of commotion from your own family when you first get taken into care which can be very upsetting and puts you in a strange and awkward position’

‘Not being able to stay with friends, we need CRB checks done on the whole family which takes time’

OCR D advice: Government policy is clear that unless the care plan says otherwise, **decisions about overnight stays should be taken by carers**, and only require the normal sort of checks that any reasonable parent would make. It is not true the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) or police checks are required. This should only ever be considered on a case-by-case basis where the assessed risk would justify making checks. To see more visit our website at: www.rights4me.org/en/home/library/right-overnight-stays.aspx

One young person asked:

‘Why do we need social worker’s permission? Our friend’s families have to be checked out before we can stay over. Police checks take time. A party takes ages to plan’

Other quotes give further examples of the issues young people are facing.

‘When I came into care I had a good relationship with my family (brothers and sisters), but over the years this has got worse. I don’t feel that my social workers ever really took arranging contact seriously’

OCR D advice: Government guidance says that it will be in the interests of most looked after children to keep links and contacts with their family, including siblings who are in care but in different placements. Arrangements for contact should be in the care plan (Schedule 1(3)(1) of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010).



'I don't feel I know my family any more'

'My social worker won't tell me why I can only see my mum twice a year'

'Being moved away from home area meant lost friendships. Placements should always be near to where young people originate so it's easier to keep in touch with the people who matter to you'

Too many restrictions or rules

Around a quarter of the young people filling in our surveys said that they felt that the rules they had to live by had been too strict. It was also an issue raised in six of the discussion groups.

'Constant health and safety risk assessments'

'Needing consent forms signed for everything'

'Hated the fact that I had to get permission and people having to be police checked if I wanted to sleep over'

'Too many rigid rules. My foster carers said I had to go to bed at 9pm when I was 15'

'Getting used to different rules'

'Not allowed [your] mobile phones or bank cards'

'A lot of paperwork that has to be filled in – because you're in care, teachers had to fill in paperwork; they'd get you to one side and fill it in'

However, some young people saw it a little differently.

'They are not strict enough on us – sets a bad example. People are getting rewarded for stuff they should be doing anyway'

There was also discussion about how some rules were applied differently in different areas. In one discussion group no one could say what the rules were about accessing their records, although many wanted to do this. One young person asked:

'Are we allowed access to our files?'

OCRD advice: The law generally allows you to see information about yourself, unless others think that this could be harmful to you. It may be necessary to remove (or otherwise get permission to see) some information that is about other people (Data Protection Act 1998).

Too many moves

Young people's concern about how often they had **changes of placement** also featured strongly in the discussions. It was raised as an issue in all 10 discussion groups, where some young people told us that social workers never seem to leave you alone and let you settle anywhere. Some young people thought that in social workers' never-ending quest to find 'a better, more suited' placement, they might have caused even greater disruption and instability to the lives of children in care. (Fourteen young people said this, around one in five of those filling in our survey.)

'It feels unstable – I got moved about loads. You don't get that if you live at home'

'It was upsetting being told you were moving foster care to somewhere else and knowing you have to start all over again'

'Moving around is the worst thing. We have lived in too many placements. You just get settled down then you have to move again. Too many placements are a bad thing'

There were a great many other comments along the same lines, some of which showed the very large number of moves that some children in care are expected to put up with. One young person told us that she had had 11 different moves in less than a year.

OCRD ADVICE: It is government policy to encourage placements for looked after children that are settled and stable. To that end, the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 has recently changed the law to say: 'Looked after children must not move from accommodation... to other arrangements without a statutory review of their care plan chaired by their Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO).' (See also Regulations 6 and 14 of Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Guidance and Regulations 2010.)

Two other comments spelled out what could be the consequences of getting moved all the time.

‘The kind of placement isn’t always a good thing. Care homes are different to foster homes and some are not nice places... on the other hand though some carers aren’t nice’

‘When they put you in a placement, like a hostel, they need to be more careful. They put me in a hostel where there was a red light district and I was preyed upon. If you’ve got people telling you ‘this will make you feel better and make you a lot of money’, a lot of people in care would go with it’

Others talked about

‘Being moved on instead of sorting things out...’

Care staff and social workers

Some issues raised were to do with care staff and social workers, and included the complaint that there were too many changes of ‘key’ people. A number of young people disliked having to put up with all of the changes in their lives, whether placement moves or **changes of carers or social workers**. Twelve young people (around one in six) said this in their survey responses and four groups discussed it.

‘Having so many placements and social workers’

‘Fear of the unknown – not knowing who I was going to live with when I first came into care’

‘Some [foster carers] start off right to give a child a good life, but then get greedy’

‘Some [foster carers] need reassessing’

‘I think you can tell which carers are in it for the right reasons’

‘Having different social workers instead of the same one’

In one group of eight young people a quick check revealed that three had had more than three social workers, two had had more than five, one had had 10, another had had 13, and one young person told us that she thought she’d had over 60 social workers during her time in care.

Other problems relating to workers and staff included **not being able to get hold of your social worker**, which was a problem mentioned in five groups.

‘Social services is the worst thing because half the time social workers were on leave – they don’t do their job. They also don’t do what young people want but rather what managers want them to do. A lot of the time the service you got depended very much on the individual social worker. Social workers change too often, in the last year alone I’ve had about six social workers’

‘I don’t feel there is enough support for children in care. I know there is your social worker but she does not visit very often and if she does she really doesn’t know what to talk about. You would think if she wanted to see me she would have a reason’

OCRD advice: The law and guidance now say that you should expect to be visited at least **every six weeks, or**, if your local authority thinks you are in a permanent placement (that is one you shouldn’t be moving from at least until you are 18), they should still be visiting you at least **every three months** (Regulation 28 of the Care Planning, Placement and Care Review (England) Regulations 2010).

‘I don’t even have a Pathways worker which is essential to my future; and it would be nice to have advice from someone who knows what they are talking about’

OCR D advice: All qualifying care leavers have a legal **right to have a Personal Adviser** appointed to help them to understand and get what the law says they are entitled to (Paragraphs 3.17 & 3.48 and Regulation 8 of Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers Guidance and Regulations 2010).

‘I don’t see my social worker [named] as often as I would like to’

‘Things not getting done on time. Social workers disorganised, late or not turning up as agreed’

‘Social worker lets you down, when already let down by your parents, by not keeping to agreements and promises’

Sometimes **social workers or carers were unable to make decisions** (five groups mentioned this).

‘Having to ask lots of people for permission (like foster carer, then social worker and then bosses)’

‘They [your social worker] say they’ll help and don’t’

‘Social worker should get more authority to make decisions’

Not knowing what is going on, which came up in nine of the discussion groups, was also a concern. From other things young people told us, placement moves often happened without the young person being told before the day of the move.

Not being consulted, listened to or their views taken seriously enough was mentioned in seven groups.

‘My social worker doesn’t take time to explain things to me properly’

‘I don’t get my point of view across to Social Services’

‘Not being consulted or included in some decisions’

‘Closing down the children’s home which the young people felt was home and the people there their family’

OCR D advice: The law is clear that **the local authority must listen to the views of the child** before making any decision affecting them (Section 22(4) of the Children Act 1989). One of the roles that has been given to Independent Reviewing Officers is to make sure that the views of children are heard through reviews: ‘In order to ensure that the meeting remains the child’s meeting... the IRO should always begin from the perspective of the child, listen to his/her views and make sure that s/he is involved as much as possible in the review process’ (paragraph 3.32 of the *IRO Handbook*).

There were many examples of young people feeling let down even though they thought that they had been listened to.

‘Saying you are entitled, raise your hopes and not give you things like laptops and flats, or getting things later than promised’

Being treated differently or labelled

When given the opportunity to talk in discussion groups about the 'worst things about care', young people thought that **the stigma that they had to live with** was the thing they most wanted to talk about.

'Being stigmatised as looked after'

'I feel as though I am under more pressure to not be the stereotypical looked after child. I don't drink all the time and take drugs'

'Being bullied at school and people not understanding what it means to be in care'

'Being pulled out of class for reviews'

'Teachers knowing stuff about your past – and thinking you use being in care as an excuse for behaviour'

'I don't like my school knowing I am in care. Social workers tell the school and teachers sometimes. There should be a rule not to tell people'

'It's embarrassing to leave class for a meeting like reviews and stuff. They [other children] ask you why you have gone for an hour'

'Also having our things moved around in black bin bags'

'I used to get bullied if I ever said I was in care'

'You have to go to respite carers when your foster carer goes on holiday'

'I do not want to be singled out'

One young person, concerned about the negative image that the care system in this country has, insisted:

'It is not a care system, it is a care service where I come from'

One discussion group, in particular, identified the issue of the growing number of care leavers having children.

'If you have been in care and then become pregnant your child is automatically referred to Social Services, classed as a vulnerable person because you have been in care'

Not having enough freedom was mentioned in five groups, although one other group said that there was too much freedom.

'Too much freedom. Our kids' home got closed down 'cos it had no rules and no structure. We were left to do what we liked'

Conclusions

On balance, care seems to have been a great force for good in many of the lives of young people who took part in this consultation. Many have said that they think it has improved their lives, and they have given plenty of examples of how this has been so. It has given them opportunities to keep safe, improve their education, meet new people and make new friends, enjoy new experiences and grow with increasing confidence and independence to become their own person.

However, from what else we have heard, the care system also has great potential to make the lives of many actually worse. The contrast between what young people themselves experience as the best that care has to offer and the worst is striking, and will remain a challenge for policy-makers, inspectors and service providers for some time to come.

From your own experience, what proposals do you have for the government and local councils to make care better in the future?

Here are the main answers to this question from our discussion groups and surveys.

Thirteen young people filling in surveys (around one in five) answered that the government and local councils **should listen to young people and act more upon what they say**, and this was mentioned in six groups.

‘Some young people in the group are from Children in Care Councils, not everyone has heard of this’

‘Just listen to young people because they are not listening at the moment’

‘Young people weren’t listened to much’

‘Really listen to children – don’t just assume you know what they are thinking or what is best for them. Don’t speak for them’

Nine young people (one in eight of those answering our survey) wanted **more local children’s homes and supported lodgings** accommodation

‘More local authority residential centres instead of private – the care is not as good’

‘More supported accommodation in the area’

‘It’s bad when young people get moved from foster carer to foster carer’

‘If you get moved around a lot that’s when things start messing up’

‘Leaving care could be smoother. I had to take the first thing that came along for accommodation’

Eight young people in the survey (around one in 10) suggested that **social workers needed better training** and this was mentioned in five of the group discussions.

‘Training of social workers to be improved so they know how to communicate with children and young people, it’s not all about the law side, they have to be able to understand children and young people’

‘You should make sure that there are better explanations about the reasons for things’

‘Make young people feel welcome. When young people first enter care they can be nervous and frightened’

‘We are not matched to the foster carer we get, like adoption. We are just dumped with them regardless of whether they are male or female’

‘A suitable match between foster carer and young person being placed with them is really important’

A typical comment suggested that **social work had become out of touch with young people** of today:

‘Young people are different now. Training should have to be re-done to come up to date with the modern world’

One young person gave an example of how she had gone to her review thinking that she was entitled to a university bursary, only to be told that she wasn’t. It was only when she went back to her social worker with a guide explaining what the law said she was entitled to that she got it.

Eight young people (around one in 10 of those answering the survey) thought government and local councils should **give them more and better support**. Most of our groups discussed the frequency and quality of **social work visits**. Young people in seven groups wanted more visits, while young people in two other groups wanted fewer.

‘Improve efficiency of social workers (for example, sticking to appointments)’

‘Social workers should visit more’

‘Social workers should have a good reason to visit the child as well as things they want to ask. There should be an outside inspection of Social Services and Pathways. This should be a surprise... They should also ask the looked after children randomly about the problems within the system.’

‘Every time young people get a new social worker they have to explain their story over and over. If it was recorded they could just read the file!’

A smaller number of young people argued:

‘Social workers shouldn’t visit as much’

These are some of the other issues that were raised.

‘Retain the number of social workers to ensure young people have some stability’

‘There should be a system which makes sure children in care have all the things they need, such as a Pathways worker. If a child is leaving care and needs help and advice they really don’t know who to contact’

‘I think young people should have more clubs to go to so that they get to see other people that are in care and they can tell each other things about being in care’

‘We need reassurance from the system all the way through – that things will be okay for us in care’

‘A lot of kids go out and get drunk because they are bored. Youth clubs finish at 9pm, most kids stay up later than this... What about a cinema club, play pool, tea and a chat? Things should stay open late at night – but social places don’t stay open, they need more funding’

‘Focus on the positives – publicise positive outcomes of care’

Seven young people (around one in 10 of those in our survey) wanted **an end to key people** (like social workers and carers) **changing all the time**.

More support for care leavers was raised as a particular issue including emotional support. This was discussed in five of the groups.

‘Make sure there’s enough emotional support’



Some of the discussion groups reported that little attention was given to preparing them emotionally for the changes that leaving care would mean. Many spoke of leaving behind carers and friends they had built a relationship with. Now they were being told that this had to end, and they weren't allowed to go back and see them. Others talked of not fully understanding just how lonely their life was about to become. For some, their lives had changed from living with and being around people to being, for much of the time, on their own.

'No one prepares you for that'

It is not a life that many leaving care choose to have, but it appears to be a life of isolation that many see themselves as forced into. In one discussion group they all agreed that the practical and financial sides of leaving care were important. But local authorities needed to do more to support young people emotionally as they leave care and start to fend for themselves for the first time.

'Emotional support is especially important when you don't see your family. They tell you what you will be doing and tell you you'll be getting a flat, but they don't know how it feels – it's scary, weird things happen in life'

'A good step would be to leave gradually in stages. You should never go from being with people to "oh my God I'm completely on my own"'

OCRD advice: On our website at www.rights4me.org there is a guide called *Leaving care entitlements: 10 things the law says you are entitled to when leaving care*.

Put children before money was the message given by young people in eight groups.

‘More money to support activities for children in care’

‘Not all foster carers use the money they get on the child’

‘The government is not putting the lives of the young people first, they are putting themselves first, for example closing down children’s homes to save money. Before closing the homes, they should make sure that the young people have somewhere to go they are happy with rather than dumping them’

‘Ask Mr Prime Minister to sort out budget funds’

And one care leaver said that before making people leave care, the government should:

‘Make sure young people have enough money to set up for themselves’

Treat us normally. This was mentioned in six groups.

OCRD advice: A number of government statements recently have spoken about the importance of treating looked after children like normal children. For example, the Children’s Minister, Tim Laughton, has said that he would like to see more of the day-to-day decisions (like overnight stays and school trips) being taken by carers.

‘Treat us more like ‘normal’ kids. How many other kids have so many people looking after them?’

‘Every local authority should have the same rules, no matter where you are in the country’

‘Foster carers to treat children and young people like their own child, e.g. take them on holiday, take them to places instead of putting them in taxis. Make them part of the family’

‘Reduce labelling and barriers which highlight a child as being in care’

‘Being in care has made me learn not to trust anyone’

‘Try to make children in care feel the same, and feel like a “normal” child’

‘Have a checklist of things that young people need when they leave care, like birth certificate, passport, National Insurance number, medical card’

One young person told us that she had left care three years before getting her birth certificate and National Insurance number.

Better information, especially about rights, was mentioned in six groups.

‘Young people need to be given more information about leaving care earlier on’

‘My local authority has a booklet showing a picture of the house I would be placed in, this should happen with all local authorities not just mine’

‘You get better information from the Children’s Rights Director than you do from your social worker’

‘They try and put you off finding out what you are entitled to’

Five groups mentioned that social workers should **make contact with families happen.**

‘Kids should see more of their family and friends. And you should listen to kids more about what they want in their life’

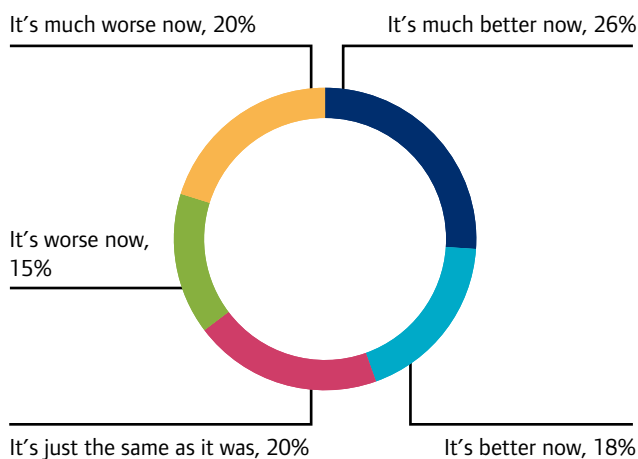
‘Make sure family contact is maintained’

‘Social workers should be made to prioritise contact – it may be a small thing to them but it’s so important to us’

What difference has being in care made to your life since leaving care?

In our discussion groups and survey we asked young people to tell us what difference being in care had made to their lives since leaving care. In our voting sessions we asked how their lives since care compared with the time they spent in care. Their answers to this are set out in Figure 2.

Figure 2: How does life since leaving care compare with the time you spent in care?



Based on answers from 119 care leavers.

Forty-four per cent of the care leavers who answered this question told us that their lives since leaving care were better or much better than they had been in care. Fewer, although still over a third (35%), told us their lives had become worse or much worse since leaving care.

What positive difference has coming from care made to your life since leaving care?

In the survey, 36 young people (half of those filling in the questionnaires) said they were feeling **more confident and independent** since leaving care. Seven of these also said that they had learned a lot and another six felt positive about ‘having their own place’. This was also seen as a positive thing in seven of the groups.

‘Even though care experience wasn’t good, I can look back and see it as a positive experience and ensure my child isn’t going down the same route’

‘I’m a lot more confident in making friends, a lot more mature. Got back in touch with family’

‘I feel it’s made me a stronger, more determined person. It’s made me have a different outlook to life and I’m very grateful’

‘Pathways worker has helped me a lot getting a flat’

‘I have got a Pathways Worker and they come and see me when I want them to so that they can check on how I’m doing’

‘Living in supported lodgings is a good way to learn how to do things for yourself’

Just under half the people in our survey (34 of the young people) saw themselves as **'a better person'** since leaving care. The examples young people used to demonstrate this were **getting involved with good things**, spoken about by six people in the survey and discussed in seven of the groups; how they had **'avoided bad things happening'** (five survey responses); and **getting on better with people** (raised in four of the groups).

'Getting more stability has meant that I can join groups, go to college, make friends and manage my life better'

'I'm not violent any more'

'Being a Youth Personal Adviser and helping people'

'My behaviour towards others has improved and believing in myself to achieve what I set out to do'

'I have a better understanding of what happened to me'

'Kids in care want to be great parents'

'Being in care made me grow up an awful lot quicker'

'I had the right support from my carer, which can bring out the best in you – but if you're not feeling loved or [you are] made to feel you shouldn't be there it can make you rebel'

'You see things from a different pair of eyes... you see what normal families are like'

'It changed my life for the better'

'Have been on the good side of the law for a year'

Looking back on coming into care, one care leaver told us:

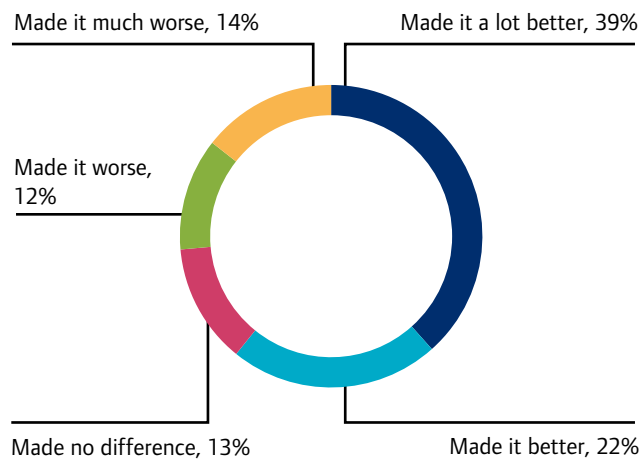
'My social worker told me to act like a child rather than an adult. I would have been an alcoholic if I didn't come into care'

The other positive difference raised by more than one in 10 young people in the survey was 12 young people (around one in six) saying that they had **a better education now**, with all proud to be in college.

'I wouldn't have even been able to think about staying on at college or going to university eventually. Being in care means that I get the support, encouragement and financial support'

In our voting sessions we asked care leavers to look back over their time in care and tell us whether they now thought being in care had overall made their lives better or worse than if they had not been in care. Their answers are in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Looking back as a care leaver, did care make your life better or worse?



Based on answers from 125 care leavers at the voting sessions.

Sixty-one per cent of care leavers voting felt that their lives in care had made things better or a lot better for them.

Just over a quarter (26%) thought that being in care had made their lives worse.

The other 13% of care leavers voted that **care had made no difference.**

When exploring these issues further in discussions it became clear that **some young people felt that being in care had given them an advantage in preparing to be independent** and cope with whatever life had to throw at them.

What negative difference has coming from care made to your life since leaving care?

Twelve young people who filled in surveys (around one in six) and young people in four of the discussion groups all said **losing contact with family or friends** had been one of the negative differences coming from care had made to their lives.

‘[I have] no family contact now as no one kept me in touch with them as I was growing up’

‘Lack of contact or relationship with natural family’

‘The biggest thing was losing contact with families and how social workers should have prioritised contact more when we were younger’

Even though this had been mentioned as one of the worst things about coming into care, young people were still identifying it in that way now as care leavers. They had lost contact with important family members and friends while in care, and were aware that they were not going to get them back now that they had left.

Eleven young people in the survey (just over one in six) said a negative aspect of coming from care was **being judged or labelled for being in care**. This was also brought up in three groups.

‘My social worker was outside my classroom, I didn’t want my mates to know’

‘Every time you tell people you are a care leaver they always want to know why you were in care’

Nine young people (one in eight of those answering our survey) said that a negative effect of coming from care was **[children’s] social care services not helping them**.

‘Not having the same support network. This wouldn’t happen in a “normal” family’

‘Leaving care was a worry, not understanding fully how it would be, worrying about when you would leave and where you would live’

‘It’s hard to think that people you lived with for nine years are not in your life any more’

Not being able to go back (brought up in three groups) meant that young people were left without support. A lack of **financial support** was a problem for seven young people (around one in 10) in our survey, who said that they do not have enough to live on.

‘Rather be back in care because I have a load of debt’

We checked with one discussion group on the level of leaving care grant that each person had received. These varied, across nine young people, from £800 (three said this), £1,200 (one said this), £1,500 (four said this) to £2,000 (one said this).

The inconsistencies that young people find not only from area to area, but sometimes across the same service, is something that they find particularly hard to understand and bear. A number argued that it is not fair and doesn’t make sense.

‘If you have certain needs in one place why should you not have the same needs wherever you live?’

OCR D advice: Government advice, based upon a recommendation from Children in Care Councils, is that young people leaving care should ask their councils for a leaving care grant of £2,000.

Other issues that had impacted negatively included **poor personal relationships**, brought up in three groups.

‘I did not feel wanted and will always have bad memories that will never leave. They’re always part of you’

‘Does not help you with personal relationships. You don’t have stability, being with lots of different people’

‘I hate care, went from a bad situation to worse’

Losing your own children was an issue brought up in three groups. Some of the care leavers in our consultation were parents themselves.

‘My child was adopted, not my choice’

‘Young mums are not being given the choice of whether they want to keep their kid’

‘Money is nothing – I don’t want compensation, I want my kid back’

‘My kids are going through the same thing. History is repeating itself’

Five young people spoke in more detail about how the care system has made their life worse because **their own children had been taken away**. We were told that some local authorities routinely assess all children of care leavers, possibly not considering each on their individual merits and risks. We heard that young mothers were not getting the support that they might expect as mothers, and local authorities were making it more difficult for them to grow up to be good parents.

In three groups, people felt that you were **made to grow up too fast**.

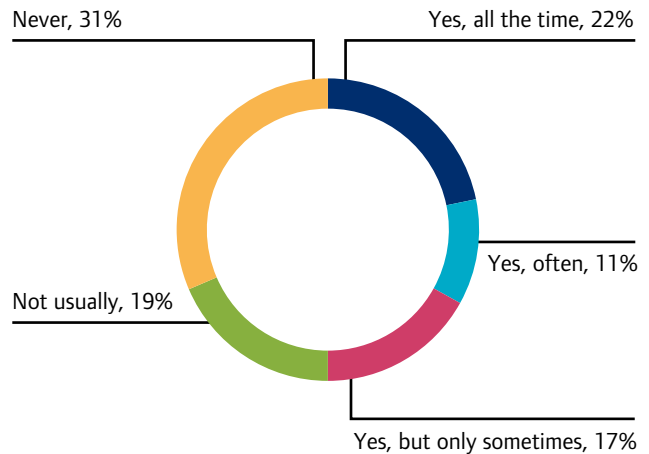
‘Loads of responsibilities – it’s not normal for kids to shop/pay bills and live alone at 18’

‘No one can ever prepare you for having to manage on your own’

We know from our consultations that some young people are worried that people who know they are from care may treat them differently from other young people, and that this can lead to prejudice when it comes to finding a job or getting accommodation, and may even result in being bullied.

We asked the care leavers at our two voting sessions whether or not they tried to keep it a secret that they had been in care. Figure 4 gives their answers.

Figure 4: Do you ever try to keep it a secret that you were in care?



Based on answers from 124 care leavers at the voting sessions.

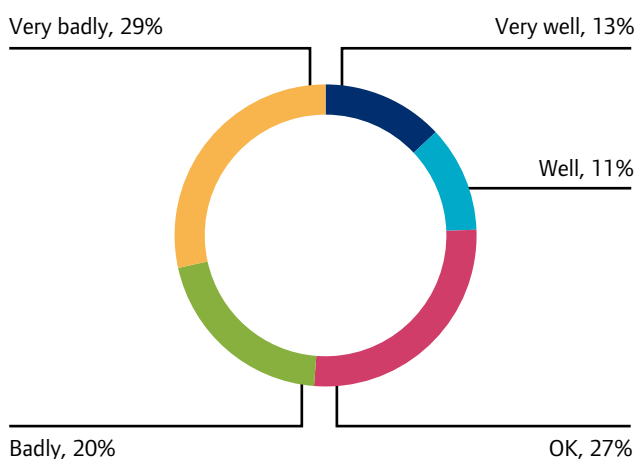
Overall, **half of these care leavers (50%) told us that they sometimes, often or always try to keep it a secret that they were in care. Over one in five of all the care leavers (22%) told us that they try to keep it a secret all the time. Only 31% said they never keep it a secret that they were in care.**

It is interesting that still, in this day and age, half of all of those asked who had been in care chose not to share the fact that they ever were. When this was explored further in discussion groups, some young people said they felt that they could be bullied, harassed or discriminated against for coming from a care background. Many felt that there was nothing to be gained from telling others, and much to be lost.

While you were in care, how were you helped to prepare for life after leaving care?

As well as asking this question in our discussion groups and surveys, we put the same question to our two voting sessions. Figure 5 gives the answers from care leavers voting at those sessions.

Figure 5: How well were you helped to prepare for independent life before you left care?



Based on answers from 123 care leavers at the voting sessions.

From our voting sessions, **just under a quarter (24%) of care leavers thought they had been prepared well or very well for independent life after leaving care, and another 27% that their preparation had been 'OK'. Nearly half (49%) thought they had been prepared badly or very badly.**

In our discussion groups and surveys, many told us they were disappointed with the help that they got to prepare to leave care. Their messages did not show any great improvement since we last consulted young people on their experiences of leaving care, back in February 2006. Our report then, *Young people's views on leaving care*, said that a common, recurring theme in what young people told us was that there appeared to be 'little middle ground in the quality of support and preparation that young people leaving care receive'. From our consultation in 2011 for the present report, nearly six years on, help was again reported by care leavers as being either excellent or poor, and in some cases non-existent.

Through the survey and in discussion groups, young people told us about the things they had been helped with to prepare them for life after leaving care. These included:

- **Getting some help with learning budgeting and managing money:** 28 (over a third) mentioned this in surveys.
- **Domestic skills training** (washing, cleaning, cooking and so on): 19 (just over a quarter) mentioned this in surveys.
- **Semi-independent living skills training:** 17 young people (just under a quarter) said this in the survey.

Here are some examples of help care leavers mentioned.



‘Getting passports and setting bank accounts up’
 ‘I’ve been lucky. I got burgled and all the stuff I bought got taken. I had nothing. My leaving care worker got me another leaving care grant and helped me to start again. Guess that wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t been in care’
 ‘There have been occasions when I have had financial advice, but I don’t feel I need it either as I am good with my money’
 ‘Leaving care give me £16 a week – not enough, only lasts me a day not a week’
 ‘Pathway team are sorting out this Passport Scheme, where kids have to learn certain things before they can get signed up on a housing list. I wish I’d have had that’
 ‘Where I am living now it’s like supported accommodation and they teach us to cook and stuff’

We heard from five groups that **some – although clearly not all – young people received good financial help or help in kind** (like driving lessons or travel passes).

The young people in our survey told us that they were helped by a number of people such as:

- **their carers** (10 young people)
- **their Personal Adviser** (eight young people)
- **their social worker** (eight young people).

Clearly, although many young people received some help in coping with money matters and looking after themselves, it was worrying that **over one in four young people** completing our surveys **told us that they had received no help at all**. This finding strongly suggests that while some young people get very good support when they are preparing to leave care, others receive little or no help at all. In fact, nine young people told us in the survey how they were left to manage for themselves.

‘I have not been prepared really; I don’t feel I need help with anything’

‘I didn’t get prepared. I went from a park bench to leaving care’

From the **discussion groups** we heard:

- that many young people had learned **some of the domestic skills necessary** to prepare them for leaving care (we heard that from eight groups)
- that other **young people were not prepared** and just left to fend for themselves (we heard that from five groups).

‘I was prepared by a floating support worker, but someone who failed me’

We found many variations in what young people can expect when leaving care, not only in different parts of the country, but also within the same services.

These findings from our survey responses and discussion groups support what we have seen earlier. The differences in young people’s experiences of services are very wide and varied. Not only are almost half of the young people we asked leaving care at a much earlier age than their peers typically leave home (which is at around 24 years old), they report that they cannot always rely on their ‘corporate’ parent to make sure that they have the preparation and support they need to do so.

What other help do you wish you had been given to prepare for life after leaving care?

Four main things were highlighted when we asked this question in our discussion groups and surveys.

- **More help with money**
- **More practical help**
- **Being given important documents**
- **Having someone you can contact/talk to**

OCR D advice: There is a guide that you may find helpful, *Leaving care entitlements: 10 things the law says you are entitled to when leaving care*, on our website: www.rights4me.org.

In addition, **care leavers are entitled to use the local authority complaints procedure** when they have a problem, a concern or want to make a complaint (Paragraph 9.2 of Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers Guidance and Regulations).

Twenty-two young people who had filled in surveys (just under a third) told us that they **wanted more help with money and practical things**, including accommodation. This was also discussed in five of the groups.

'I think they should [have given] me a form for getting my own place'

'It's only when you get in the flat that you find out what things cost, such as TV licence and broadband'

'Before you leave you should have three or four weeks of independence, to get a taster – given a certain amount of money and monitored. Given a trial period and a bit of assessment'

'Financial support is really important, like advice on budgeting. I had, over a period of time, gone shopping under a worker's supervision to make sure I was buying the right things. This had worked well and got me used to managing money'

Fourteen young people (nearly one in five) and young people in four of the discussion groups told us that they **wanted more help to look after themselves**, like with shopping and budgeting.

'More support from social workers to prepare for life after care – they have to be involved too'

'More time to move house and get settled in...'

'I wish I'd been helped to say no and not be a pushover'

'I was only 16 when I got my flat. I wanted it, but needed more support. My social worker should have helped me more'

'16/17 is too young for independent living'

'When you're in care you don't have to worry about bills and cooking or meals. All of a sudden when you leave it's harder to manage and [it] stresses you out'

'You shouldn't just get a booklet with a load of stuff in it out in front of you. That's not going to get you motivated to leave care. There should be more visual help; I don't like reading or writing'

Being given important documents (like passport, National Insurance number, birth certificate) came out of three groups.

‘We need support with getting ID so we can be independent and work. I cannot work without my National Insurance number and I need my birth certificate. I have left care for three years now and am still waiting for them’

‘They should have started my plan earlier. If you haven’t got a National Insurance number you cannot get a job. My social worker didn’t apply for it’

OCR D advice: Essential things that you may need before leaving care include: National Insurance number; GP registration (with a local doctor); birth certificate; passport; bank account.

Having someone you can contact and talk to (like social workers) came out of three groups.

‘Talk to someone about how you feel’

‘Talk to someone that has been through the system – it’s better to meet people that have similar experiences’

‘I thought I was the only one in care’

A couple of young people said they still kept in touch with their carers and this really helped them.

‘Being able to keep in touch with carers would be a big help. If I didn’t see my carers I wouldn’t have any support. We have Sunday dinner, and it’s nice’

In what ways has your life since leaving care been better than your life was in care?

When we asked this question in our discussion groups and surveys, there was one main theme that really stood out: **being more independent and having more freedom.**

Forty-one young people who filled in surveys (over half) mentioned this, as did seven out of the 10 groups.

‘Not having as many people to answer to’

‘Not having to live with people you don’t want to live with’

‘There are fewer rules but you have more responsibility’

‘In care I was offending and drinking, but now I’m at college’

‘You get more freedom and you don’t have to ask people if friends can sleep over’

‘It’s a sense of achievement – finally leaving and finding out who you are’

In what ways has your life since leaving care been worse than your life was in care?

Two main issues were raised in both the survey and the discussion groups:

- **Feeling alone and struggling to cope with the loneliness of being on their own**
- **Not getting the support or help they need**

Seventeen young people who filled in surveys (just under a quarter) mentioned **feeling alone and struggling to cope with the loneliness of being on their own**, and this was echoed by the young people in six of the discussion groups.

'[I] was lonely at first as it was not the norm'
 'Hard to cope on your own'
 'It's quiet! You turn around and you've got no one bugging you. Even though you used to get annoyed, you miss it when you leave'
 'I think it's lonely sometimes'
 'I sometimes miss the home comfort. I used to hate being told to be in at a certain time, but now I miss it'

Not getting the support or help they need was raised as a problem by 11 young people in the survey and discussed in four of the groups.

'When I was in care I had a lot done for me. I was spoilt and it has been a shock for me when I left care'
 'They don't prepare you for an independent life'
 'Young people are often put into B&B which is not good. You are with lots of other young people in B&Bs, and often the other young people smoke weed so you do as well, even if you didn't before'
 'As a 16-year-old I have gone from a children's home to a women's refuge – have gone from having lots of support to none at all'

Other problems raised in just the **discussion groups** were:

- **Not having enough to get by on** (discussed in five groups)

'Trying to make a better life for yourself and your child but constantly facing obstacles'
 'Cannot access education because of childcare issues'
 'You cannot get a job without education; but [there's] no funding for education'

- **Growing apart from family** (discussed in three groups)

'Feel more pushed out by my family now I've left care'
 'I feel I'm being punished by my family – they have always said they wanted to see me but now they can't have time'

- **Being made to leave too early** (discussed in three groups)

'Too many responsibilities at such a young age'
 'Having to grow up'
 'Not ready to be independent, I miss the support'

What many of the services and organisations seemed to have failed in, from what young people have told us about their experiences of leaving care, is **understanding the loneliness that many are struggling to cope with**. In many ways, this is not surprising. Not only are young people leaving care at a very early age, but they are almost unique among their peers in being expected to live on their own. From what they told us, having spent years living with others in care, many now feel as though they have been abandoned to a life of isolation and limited support.

What support have you got from your local authority since you left care?

We asked care leavers in our surveys and discussion groups to tell us about the support they were getting. Fifty-two young people answered this question in our surveys.

- Twenty young people who filled in surveys were **getting practical and financial support**.

'I had my own place and wasn't coping, but now am in supported housing which is really good 'cos always someone around to ask for support'

'Leaving care grant to help set up home'

- Seventeen young people who filled in surveys said **their Personal Adviser/leaving care team was supporting them**.

'I've had a good deal – they're always there to help me out when I need it'

- Seven young people who filled in surveys said they were **getting social work support**.
- Seven young people who filled in surveys told us that they were **involved in participation groups**.
- One young person who filled in the survey said that he wasn't sure.

We asked the same question of 88 young people taking part in the **discussion groups**. Here are some of their responses.

- **Good support worker and leaving care team** (mentioned by four groups):

'Aftercare go that bit further to help you'

'I got to the point where I don't need any more support... and they keep coming around and I am at work'

'My social worker will ring me if I need her to, but she won't pester me'

'My social worker is brilliant; it's my kid's social worker I can't stand'

'The Head of the Business Unit said they were going to close my case. I said I wasn't ready and still needed support, so they changed this'

'I've got a really good support worker, someone who tells you what you are entitled to'

'Sometimes too many professionals are involved. You have to tell them all the same things. You want them to "get off your back" and it's harder that way to build one-to-one relationships'

'It's worse to have more than one because you can talk to one but three gets confusing. I don't know which one's higher up and I get confused about who I am seeing...'

The types of things they had received support for were **practical matters** like getting travel passes, driving licences, National Insurance numbers, birth certificates and passports (mentioned by four groups). Young people also talked about getting **support with education** (mentioned by three groups).

'Couldn't follow through university for personal reasons, but was offered extra support'

Two additional areas where young people in the groups mentioned getting support were **financial matters** (mentioned by three groups) and **keeping in touch with past carers** (mentioned by three groups).



OCR D advice: The law on leaving care can get very complicated indeed. One recent court case described it as ‘impenetrable’. It is not surprising then that so many young people are saying that they find it very difficult to understand what the law says they are entitled to.

Basically, the law says that **you are entitled to leaving care support and advice from your local authority if any one of the following applies to you:**

- You are 16 or 17 years old, and are still being looked after (this is what’s called being ‘**an eligible child**’).
- You are 16 or 17 years old, and have left care (this is what’s called being ‘**a relevant child**’).
- You are 18 years old or over, and have left care (this is what’s called being ‘**a former relevant child**’).
- You are a **care leaver who returns to education or training** up to the age of 25 years old.
- You have left care; and before were:
 - on a **Special Guardianship Order**, and are now aged between 16 and 20 years old
 - **looked after for less than 13 weeks**, while aged 16 or 17 years old, or
 - living in a **voluntary or privately run children’s home, a hospital, a school arranged by the local education authority, a care home** or were in **private foster care**, at the age of 16 or 17 years old, and you are now under the age of 21 years old.

You are then entitled to receive some advice and support (this is called being ‘**a qualifying person**’).

What support do you think you should have got, but haven’t got, from your local authority since you left care?

Here are the main points from the **survey** responses.

- Twelve young people (around one in six of those in the survey) felt that they had needed more practical help and financial support.
- Eight young people (just over one in 10) felt that they had needed more emotional support.

The main issues raised in the **discussion groups** were:

- **More money and help with bills** (three groups raised this).

‘Funding for university has stayed the same even though the fees have gone up. Funding is not enough and there is less incentive to go to university as you are going to leave with a huge debt’

- **Easier contact for help and advice** (three groups raised this).

‘Access to personal files is not fast enough’
‘My social worker writes things down about me which I never see’
‘Someone to contact when I needed them – a social worker that knew me and kept contact with me’

- **More support for emotional issues** (two groups raised this).

‘We should not get treated differently because we are in care’



- **More support with education** (two groups raised this).

‘More to do with education’

‘You’ve got to be in education to receive support. It shouldn’t be like this’

- **Longer or better access to aftercare support** (two groups raised this).

‘After care workers have to turn their phones off at the weekends – sometimes we need support at the weekends’

‘After care service [should be] for longer if you have health issues or learning difficulties’

‘You should have the option to stay in foster care if you want to stay’

‘You may need longer support if you have a mental health disability’

Key issues from voting sessions

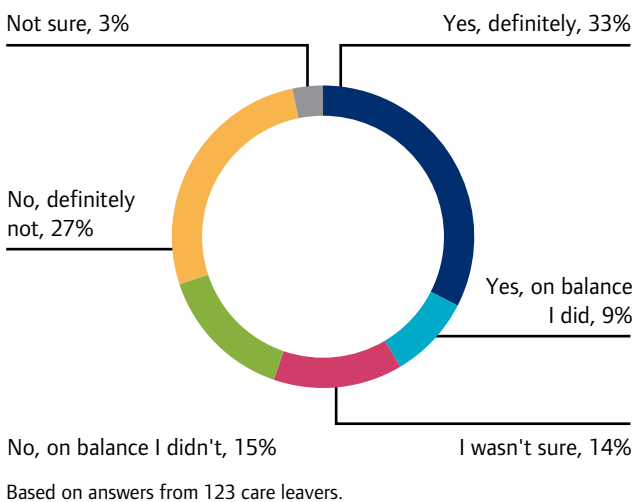
In our two voting sessions we asked care leavers for their views and experiences on a number of key issues we thought were important in leaving care. We followed up what they said in more detail in our discussion groups.

We asked the groups about the decision to leave care and whether they thought they had left care at the right time, how many times they had changed accommodation after leaving care, what difference being in care had made to their education, what planning, advice and support their local authorities had given them, whether they had left care at the right time for them, and whether they thought the way children in care were looked after had improved or got worse during the time they had been in care.

The decision to leave care

In the voting sessions, we asked care leavers to think back to the time when they left care, and to tell us whether at the time they had wanted to leave care. Their answers are set out in Figure 6.

Figure 6: At the time, did you want to leave care?



These results show an even split between those who wanted to leave and those who didn't. **Forty-two per cent told us that either definitely, or on balance, they had wanted to leave care when they did, and 42% told us that they either definitely or on balance did not want to leave care at the time.**

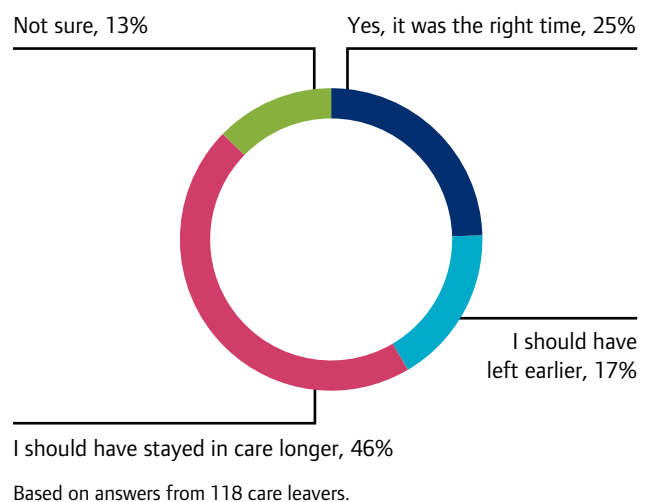
Fourteen per cent were not sure at the time (and 3% were not sure how to answer this question at our voting sessions).

However, as we can see from Figure 7 below, 63% of care leavers told us they did not think they had actually left care at the right time. Some of the points raised at the discussion groups suggest that some young people might have taken a different view about leaving care if they had known about the loneliness and lack of support that many said they experienced once they had left.

This final set of results also shows clearly how well much of the care and after care system works: it can either be excellent or it can be very poor indeed.

Figure 7 sets out the answers from care leavers at the voting sessions on whether, looking back, they now thought they had left care at the right time for them.

Figure 7: Do you think you left care at the right time for you?



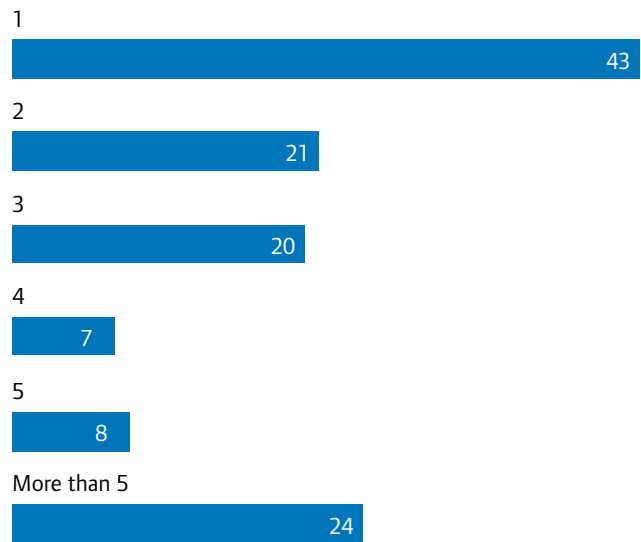
These answers show that only **a quarter (25%) of the care leavers thought they had left care at the right time for them. Most of those who thought the time hadn't been right for them thought that they had left care too early. Out of all the care leavers answering this question, 46% thought they had left care too early, and only 17% that they should have left care earlier.**

The fact that 46% of care leavers thought that they had left care too early helps to support those people who have questioned the early age at which most young people leave care. What many told us in this consultation also suggested that it is not only age that is the important factor in getting the timing right. Not having enough support, getting into debt and being expected to manage on their own were some of the reasons that were given by those who did not think that they were ready.

Moving around after care

One of the things children in care have told us over the years is that a problem with being in care is that you can often be moved from one placement to another. We asked our care leavers at the voting sessions how many different places they had lived in after leaving care. Figure 8 sets out their answers.

Figure 8: How many different places have you lived in since you left care?



Number of places in black; numbers of care leavers in white.

Based on answers from 123 care leavers.

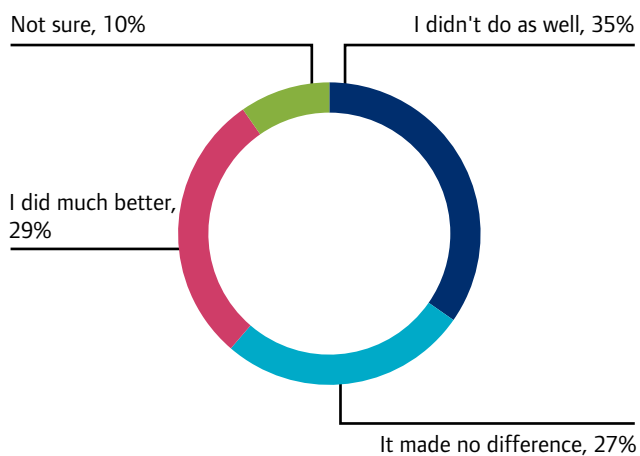
When we look at these figures, we need to remember that the average age of the care leavers telling us about these moves was 18, and that the oldest was only 23.

It was encouraging that so many young people were seemingly able to settle down after leaving care. But, as with almost every question that we put to young people in discussion groups, we found much variation and many contrasts in their care and after care experiences. Many had experienced unsettled lives and many changes since leaving care, and not always through their own fault.

The effect of care on education

Education is vital to doing well after leaving care, and a huge amount has been researched and written about how young people in care find it hard to succeed in their education. Sometimes children have told us this is because of the problems they have, or the experiences they have had to cope with, or because they have changed placements and schools many times during their time in care. In our voting sessions, we took the opportunity to ask care leavers to look back on their time in care and on their education, and to tell us how they thought going into care had affected their education. Their answers are in Figure 9.

Figure 9: How do you think going into care affected your education?



Based on answers from 124 care leavers.

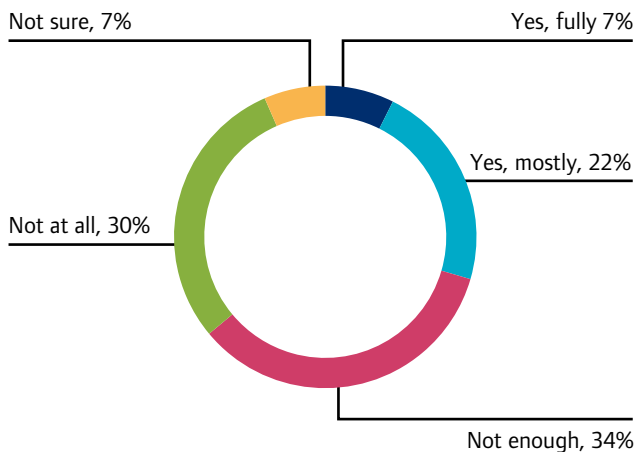
It is sad that **over one in three care leavers (35%) felt they did not do as well in their education as they might have done if they hadn't come into care**. This is an interesting finding because it is not just a simple statement on the abilities of children in care, but questions whether, given enough stability and encouragement in their lives, more could have achieved what they are capable of. **However, between a quarter and a third of the care leavers (29%) told us they thought they had done better in their education as a result of coming into care. Just over a quarter (27%) thought that coming into care had made no difference to how they had done in their education.**

The care leavers were not telling us overall that coming into care has a good or a bad effect on education, but that, as with many things, it all depends on the individual and their experience. **Almost two thirds of care leavers (64%) told us that coming into care did affect their education; for some this was for the worse, but for others it was for the better.**

Local authority help on leaving care

We asked care leavers to vote on what advice and information they were given on leaving care, and then on the types of help and support they were given. Figure 10 gives their overall view about whether they had known enough about the help and support they were entitled to as care leavers.

Figure 10: When you left care did you know enough about your rights to help and support as a care leaver?



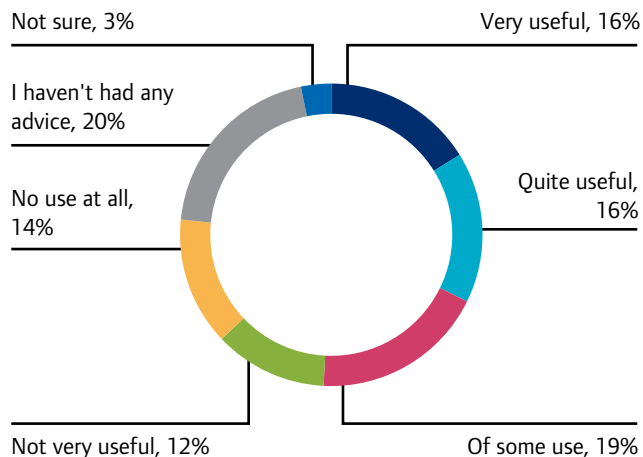
Based on answers from 122 care leavers.

Nearly two thirds (64%) of the care leavers answering this question told us that they did not know enough about their rights when leaving care. Twenty-nine per cent said they knew fully or mostly about their care-leaving rights.

Lack of knowledge about rights and entitlements as care leavers was confirmed in some of the discussion groups. It emerged that some young people were clearly missing out because they weren't sure about what they were entitled to, and nobody was telling them. Also, even though other young people told us in discussions that they knew what they were entitled to, this did not mean that they would automatically get it.

We asked those in our voting sessions to tell us how useful they had found any advice they had been given as care leavers by their local authorities. They were also able to tell us if they hadn't actually had any advice. The results are set out in Figure 11.

Figure 11: How useful has the advice given you by your local authority been to you as a care leaver?

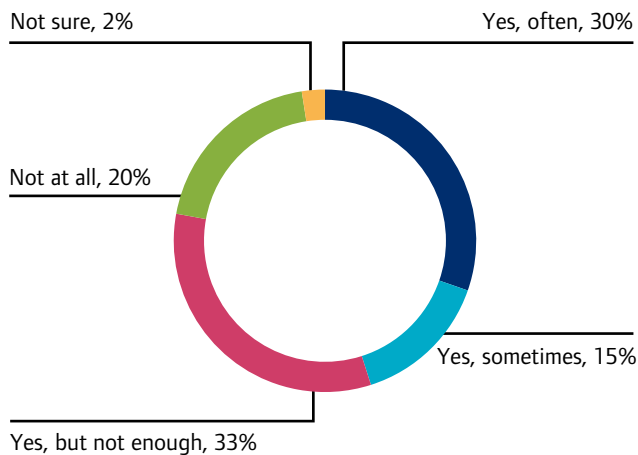


Based on answers from 124 care leavers.

It is encouraging that **just over half (51%) of all care leavers answering this question had found advice they had been given useful to some extent. Almost a third (32%) said the advice had been very or quite useful. However, just over a quarter (26%) said that advice they had been given was not very useful or of no use at all. One in five (20%) told us they had not received any advice as care leavers.** These figures are worrying, given what young people told us in discussion groups about how much they come to rely on the information and advice they are given.

Our next questions were about exactly what sorts of help and support the care leavers at our voting sessions had received from their local authorities. First we asked them whether anyone from their local authority had kept in touch with them after they left care. Figure 12 gives their answers.

Figure 12: Did your local authority keep in touch with you after you left care?



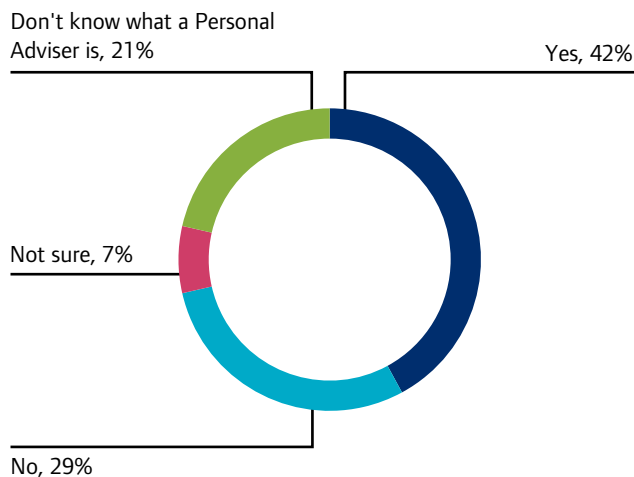
Based on answers from 122 care leavers.

One in five (20%) of the care leavers said their local authorities had not kept in touch with them at all since they left care. Forty-five per cent told us their local authority had kept in touch often or sometimes since they had left care. Another third (33%) said there had been some contact, but not enough.

The difference in replies here is worrying, as local authorities have a legal duty to keep in touch with care leavers. Of course, some of these replies may have come from young people who did not wish their local authority to keep in touch. However, from what we were told in discussion groups and surveys, this will not account for everybody. Some care leavers told us quite clearly that they wanted contact and support from professionals which they were not getting, or not getting enough of.

Our next question was about having a Personal Adviser after leaving care. The answers from our voting sessions are in Figure 13.

Figure 13: Did your local authority provide you with a Personal Adviser after you left care?

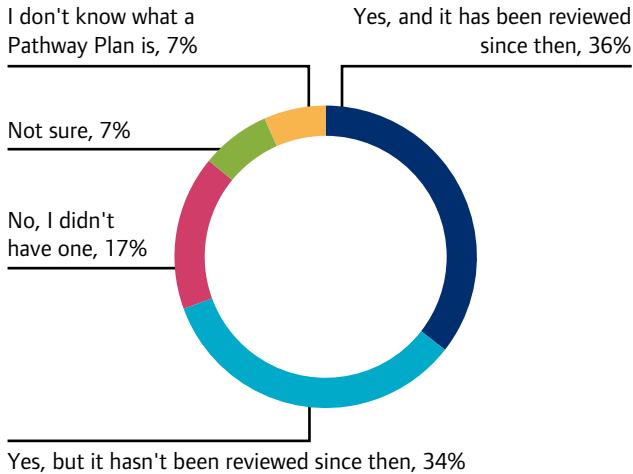


Based on answers from 126 care leavers.

Although the law is clear on care leavers' entitlement to have a Personal Adviser, only 42% of the care leavers told us they definitely had one. The number of young people who told us that they have not got one or do not know what one is must be a cause for concern. Many young people told us that they often only found out what they were entitled to, or were able to get it, with the help of their Personal Adviser.

Our voting session questions then moved on to Pathway Plans for care leavers. Figure 14 gives the answers from the voting sessions on whether the care leavers had Pathway Plans when they left care.

Figure 14: Did you have a Pathway Plan when you left care?

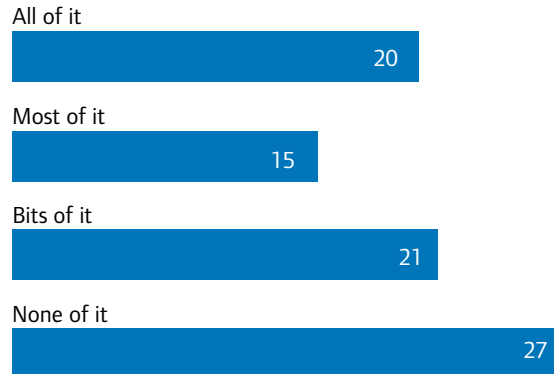


Based on answers from 121 care leavers.

The percentage of young people (70%, seven out of 10) telling us that they had a Pathway Plan was encouraging. However, it was disappointing that only 36% said they had a Pathway Plan that had been reviewed since it was made. This is almost half of all those who told us they had a Pathway Plan.

We went on to ask whether the care leavers at our voting sessions considered that their Pathway Plans were being kept to. We had answers from 83 out of the 84 care leavers who had Pathway Plans, and their answers are set out in Figure 15.

Figure 15: How much of your pathway plan is the local authority keeping to?

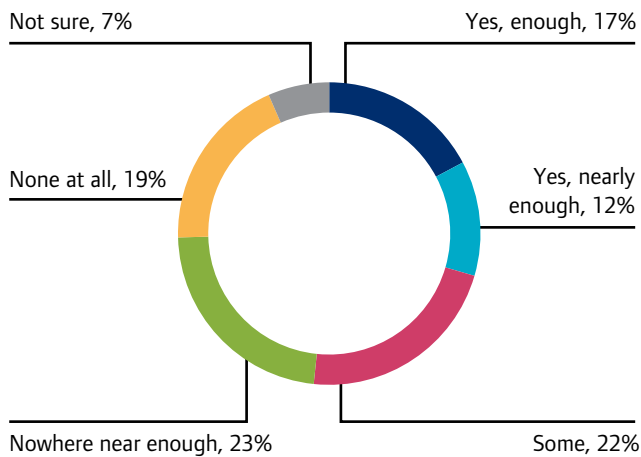


This figure shows the numbers giving each answer out of the 83 care leavers who answered this question at the voting sessions.

Overall, just over four out of 10 of the care leavers said their Pathway Plan was mostly or fully kept to, with another quarter saying bits of it were being kept to. That makes just two thirds of the care leavers with a Pathway Plan who said that their plans were being followed to some extent. A third told us that none of what was in their Pathway Plan was being kept to.

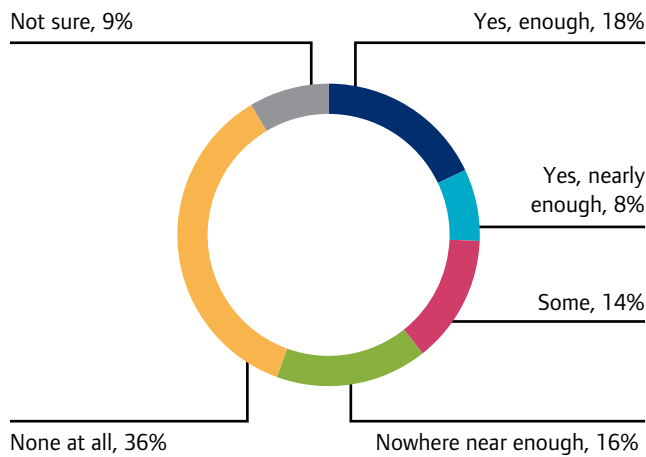
From Pathway Plans we went on to the subject of financial support for care leavers. First we asked about the financial help with their everyday living costs care leavers might have had from their local authorities. Figure 16 gives the results.

Figure 16: Did your local authority give you any financial help with your living expenses after leaving care?



Based on answers from 122 care leavers.

Figure 17: Did your local authority give you any financial help towards your education or training after leaving care?



Based on answers from 117 care leavers.

Twenty-nine per cent of the care leavers told us that they were given enough, or nearly enough, financial help with daily living expenses by their local authorities. Twenty-three per cent did get some help, but told us it was nowhere near enough, and 19% said they did not get any help from their local authorities towards daily living costs.

Very many young people told us in our discussion groups that they felt that they did not have enough money to live on, and that they struggled with the reality of trying to make ends meet. Some said they were frustrated because they knew the financial support provided to different care leavers varied a lot, and knew how well some other care leavers were being supported. The differences in leaving care grants were brought up in all of our discussion groups, and many care leavers who weren't in education or training told us of better support being given to those who were.

Figure 17 gives the answers to our next question, which was about financial support for carrying on in education or training after leaving care.

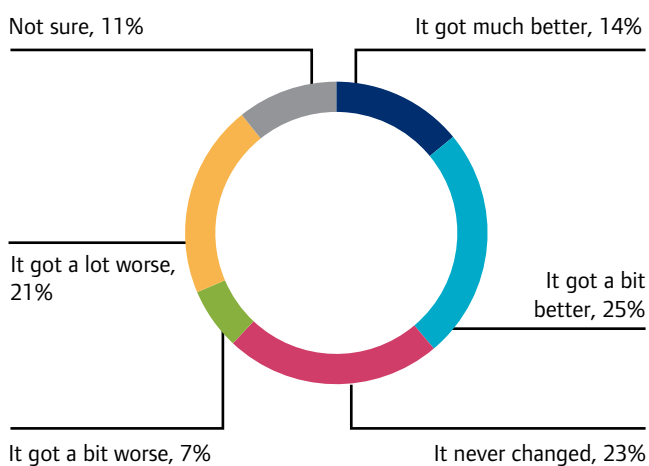
Over half (56%) of the care leavers told us they were getting some financial help from their care authorities towards their education or training. But only 26% said the financial help they were getting was enough or nearly enough. Sixteen per cent said it was nowhere near enough. Over a third of the care leavers told us they were not getting any financial help from their local authorities towards education or training – though of course some of these would not have been in any sort of education or training.

Again, we found in discussion groups that what young people were telling us was disappointing in terms of what the law says that they should be entitled to. Many were clearly not aware of the range of education and university bursaries that had been brought in by the government to support them. Some young people thought that, in their experience, some local authorities were withholding information about what they were entitled to, or contradicting their understanding of what the law actually says about this.

Is the way children in care are looked after getting better or worse?

We invited the care leavers in our voting sessions to tell us whether they thought that over the time they had been in care, the way children in care were looked after had improved or got worse. We asked for their views about the care system, not about whether they had personally done well or badly in care. Their verdict on the trend in the care system is set out in Figure 18.

Figure 18: How did the way children were generally looked after in care change during the time you were in care?



Based on answers from 121 care leavers.

Care leavers' views on the overall change in the quality of the care system were very mixed. **The verdict of the care leavers was that the care system had generally improved in how it looked after children in care over the time they themselves had been in care: 39% rated it as having got a bit or much better, against 28% who rated it as having got a bit or a lot worse.** Almost a quarter (23%) rated it as not having changed at all over the time they had been in care.

It is encouraging that nearly four out of 10 care leavers thought that the care system had got better during their time in care – that the way it looked after young people had generally improved. It is not at all encouraging that half the care leavers hadn't seen any improvement or thought things had got worse. This shows just how different the experience of the care system can be from one young person to the next.

Last word

The last word in this report goes to the care leaver who said to us:

'You have many opportunities to get leaving care right; we only get one!'

Appendix

The following local children's rights and leaving care services consulted their own groups of children and young people for this report. We are very grateful to these services for their help in providing additional young people's views.

Children in Care Council, Essex

Children's Participation Service, Herefordshire

Barnardo's Children's Rights & Voice, Leeds

Children's Services, Shropshire

Children in Care Council, West Sussex

The Harbour Project, Cumbria

Voice Children's Rights, Swindon

Children, Young People & Families Service, Barnsley

Corporate Parenting Team, Barnet

Family Services, Wakefield

Children's Service, Oldham

Participation Team, Cambridge

The Havering Stepping Stones Project, Action for Children

Children's Services, Derby

Children's Services, Exeter

Children's Services, Torquay

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