



**The Scottish  
Government**  
Riaghaltas na h-Alba



**Who Cares? Scotland in partnership with The Scottish  
Government**

# Permanence

**The views of care experienced young  
people**

November 2014

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## Overview

The Scottish Government asked Who Cares? Scotland to consult directly with care experienced young people on the subject of 'permanence'. This is to help The Scottish Government construct guidance for professionals, which directly reflects the views and experiences of care experienced young people.

Who Cares? Scotland spoke to 15 care experienced young people about their knowledge, understanding and experience of the permanence planning processes. The issue of permanence is complex and can involve a number of professionals including Social Work, Children's Hearing Scotland, the courts and lawyers, amongst others. It is a powerful issue which can have a significant impact on the experiences and childhoods of children and young people. When a young person is removed from the family home, permanence planning seeks to return them home as soon as possible. If that is not appropriate or possible, then a permanent placement of another kind is pursued. Suitable placements can include adoption, foster care, residential units or kinship care. Regardless of where, the intention of permanence is to ensure children and young people are able to reside permanently somewhere that they can be nurtured, loved and feel that they belong and can have positive relationships surrounding them.

Permanence is a powerful and impactful process which has the potential to shape the future outcomes of individual children and young people. We believe that it is critical that the views and experiences of children and young people within the care system are taken into account throughout the whole process. To capture this expertise we asked young people to reflect on their own care journeys, looking at varying aspects of the permanence process: their understanding of permanence; how they believe the system is working now; the impact of attending Children's Hearings; their understanding of, and thoughts on the Scottish Government's Permanence and Care Excellence programme and their recommendations for how permanence can work more effectively.

### 1. Who we spoke to

We spoke to a range of young people with the youngest respondent being 17 years old and the oldest 26 years old. The average age of our interviewee group was 21. We spoke to young people from 9 different local authorities: Renfrewshire, Argyll and Bute, Stirling, Inverclyde, Dundee, Glasgow, North Ayrshire, South Lanarkshire and North Lanarkshire. Six of the respondents currently reside in Renfrewshire and two in Glasgow.

The majority we spoke to had now left care, although 2 were still living in long term residential placements and 3 were living in foster care. The decision to speak to older care experienced individuals, who had generally moved on from care placements was an intentional one. This ensured

that respondents were at a stage in their own life to reflect on their full care journey, with a greater sense of emotional stability. This also allowed for a degree of distance to be present between the young person and the issues discussed. Permanence, long term placements and connection to birth families are sensitive subjects and any exploration of these issues requires a degree of reflection, which can present challenges. Young people were supported after the interview, when necessary or required, given the issues discussed.

One to one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the care experienced young people as part of this process.

## 2. Young peoples' understanding of permanence

We asked young people what their understanding of the word 'permanence' is, as well as their knowledge of the processes associated with it. In acknowledging the limits of young people's understanding of what permanence is, professionals should become better informed in how to articulate permanence to those they are working in partnership with.

Only one young person was unable to expand on the concept of permanence and explained that they had never heard of the term before. Interestingly this particular young person had very recently left a long term placement in a children's unit and spoke warmly of the support they received growing up, as well as the continued relationships they were able to maintain with staff on leaving. Another young person only identified permanence as relating to young people who live within secure accommodation for long periods of time. In this case, permanence was interpreted as a negative term.

The majority of young people we spoke to, however, identified it as broadly linked to **security**. Security related to both internal feelings of belonging, as well as consistency of accommodation in the short term. For those young people who had positive experiences of permanence planning, the concept itself was viewed as a good one. Explaining that it was a concept rooted in promise and which provided a sense of belonging and love. It was something that they believed all young people in care should and would strive for where given the chance.

For those young people who had negative experiences of permanence or multiple placement moves, they associated the concept of permanence with reducing worry about the future. They recognised that permanence could potentially offer better chances of staying in the one place for longer and increase the likelihood of experiencing belonging and 'home'. They also believed that permanence could offer better support during care and once they have left – mirroring the support a non-looked after young person might receive from their family. However many of those who had negative

experiences of permanence or several placement moves, were hesitant in their support of permanence planning. Specifically this group were more likely to recognise that permanence cannot offer guaranteed security. They recognised that future security cannot be certain, even with good permanence planning. This idea was extremely important to them, recognising the need for professionals to be realistic and honest with young people moving through permanence plans:

“People tend to promise good things because they want the best but if promises are made but the promises can’t be fulfilled, young people feel hopeless and upset.”

Additionally, this specific group of young people were more likely to state that permanence will only be positive if the placement is right and the reasons for permanence are right for that particular young person. Their hesitation to absolutely support the concept of permanence is another example of the uncertainty and lack of trust that negative placements and multiple moves can instil within looked-after young people. One young person offered insight into the potential effect of the process on young people:

“I think permanence takes a lot of commitment from the young person. It could be really bad for them if the plans fall through.”

This acknowledgment of the potential breakdown of permanence and long term placements was raised by several young people. These young people felt these views from young people must be embraced by professionals and more importantly communicated honestly and openly to the children and young people about to embark on the permanence process.

### **3. How young people think the system is working now**

We spoke to the young people about how they believed the system was working presently in Scotland. We encouraged them to reflect on the areas of care that they feel most relevant to permanence planning.

#### **3.1 Multiple placement moves**

We know that excessive placement moves can severely impact on young people and their development. It can cause young people to live transient, chaotic lives and it can result in an inability

to form secure attachments<sup>1</sup>, sustain positive relationships and experience good outcomes both during and after care. The effects are substantial and well documented. The vast majority of young people we spoke to were able to identify the impact that multiple placement changes had on them or have had on those around them. When we asked them to explain what these impacts were, most commented on the negative affect this can have on an individual's **identity** – a lack of belonging and an inability to identify '**home**'. Our young people spoke clearly about how this lack of identity can lead to problems in the future when trying to settle. The experience of moving often results in reluctant acceptance of a life which offers no stability. As one young person explains:

**“I always had a bag permanently packed so I was always just ready to go.”**

The impact that this type of experience can have on the development of a looked-after child is significant. The young people we consulted talked clearly about the feelings of anticipation prior to a move. They reflected on how much they thought about whether or not they would fit in and how they would cope with the pain of rejection when the placement breaks down. This is why it is imperative that in cases where permanence planning is appropriate, that it is done in such a way that holds the young person at the centre of all decisions made. Communication which is open and honest, but which also takes place often and in terms the young person understands, was viewed as vital.

### **3.2 The people involved in permanence planning**

For those young people who went through formal permanence planning, the experience of the process was varied. Many had gone through this process at an early stage in their childhood and were unable to remember what it involved or who was involved. Some young people described the sheer number of people involved in the permanence planning process. When asked to list who was involved, the following people were identified:

- social workers
- police
- panel members
- family members
- foster parents
- health workers

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<sup>1</sup> Furnivall, J. 2011. IRISS Insights: attachment-informed practice with looked-after children and young people. [http://www.iriss.org.uk/sites/default/files/iriss\\_insight10.pdf](http://www.iriss.org.uk/sites/default/files/iriss_insight10.pdf).

- lawyers
- sheriffs
- Support workers.

### 3.3 Birth family

Regardless of whether or not they could remember much about the process, the young people were in agreement that permanence can work best if birth families are in agreement with the decision. While they understood that this often may not happen, they were able to reflect on their experience and agreed that when birth parents understand the reasons for permanence and accept the decision, the young people can feel better placed to embrace their placement. Several young people spoke about the need to ensure young people understand what permanence means for the connection to and relationships with their birth family. Regardless of their experiences, the connection to the birth family can remain strong and several spoke about being endlessly worried about how permanence with another family or placement could impact on the birth family.

One young person who had not experienced permanence spoke strongly about how permanence planning for her brother affected her. She spoke about the need for professionals to be mindful of the whole family – if one sibling is to get permanence, the effect this can have on other siblings can be profound:

**“When my brother got permanence plans and I didn’t, I felt like the black sheep of the family.”**

This individual reiterated the need to support siblings to understand such decisions in order to avoid further instilling feelings of rejection and worthlessness. They went on to state that gaining such an understanding of the decision making process would have better enabled her in supporting her sibling’s placement.

### 3.4 Timeframes

For those young people who had experienced formal permanence planning, timescales varied. The plans that worked best in the eyes of the young people we spoke to, were the ones in which permanence had been formalised within a year. For most of these young people, they were aware of permanence starting around 6 months into a placement but having it secured within a year. For others, the experience was much longer, taking several years and ending negatively. One young person stated that permanence planning started when he was 6 years old and was not formalised until he was 9 years old. Ultimately this placement broke down and the young person was able to identify

that this was because the placement was not right from the beginning. This could have been identified sooner in the process – according to the young person.

### **3.5 Informal permanence experience**

Many of the young people we spoke to had experienced long term placements and/or permanence which had occurred by chance. Many spoke about how they had simply just ended up staying in placements which were working well for them. While they were positive about this experience, they spoke about maintaining a feeling of uncertainty and worry over their future and feeling as though they did not truly belong in that placement. The lack of formalised permanence resulted in these young people never letting go of the expectation of impending placement changes and in some cases fear of the ‘what next’ – which they did not have full control of.

For other young people who did not have experience of formal permanence planning, there was recognition that the long term placements that they ended up in were a result of poor mediation attempts with the birth family. In some cases, young people were placed in residential placements in the short term whilst social work intervention was intended to be focused on the child returning to the family home. However for several reasons, this work did not begin and any chance to rehabilitate the family had been lost due to the passage of time.

## **4. The effect of Children’s Hearings on young people**

We asked young people to discuss their experience of the Children’s Hearing system. Currently, children and young people looked-after by their local authority will attend Hearings annually, whenever one is needed on an emergency basis or whenever it is appropriate to meet the needs of the young person.

### **4.1 Emotional impact on young people**

The young people highlighted the many ways in which the Children’s Hearing can impact on them emotionally. For many young people, attendance at the Hearings can bring around feelings of anxiety and stress:

**“I was at hearings from the age of 7 and refused to go to any more because I found the environment horrible and invasive.”**

Young people informed us that these feelings are both in reaction to the unknown – what the outcome will be or will a family member get upset – and also the knowledge that they will be forced to revisit

past experiences and analyse their recent behaviour. Some young people suggested that Children's Hearings in fact feel more like a punishment, than somewhere which looks out for their wellbeing.

## 4.2 Current experience of the Children's Hearing system

When asked to describe what involvement with Children's Hearings currently looks like, young people generally grouped their answers into three categories: **the people, the content and the time**.

The first issue raised was the fact that young people attending never know who the panel members will be at the Hearing. They highlighted the anxiety that can be caused by the anticipation of meeting three people who they do not know, but who have a certain degree of control over their future.

In addition to this, the young people spoke about how difficult it can be to revisit past experiences at hearings and to have to speak to these potentially unknown panel members about parts of their lives which have been traumatic and affected them deeply. Not only this, but they must revisit it each time they attend and this repetitive process is something which can result in care experienced young people feeling resentment towards the professionals and panel members involved.

The final issue raised was in regards to the timings of Children's Hearings. The young people consulted with spoke about their frustration at being forced to attend Hearings during school hours. Not one of them remembered attending a Hearing after school or during the weekend. They spoke eloquently about the benefits of attending regular, consistent education placements and the stability this can provide for them. In relation to missing school to attend a hearing they spoke about the message this can give to young people who are already struggling to engage with school: that their education is not as important. They also spoke about how difficult it can be to return to school later that day, struggling to switch off from the discussions had at the Hearing and to answer the questions posed by other pupils. This experience only acts to enhance the stigma they face too – in their view.

## 4.3 Thoughts on reducing the use of Children's Hearings

Interestingly, the vast majority of the young people we spoke to, despite their views on the impact of attending Hearings, were uncomfortable with the concept of moving away from long term supervision through Children's Hearings. Most were able to identify the benefits of the Children's Hearing system and what it offers to young people growing up in care. Several spoke about the fact that it is an independent structure operating within a very complex environment. They could recognise that this independence was integral to making sure they could continue to be safe within their placements and could hold social workers and other staff to account on the standard of their care.

When asked to discuss how permanence could help move away from long term supervision under the Children's Hearing system, the majority of young people were concerned about how quality of their

placements would then be monitored. With the exception of three people, those we spoke to were uncomfortable with the idea that permanence would not be closely monitored. This is despite the understanding that permanence seeks to create 'normality', 'stability' and a 'family home' which children and young people can belong to. For those young people who had experienced multiple moves or who had experienced permanent placements which then broke down, the idea of residing in a placement permanently, with less involvement from the Children's Hearing system was difficult to accept. For these young people specifically, it was highlighted that improvement was needed around Children's Hearings to reduce the emotional impact, rather than moving away altogether.

Three young people understood the logic of using permanence better and earlier, moving away from Children's Hearings and therefore supported the concept fully. It is interesting to note however, that these particular young people had positive experiences of permanent placements. One young person described a very positive experience of permanence planning, where she fully understood what was happening, was consulted with at every step and settled well, along with her siblings, in a permanent placement where she then thrived. This example of the permanence process working well - meeting the needs of the young person and involving them fully - is one which the young person feels should be in place for all young people involved in the permanence process.

## **5. What young people think about the Permanence and Care Excellence (PACE) programme**

We spoke to young people about the Permanence and Care Excellence programme. The young people understood the concept of PACE and the intention it has to improve and speed up permanence planning across all relevant agencies. We asked them if care experienced young people should be involved with PACE and if so, what this engagement would look like.

The young people we spoke to were in agreement with the idea of involving young people with care experience in the PACE programme. They recognised mutual benefit this could have for everyone involved. There was a recognition that if young people were to be involved, their expertise would be invaluable to both the professionals involved and the young people currently moving through the care system. Additionally, several young people highlighted that by involving care experienced people, young people across Scotland will be encouraged to know that professionals are serious about listening to the views of young people and genuinely acting on what they hear. They believe this could send out a very strong message to care experienced young people currently on their journey.

Young people were asked to describe the type of person that should be involved with PACE. Several young people stressed the importance of being able to be reflective and constructive with suggestions.

For this reason, many suggested that those involved with PACE should be older, care experienced people who have had time to move away from the system and have made the transition into independent living. Not only did young people feel this would allow the individual to be reflective and constructive, but they also identified that this would ensure the individual is emotionally strong enough to revisit areas about care that may have been difficult. The young people we spoke to suggested that the individuals involved should have experienced permanence planning to a certain degree to ensure their experience has context and relevancy to the discussions. Several believed that to ensure reflection is beneficial those involved must not simply have experienced care, but lived within the very specific structures and experiences that permanence planning brings.

We also asked the young people to suggest what role these care experienced individuals would have in relation to the PACE programme. They suggested that the care experienced people involved could do the following:

- Provide examples of positive experiences of permanence planning and why they worked *from a young person's perspective and not a professional's one.*
- Ensure that all discussions with frontline professionals remain focussed on the needs of young people *and especially ensured they were included and supported to share their views.*
- Provide a knowledgeable reference point for any decisions or discussions around how to improve the permanence process.
- Take on consultative roles across several local authorities to provide a 'sounding board' to professionals who wish to speak directly to formally looked-after young people.

## **6. What WC?S advocacy workers think about permanence planning**

Throughout this process we also consulted with Who Cares? Scotland Young Person Workers who specialise in providing independent advocacy support to looked-after young people across Scotland. We believe it is helpful to provide context from an independent professional, separate to the work of those key agencies involved in permanence such as Children's Hearing Scotland, Social Work and the Courts. Who Cares? Scotland Young Person Workers are experienced in supporting young people through permanence planning. It is a consistently dominant feature of our advocacy work and has been for several decades.

### **6.1 Lack of understanding**

Our advocacy workers told us that young people they meet have, in their view, a very poor understanding of what permanence means. They suggested that the process is poorly explained to young people and therefore there is a lack of knowledge about what permanence planning might

mean to a child or young person. One worker spoke about the use of phrases such as *'forever home'* and *'you will stay here forever'*. They raised concern over such definitive terms which suggest to the young person that the placement will never end and never breakdown. If it does breakdown, the impact is significant on the emotional stability of the child or young person who has entered the placement believing they will be settled forever. The workers spoke about a need for realistic and honest discussions to take place, in terms the young person understands and feels included in, which prepare the young person for all eventualities. There was a strong emphasis that guarantees such as *'forever home'* should never be used. The reflection from workers being that promises made in good faith to the young person, can sometime present unrealistic expectations for them. This is especially problematic where young people have never felt settled, and have spent a large part of their childhood longing for security.

The issue of potential resistance towards permanence was discussed. Our advocacy workers identified that resistance from young people towards permanence plans is a reality and should be expected and predicted. They suggested that resistance should not be treated as an issue but rather the young person should be supported appropriately to understand the reasons for permanence and to have a voice within the decision making process. To involve the young person fairly and fully in all decisions will help them to recognise that they have a say in their future and that their views and feelings matter. This is extremely important, even where the decisions made are not what the young person wants – as it helps them to build trust and understanding with the professional adults involved in the process.

## **6.2 Issues around contact with birth families**

The advocacy workers we spoke to also identified how important it is for the young person to have a connection and relationship with their birth family, if that is what they want while in their permanent placement. Workers spoke of experiencing too often, decisions being made for young people to have no contact with their birth family, against the wishes of the young person. The young people should be supported by someone independent of the permanence process, to decide whether or not contact with their birth family is something they would like to maintain.

***Please see research on Contact<sup>2</sup> for further explanation and understanding on this issue, from a young person's perspective.***

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<sup>2</sup> 'Contact: the views of care experienced young people' Who Cares? Scotland on behalf of The Scottish Government; November 2014.

## 7. Concluding remarks and recommendations

It is clear that young people support the idea of permanence and recognise the benefits it can have for their development, security, ability to form relationships and long-term outcomes. They articulately voiced that instability and multiple placement moves can increase levels of anxiety and frustration. They also recognise how this experience only encourages a sense of exclusion, a feeling of difference and a lack of belonging. All of these feelings further impact on the levels of stigma they feel from others. With this in mind, the young people identified the following as recommendations for how permanence planning should operate in practice:

**The explanation of permanence must take a multiagency approach and involve people the young person has a relationship with.** Someone independent to the permanence process and/or who has a positive relationship to the young person must help increase understanding.

**The explanation must be clear and realistic, in children and young people's terms and at their level of understanding and discussed openly and often.** It should also not hide the reality or the potential for placement breakdown.

**The permanence planning process must recognise the needs of the individual child or young person and take a flexible approach.** Permanence might seem ideal for all but any decisions must suit the needs of young people and not the system.

**Multiple placement moves can significantly impact children and young people.** If permanence is appropriate, it should be progressed as early as possible with little drift.

**Children and young people must be included throughout this process regardless of age, to ensure understanding and address any concerns as they arise.**

**Permanence should mean stability but not always exclusion from birth family.** If appropriate, contact and connection to birth family should be supported.

**Permanence should be secured as soon as possible, but within the correct placement.** Drift should be avoided to encourage children and young people to settle and allow the placement to work. If mediation with birth family is possible, it should begin immediately.

**While there is recognition of the negative impact that regular attendance at Hearings can have on children and young people, many still see the value in having Hearings to act as an independent party in the lives of those in care.**

While it may be appropriate to reduce reliance on Hearings for the supervision of children and young people in permanent placements, young people must still be aware of the avenues available to seek out independent support.

**The PACE programme should involve care experienced people.** These people should be older and be in a position to reflect constructively with insight. If possible they should be recruited to take account of their genuine skills and knowledge, rather than a tokenistic group of young people used to consult with.

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