



## Failed By The System

### The views of young care leavers on their educational experiences



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*'There were too many promises made but not many fulfilled',  
Care Leaver aged 16*



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## 1. Introduction

Barnardo's runs twenty two projects across the UK that offer support to young people who have been in the care system. These projects provide 'all round' support for young people, helping them find and maintain accommodation; secure further education or training and employment and access important information about health and nutrition for example. They also provide invaluable emotional support to young people who may often be isolated from the rest of society.

We believe that 'looked after' young people (those who are in local authority care) should be fully supported to maximise their educational potential. During the transition to adulthood they should be supported to enable them to make the most of all opportunities.

Good education which meets the needs of each child is crucial if this transition is to be successful and it can only be a matter of great shame that society's ability to be a good 'Corporate Parent' appears to be severely compromised in this area. The educational under-achievement of children in care up until Year 11 is well researched and documented. However, despite the long standing recognition of this issue, there appears to have been no substantial improvement in recent years.

As a leading children's charity, Barnardo's wanted to find out more about the factors that inhibit children doing better and what young people themselves felt and thought about their experiences of education

We surveyed 66 young people aged between 16 and 21 who had been in care and who are supported by Barnardo's Leaving Care projects. They told us about their school life and education, giving information about the factors that inhibited them from doing well, those that had a positive effect and what could have helped them do better.

## **2. Findings from Barnardo's survey of young care leavers and a National Opinion Poll of 500 parents and carers of children not in the care system**

While we can say with certainty that looked after children do significantly worse when compared to other children in terms of educational achievements, it is quite difficult to quantify the impact of proper support, encouragement, attitudes, assumptions and aspirations on the education of looked after children.

Our survey asked for information regarding a range of factors that may have affected their education. It included questions about placements, schools, exclusions, support received, and qualifications gained.

We also wanted to compare the experiences of children not in local authority care, so Barnardo's commissioned a National Opinion Poll seeking the views of 500 parents or carers of non-looked after children who took their GCSEs this year. We asked them similar questions to those we asked the care leavers and this gave us a comparative 'snapshot' of the differences in aspirations for their children as compared to those who are looked after. Barnardo's believes that this comparison, while relatively small scale, is unique and provides an indication that, in general, parents and carers of children not in the care system have much higher aspirations and expectations that their child will do well in school, and provide the support and encouragement to help them achieve this.

<b><u>Barnardo's service users: What the young people with experience of care told us.</u></b>	<b><u>The NOP findings: What parents and carers of children <i>not in care</i> told us</u></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Qualifications</u> – 52 of the young people who had been in care had no GCSEs or other educational qualifications when they left school. Only 14 out of the 66 young care leavers had any sort of educational qualification when they left school. Only 7 had 5 or more GCSEs at grade A* - C</li> <li>• <u>Training etc</u> – over half (35) were not currently in employment, training or further education.</li> <li>• <u>Placement moves</u> – the number of care placements young people had lived in varied between 1 and 30 with four of them having had more than 24 placements. Thirty three young people had been in more than 4 placements and 27 of these had been in both residential and foster care.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Qualifications</u> – Only 6% of the parents and carers questioned are expecting their child to get no GCSEs whatsoever this August. Thirty percent of the parents questioned expected their child to get 9 or 10 GCSEs, 74% expected them to get at least five at grades A* - C. Only 1% expected their child to get only one GCSE</li> <li>• <u>Training etc</u> – over 90% of the parents said that their child expected to go into training or further education when they left school.</li> <li>• <u>Home moves</u> – fifty eight percent of the families surveyed had never moved home in the lifetime of their child, only 8% of the sample had moved home twice or more.</li> </ul>

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>School moves</u> – young people in the group had attended on average five schools. Almost half the group had attended 6 or more schools and seven of the group had attended more than 10 different schools</li> <li>• <u>School exclusions</u> – forty one young people had been excluded from schools for periods lasting between 1 day and 2 years. Twenty two young people had been excluded for more than 60 days and 2 had no secondary education at all. Eighteen young people had received no alternative education in the time they were excluded.</li> <li>• <u>Attendance at parent's evenings etc</u> – twenty six young people said no one had attended their school parent's evenings and 32 said no one went to sports days or other school events. Where someone did attend it was more likely to be a foster carer than a residential or social worker.</li> <li>• <u>Being bullied</u> – over half the group reported that they had been bullied at school and believed this was directly related to them being in care.</li> <li>• <u>Praise and rewards</u> – thirty one young people were never praised or rewarded if they did well at school and where praise was given it was mainly by a foster carer; only 4 said they had been praised by a teacher. Almost all said that praise would have encouraged them to try harder.</li> <li>• <u>Being involved in decision making</u> – twenty four young people told us that they were never involved in making decisions about their education – for example which school they went to etc.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>School moves</u> – eighty five percent of the parents said their child had only attended two or three schools during their education life and 97% said their child had attended fewer than 5 schools.</li> <li>• <u>School exclusions</u> – the majority of parents (93%) said their child had never been excluded from school; of those whose child had been excluded 83% said the exclusion had been for less than two weeks.</li> <li>• <u>Attendance at parent's evenings etc</u> – the majority of parents and carers (96%) attended their child's parent's evenings and only 28% didn't also attend sports day and other school events.</li> <li>• <u>Being bullied</u> – only 28% of the sample said that their child had been bullied at school.</li> <li>• <u>Praise and rewards</u> – almost the whole sample (97%) said that they praised or rewarded their child when they did well at school.</li> <li>• <u>Being involved in decision making</u> – Only 3% of parents said they never consulted their children about decisions regarding their education.</li> </ul> |
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- A designated teacher – fifty five young people did not know that there should be a teacher with special responsibility for children in care. (*Dfes and Welsh Assembly guidance requires all schools to have a designated teacher trained in all aspects of the care system – see Current Information at the end of this report*)
- Different treatment – two thirds of the group felt that they were treated differently in school because they were in care. Nineteen young people felt this was in a detrimental way – they were stereotyped as being troublesome for example; while others felt they were helped – allowances made for disruptions in their life or extra tuition for example. However, a number of the young people who had been treated differently had not wanted this, they felt they were singled out rather than being allowed to be ‘just one of the class’
- Extra help - twenty nine young people had received no extra help to catch up when they had to move schools



*‘No one attended although I always did well in sports days’  
Care Leaver aged 18*

### 3. What do we know about the problem?

- Research shows that many children in the care system have poor experiences of education and low educational achievement but perhaps contrary to perception, most of them know how important education is for them and that low achievement can contribute to continuing disadvantage and exclusion into their adult lives.<sup>i</sup>
- Although there are no official statistics kept on either university entrance or 'A' level results for care leavers, it is estimated that only 1% of care leavers go to university compared to 37% of all young people.<sup>ii</sup>
- In 2003 the Social Exclusion Unit noted that children in care were 10 times more likely to be excluded than other children<sup>iii</sup> - it should be noted that the most recent figures on exclusions in England and Wales published by Department for Education and Skills in June 2006 do not give figures for exclusions of children in care.
- There are variations in educational achievement in the care population, some groups in certain circumstances are likely to do better –those who have a long term stable placement and/or whose main placement is with foster carers and those who are placed within their own local authority.<sup>iv</sup>
- There are also wide regional variations – the best performing local authorities have 83% of care leavers getting one or more GCSEs in contrast with others where the figure is as low as 16%.<sup>v</sup>

### 4. What would have helped?

The young people we surveyed were clear what did or could have made a difference for them at school:

**Not making assumptions** – young people told us that assumptions were made about what being in care meant:

- that they were not interested in school work
- that they were not academically able
- that they were 'trouble makers'
- that they did not tell the truth
- that people were in care because they were 'bad'

*'I had a behaviour problem and was treated like I was incapable of achieving anything'*

*'Teachers assumed that because you were in care that you wouldn't make anything of yourself'*

*'It felt it was one rule for everyone else and one for me'*

*'Assuming I was bad because I was in care'*

**Teacher's attitudes** – young people were very clear about what helped in terms of how they were treated by teachers:

- not being 'singled out' as different
- someone offering unobtrusive help
- being listened to
- not using threats– 'I'll tell your social worker'
- respecting confidentiality (within child protection boundaries)
- understanding that school work might fluctuate when things changed in care

*'Some teachers didn't respect me or understand my situation but others did'*

*'The teachers were a bit more understanding when there were difficult times'*

*'Teachers used to tell everyone I was in care'*

*'I did not want to be at school because I did not fit in with what the school wanted'*

*'I was always feeling as if I did not belong'*

*'I felt worth something (because I was given extra help)'*

**Encouragement** – young people said it would encourage them to do better if:

- they were praised for small achievements
- social workers and teachers also acknowledged their achievements, not just immediate carers
- there was more work done to build self confidence and self esteem
- people had higher expectations and expected them to do as well as all other children.

*'Yes it would have helped (being praised) because it's thinking positively and then you can do more than you think you can'*

*'If I'd had praise from my social worker I think I would have tried harder'*

*'It would have made me feel good about myself and given me confidence (getting praise)'*

*'It made me determined to work harder and achieve better results'*



**Stability and placements** – almost all the young people felt:

- That fewer changes of social worker as well as moves in care and school also played a part in how well they did in education
- They were often given expectations that were not then realised – too many promises.
- That not enough attention was paid to supporting them in education.

*'I was never settled, always moving and had no one to show me how to do the work'*

*'Every time you move you feel rejected and this affects your self esteem and confidence'*

*'No peace and quiet in the home to do homework and no help from staff'*

*'I didn't have a strong relationship with my social worker as they kept changing'*

*'I wish the people looking after me in care would have worked with me to help me at school, because I loved my school but they never knew how bad things were for me out of school'*

*'They helped me through my exams and to get there on time'*

**5. Barnardo's recommendations for change**

Barnardo's believes that these recommendations are achievable and should be implemented in policy and practice across the UK.

**In schools**

- There should be a statutory requirement that there is a designated teacher in all schools. While this may not always be the person in whom children confide or relate to best; it is vital that they know who *'can make things happen'* if there are issues or problems.
- All teachers should have training that includes a basic understanding of the care system.
- School bullying policies should have special regard to those children who may experience bullying because they are in care.

### In local authority children's services

- There should be a requirement that children's services departments maintain children in the same school even if there is a change of care placement, unless this is completely untenable because of distance.
- Children should not change care placements during GCSE years, in particular, young people should not have to be planning to leave care while they are in exam periods – either GCSE or A level.
- There should be a requirement that someone attends parents' evenings and other school events for every child in care. The decision about who attends should take into account the views and wishes of individual children.
- Children's services plans should have a specific requirement to address how agencies will work together to support children in care to improve their educational experiences and outcomes.
- Looked after children should be consulted in decisions regarding their education and this should form part of the statutory review process.

### At a UK level

- The annual statistics for school exclusions should include those for children in care.
- Within the general targets for schools on reducing exclusions, there should be a specific one for children in care.
- The Government should research practice in the best performing authorities and ensure that the learning is applied by all authorities.
- The 'A' level results and university entrance by children in care should be monitored and there should be a statutory requirement for Universities to support care leavers.
- It is unacceptable that looked after children should not be receiving education for whatever reason. In 2003 the Social Exclusion Unit recommended that '*local authorities should make immediate arrangements to provide full time education for children (in care) who do not have a school place*'. This should be made a mandatory requirement for all education departments.

## **6. Current information about looked after children in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland**

### **Wales**

- There were 4,668 children 'looked after' in the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2005 – an increase of 1.7% since 2004 and almost 400 young people left care in 2004/5.
- 37% of those leaving care in 2004/5 had at least one GCSE or GNVQ <sup>vi</sup> and 83 young people had five or more GCSEs at grade A+ to G.
- The National Assembly does not set targets for tracking the attainment of looked after children in Wales, but Welsh local authorities are the only ones in the UK which have to report their performance each year with regard to the educational achievement of looked after children.
- Studies of long term overall trends show that on average throughout their childhood, looked after children in Wales are still under half as likely to achieve expected test and exam results as other children. <sup>vii</sup>

- In 2004/5 14% of looked after children had 3 or more placements; 73% were living with foster carers.<sup>viii</sup>
- The Welsh Assembly has just announced a review of the arrangements to strengthen duties for looked after children and are seeking to issue statutory guidance specifying functions local health boards must undertake in discharging their duties to improve the education, health and wellbeing of looked after children.<sup>ix</sup> The Assembly has also introduced the RAISE programme for 2006/7, providing £16 million part of which will be used for learning support for looked after children.

## England

- There were 60,900 children 'looked after' in the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2005 – an increase of 3% since 2001<sup>x</sup> and approximately 6,000 leave care each year
- The Public Service Agreement (a PSA is an agreement between the Treasury and agencies receiving treasury funding about the standards they will meet) set in 2003<sup>xi</sup> relating to education and children in care was that at least 15% of young people in care would have 5 GCSEs graded A – C by 2006. It is increasing unlikely that this target will be met by the end of 2006. This should be contrasted with the PSA of the 2004 spending review on educational achievement for all other children, which is: '*By 2008, 60% of those aged 16 to have achieved the equivalent of 5 GCSEs at grade A+ - C*'.<sup>xii</sup>
- In 2004/5 less than half (43%) of young people leaving care had a least one GCSE or GNVQ on leaving school in comparison with 95% of the general population and only 6% of care leavers had at least 5 GCSEs at grades A\* - C (the Government target for all other children).<sup>xiii</sup> This starkly contrasts with the figures for all other children, in the same year 56.3% achieved the equivalent of 5 GCSEs.<sup>xiv</sup>
- In 2004/5 around 35% of all children in care had two or more placements in the last two years; two-thirds of children in care lived with foster carers and just over a quarter were living in placements more than 20 miles away from their home area.<sup>xv</sup>
- Guidance produced by the Department of Education and Skills in England and Wales in 2000 required that all schools should have a designated teacher trained in all aspects of the care system. The designated teacher should have '*enough authority to make things happen and is an important resource for the child*'.<sup>xvi</sup>

## Scotland

- There were over 12,000 children looked after on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2005 – an increase of 4% from 2004<sup>xvii</sup> and around 1,114 left care.
- Approximately 45% of those leaving care achieved at least one SCQF, 3 percentage points more than in 2003/4. Thirty percent of care leavers achieved maths and English at SCQF at level 3 or above as compared to 93.4% and 92.2% respectively of all other children<sup>xviii</sup>.
- Approximately 29% of children were living with foster carers and 13% in residential care – the remainder lived with parents or family members (this is more common in Scotland than in the rest of the UK because of different legislation).
- The education target is that all young people leaving care will have achieved Maths and English at Standard grade.<sup>xix</sup>

## Northern Ireland

- There were 2,531 looked after children as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2005, an increase of 4.5% since 2000<sup>xx</sup> and 241 children aged 16 or over were discharged from care.
- Up to date figures on educational achievement are still being collated but figures for 2002 indicate that 44% of looked after children achieved at least one GCSE compared to 96% of the total school population and 14% had at least 5 GCSEs compared to 58% of all school leavers.<sup>xxi</sup>
- Just over 56% of looked after children were in foster care and 12.5% in residential care, the rest were living with parents or family members.

## 7. References

<sup>i</sup> 'A better education for children in care' Social Exclusion Unit 2003.

<sup>ii</sup> Jackson. S, Ajayi. S, Quigley. M. (2003) 'By Degrees: the first year, from care to university'. The Frank Buttle Trust, London

<sup>iii</sup> As for i

<sup>iv</sup> As for i

<sup>v</sup> As for ii

<sup>vi</sup> 'Adoptions, outcomes and placements for children looked after by local Authorities year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2005' National Statistics 30.11.05

<sup>vii</sup> 'An analysis of children first management action plan and progress: Report for Wales 2003/4' Wales College of Medicine. July 2005

<sup>viii</sup> As for xiii

<sup>ix</sup> Welsh Assembly Government: Children and Young People: Rights to Action: Stronger Partnerships for Better Outcomes. Guidance on cooperation under the Children Act 2004.

<sup>x</sup> 'Children Looked After in England 2004-5' National Statistics 24.11.05

<sup>xi</sup> “ “

<sup>xii</sup> [http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/12D/57/sr04\\_psa\\_ch2.pdf](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/12D/57/sr04_psa_ch2.pdf) accessed 03.07.06

<sup>xiii</sup> 'Children Looked After in England' 2004 – 5. Department for Education and Skills November 2005

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000631/index.shtml> accessed 03.07.06

<sup>xv</sup> As for ii

<sup>xvi</sup> 'Joint guidance on the education of children and young people in public care' Dfes and DoH 2000

<sup>xvii</sup> 'Statistics publication Notice: Health and Care Series: Children's Social Work Statistics 2004-5' Scottish Executive October 2005

<sup>xviii</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/03/09080409/22> accessed 14.08.06

<sup>xix</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/scotstat/education/Paper-SEIAG-02-08> accessed 01.08.06

<sup>xx</sup> 'Children Order Statistical Bulletin 2005.' Northern Ireland Statistics and research Agency. October 2005.

<sup>xxi</sup> 'Our Children and Young People – Our pledge. A ten Year Strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland 2006 – 2016.

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