Who Cares? Scotland in partnership with The Scottish Government

Contact

The views of care experienced young people

November 2014

Table of Contents

Overview

The Scottish Government asked Who Cares? Scotland to consult directly with care experienced young people on the issue of 'contact'. 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 therefore consulted with care experienced young people on their experiences, knowledge and opinions on how 'contact' is facilitated for children and young people growing up in care. Relationships are important to looked-after young people. They are particularly important to young people who have experienced neglect or instability early in life where their development can be hampered, both physically and emotionally. However it is also true that many care experienced young people are keen to continue relationships with family members who are part of the reasons why the young person has been taken into care. These relationships are not always easily enabled whilst the young person is in care, due to child protection and best interests. However, upon leaving care and as a young adult it is often the case that young people are curious and keen to reconnect with these family members. It is for this reason that professionals must work hard to ensure that loving, stable relationships are encouraged for looked-after children and young people. Ensuring that young people have strong reference points for what is a positive relationship is vital. Arranging good quality, safe contact with key people for those who have been removed from the family home is important and has the potential to strengthen the personal development of those in care and after care - if facilitated appropriately. It is also important that communication on the decisions made about contact is open and honest with the young person, so that they are able to understand fully the reasons why decisions are being made.

1. Who we spoke to

Given the sensitivity of this issue, it was decided that in-depth one-to-one semi-structured interviews would take place with care experienced young people who were in a position to reflect on their care journey and their experiences with 'contact'

We spoke to 11 care experienced young people during this process - 7 females and 4 males. The average age of the young people who engaged in this process was 16; the youngest person being 14 and the oldest being 21.

Two of those interviewed stated that they now live within their own tenancy; eight came from three differing residential schools and one other young person was living in a residential unit at the time of

interview. During the interview process it was apparent that this group of young people had a wide range of placement experiences: kinship care placements, foster placements and other residential placements.

The average age participants came to be looked-after and accommodated by the local authority is around eight years old. One young person stated that they were not sure at what age they stopped living at home with their family.

The young people who participated identified as belonging to several local authority areas. Nine local authorities were represented in total: West Lothian, Falkirk, Edinburgh, Aberdeenshire, West Lothian, North Ayrshire and Stirling. Both West Lothian and Edinburgh City Councils had two young people from their locality participate.

2. Young peoples' experiences of contact

In summary, all of the young people that we spoke with agreed that good quality contact with others outside of the care system was essential for the wellbeing of care experienced young people. Contact can help instil a sense of normality and connection to those people deemed to be important out with the professionals in the care system. Each young person stated that this is a view commonly held by their looked-after peers and is a common conversation point amongst looked after and accommodated young people.

2.1 Understanding 'contact'

We began the discussion by asking young people to identify what 'contact' meant to them. All of the young people we engaged with were able to articulate what contact meant for them, but also highlighted that contact arrangements vary for each individual. One young person identified how wide ranging contact can be:

"Contact is when I get to see my Mum and Dad. But I also get to see my friends, at home and in the local area of my residential school."

Others spoke similarly of contact allowing them to maintain relationships with those they knew out with the care system, or from previous care placements.

The age at which interviewees initially became looked after and accommodated varies significantly. This appears to have had an impact on the participants being able to clearly state whether or not

4

they felt anyone had explained to them clearly what their rights where in relation to contact; or even explore who they wished to have contact with.

However one young person was able to articulate that contact arrangements were always explained well and that she felt as though her thoughts and considerations were always acknowledged when decisions were being made. She felt this helped her understand why decisions were being made on 'contact' for her. In contrast however, some a number of young people felt that professionals and those working in partnership with professionals, would withhold information on why decisions on 'contact' were being made. This, in turn strained the relationship and in some cases the trust which young people felt they could have with these professionals.

2.2 Birth parents

All of the young people who participated were clear that having contact with their biological parents was almost always possible. It was stated that on a number of occasions contact with birth parents, for the young people we spoke with, was supervised. The young people explained that when their social workers discussed the reasons that meant contact had to be supervised an understanding could be reached. All the young people we spoke to, that had experience of supervised contact, stated that supervision could cause frustration. The word "fake" was used by some to describe these contact meetings. Another young person said:

"When my contact was supervised, everyone acted really weird. My Mum and Dad wouldn't act their self, and I wouldn't either. It felt like we were at a proper meeting, instead of just spending time with my Mum and Dad."

2.3 Practical arrangements for contact

Another young person told of how they felt embarrassed being out in the community for contact when it was supervised because:

"It was obvious to everyone we were with someone from social work".

When exploring this further the young person said that people in the community would be able to notice because of the way that the person supervising would dress. They also stated that at times those supervising contact would be wearing their work identification and that they were fearful of

meeting anyone they knew. They worried about having to explain to them what they were doing on a Saturday with someone from the Social Work department.   This experience of feeling uncomfortable and exposed when doing something which non looked after peers would deem as common as meeting with family members, only acts to strengthen the stigma that looked-after young people both face and feel personally.

The venue chosen to facilitate contact, according to the young people we spoke to, also had an effect on the quality of the contact. All of those who participated stated that the quality of contact was best for everyone when it was facilitated in a neutral venue within the community; or within a family member's home. All of the young people we spoke with believed that holding contact within social work offices, or similar venues, negatively impacted on how people interacted during the contact. Even when there was acceptance of the reason which had been provided for why such a venue was appropriate, the young people stated that they still believed an alternative would have been more appropriate.

2.4 Types of contact

The young people who we spoke with highlighted the positives and negatives of various other methods of contact. Young people felt telephone contact with immediate family should be an automatic entitlement.

Others stated that they felt angry and annoyed when they were not permitted to contact members of their immediate family by phone, regardless of any reason given as they felt "other families" would not have those restrictions placed on them. Others felt that telephone contact helped them to rebuild broken relationships and was a useful way to prepare for face to face meetings. All of the young people involved valued privacy during these phone calls.   They said that calls being monitored, or where they were unsure if there were being monitored or not, negatively affected the conversation they had with others.

2.5 Contact with siblings and others

Some of the young people discussed the difficulties they faced in securing regular contact with those they were close to who were not viewed as immediate family. More commonly however, were the feelings of frustration they had experienced relating to sibling contact.

Participants spoke about how coming into care meant separation from some of their siblings. Whilst they may understand that being placed with their siblings in the same placement was not always possible, they mostly felt that no contact decisions being made seriously impacted on the relationships they could have with their siblings. Upon leaving care, they felt this decision could also

ruin the chance they had to maintain a healthy and strong sibling bond into adulthood. This, they felt, could seriously affect the levels of meaningful relationships they have around them; especially with people from their family who have had the same experiences as them.

Some young people explained how, through the assistance of advocacy workers or other key professionals in their lives, they were supported in establishing contact with their siblings. Even with support, the young people stated that sometimes this would not make a difference.

More than one young person explored how having a separate children's' hearing from their sibling, hindered any progress in establishing sibling contact. No one was able to come to a decision because panel members said *"we can't talk about them, they have their own hearing".* One young person stated that four years ago his brother was adopted. Before then he had contact frequently until he was abruptly told that his younger brother was going to be adopted. Following the adoption, promises of contact did not materialise. He was supported to try and re-establish contact, and it was agreed by all parties that he would be able to write to his brother and that he would receive his brothers' responses. Four years later, the young person stated, he is still unsure as to whether his brother has received any of his letters; and is still awaiting a reply. This can be devastating to young people – and sometimes feels similar to the emotional impact of loss or grief - according to the young people we interviewed in this process.

All of the young people we spoke with highlighted the importance good quality contact was to them - whether that was with family or friends. Young people stated that having good quality contact with others made them feel that they still had people, out with the care system that cared about them. This made them less anxious about living independently, once they leave care, and less fearful of having to live life in isolation. It also made them feel more connected to their past and their family, even where they understood that their family was the reason why they were in care.

2.6 Geographical location

If a young person is accommodated within their local community, or in a surrounding area then the young people we spoke with explained then having contact is much easier to organise and much more enjoyable. Those young people who we spoke with in residential schools, said it was sometimes tiring going to see family and friends because of traveling distances. They also spoke of the reluctance of professionals to facilitate such contact on a regular basis. One young person placed within a residential school described a positive experience of long distance contact by saying:

"Every weekend someone from here drives me over three hours to go and see my family. They drop me off and come and pick me up when it is time to go home. The drive lets staff get to know me better and I get to know them a bit more too. Without them driving me I doubt I'd see my family as often because it's a long way for them to travel…and I don't know if they'd have the money."

2.7 Using contact as a punishment

The majority of the young people expressed complete disagreement with contact being withdrawn as a way of discipline. Many gave examples of instances when prearranged contact was cancelled, due to their behaviour within their placement. They felt this was unfair and resulted in the placement becoming unsettled – especially where they attempted to express their disapproval of the decision. One young person felt this was a breach of her rights:

"If you're in prison, you get visits. Even people I know who fight in prison get to see their families. I'm not in prison, but I don't get to see my family when they say my behaviour has been bad in here (the residential school which the young person resides)."

2.8 Flexibility of contact

The majority of the interviewees expressed a wish to have increased contact during school holidays, but unfortunately felt this wish was not commonly granted. The young people spoke about how they felt decisions not to increase contact at this time was a result of limited resources. Although many expressed an acceptance that resources are limited, they stated that they felt increased contact at this time would strengthen their relationships with family members and communities. They also felt that the decisions not to increase contact during school holidays disadvantaged them - as they believed this was not a difficulty their non-looked after peers experienced.

3. Emotional impact of contact

The young people we spoke to reflected on how contact made them feel before, during and after they had contact with those relevant to their lives. Only one young person stated that contact had no emotional impact on him, and therefore did not have any reflection or feelings on this.

The rest of the participants were able to reflect and articulate how contact can have both a positive and a negative personal impact on them individually. They were also able to identify how the feelings evoked due to contact could impact on their individual placements; in either a positive or negative way.

In preparing for pending contact the most common feeling described was **anxiety**. The young people we spoke with described how this was caused by a number of factors. The most prominent one relating to the hope that contact was going to go as planned and that it would be enjoyable. Levels of anxiety appeared to be higher for those whose relationships with their family had been strained at times. The anxiety was most felt for face to face contact. However, the young people felt strongly that despite this they still should be supported to have appropriate and meaningful contact with those relevant to them. This was eloquently put by one of the young people who said:

"They're still my family, and once I leave here (the care system) they might be all I have."

The young people who felt they had managed to establish a good working relationship with an adult within their placement affirmed that this resulted in them being well supported with all aspects of contact arrangements. For those who felt that they did not have a good working relationship with someone within their placement, they spoke of how they would internalise the way they were feeling. This had a negative impact in the way they engaged with others in all aspects of their life - as they struggled to manage the emotions they were experiencing. Again, the importance of relationships that are strong and trusting with adult professionals in their lives is highlighted here.

As mentioned previously, it was identified by most young people that telephone contact was a good way of enabling them to work towards meeting relevant persons face to face. It was highlighted that when the structures put in place, for the young persons' best interests, were too rigid then this could be counterproductive in the development of relationships with their family.

All of the young people had experience of having their contact being supervised at some stage in their care journey. As aforementioned young people felt that this affected how everyone engaged

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with others. Young people highlighted that at times they felt that social work practitioners did not readily share the supervising persons' observations as readily as they would hope. There was a feeling that when a young person had an opposing perception of how the contact went, to that of the supervisor, that they often felt unable to have their own views acknowledged by decision makers. Sometimes the young people felt that they were not able to explore these feelings as they would have liked and that this impacted on how they felt post contact. A number of the young people we spoke to also stated that at times when they felt uncomfortable during contact they did not wish to share this with professionals.

One young person felt that she and her family were disadvantaged when it came to contact, as English was not their first language. She discussed how contact with her family was supervised, and that initial phone call contact was problematic as she was unable to converse with her family in their native language. She spoke of how practitioners made her speak in English to allow them to monitor what was being said, however this resulted in strained relationships with both her sister and mother who could not speak English. The young person described feeling this was unfair. She felt that if it was deemed necessary to supervise contact then the local authority should have the resources available to do this without negatively impacting on the quality of that contact with her family.

Some young people felt that practitioners would more readily stop or reduce contact than they would support it, to continue or even to establish it. One young person said:

"All families and friends fall out, but when I tell them they want to interfere too much. I just want people to talk to, not change everything straight way… when it's good, nobody says let's do more of this quickly".

Sibling contact featured heavily in this part of the semi-structured interviews. Young people spoke at length about how difficult it was being separated from their brothers and sisters. The separation meant that some had celebrated Christmas' and birthdays without getting to see their siblings. Consistently those we spoke with stated this felt unfair, but no one was able to offer a solution to the issue aside from siblings being accommodated together. The young people who had younger siblings stated that at times contact with them on occasion was abruptly halted or discontinued altogether. One reason commonly given to the young people by practitioners, according to those we spoke with, was that the contact was distressing for the younger sibling and that they had

demonstrated this in the way they had behaved before and after the contact. This caused some of the young people to apportion blame on them. Others questioned the accuracy of this reason and felt it warranted deeper discussion with them, which was not always afforded. One young person stated that:

"Of course they would've been upset, the last time they had seen me was when we were taken off my mum and dad. We didn't see each other for ages we went to McDonald's for a wee while and then went home".

The young person could not understand why decision makers did not seem to understand why their younger sibling would be upset and thought that reducing the contact would actually be detrimental to their relationship in the long term.

When contact was deemed to be inappropriate with certain individuals' young people spoke of how this made them feel a mixture of emotions. Mostly young people felt sad that people they loved were not allowed to see them. However, they also felt decision makers were protecting them from harm and therefore they felt cared for and protected by them. In saying this, others said that when this was not reviewed, even when requested by the young person, they felt disadvantaged and not listened to. Generally the young people we spoke to felt that since relationships change on a daily basis, decisions relating to contact have to be reviewed often. All of the young people stated that they either have or would establish contact independent of support, if they felt their views were not considered.

Establishing contact, independently from support, appeared to have benefits and consequences; according to the young people. They reflected on how at times when they, or other young people they knew, had done this because decision makers had disallowed contact then they would still be able to maintain some form of a relationship with the individuals. This was important to them. They felt that they were able to have a "normal" relationship without anyone recording what had happened or with people discussing it amongst other professionals. Although the same number of young people identified that this could be dangerous for their own safety. They also recognised that when things were not going well then they were reluctant to share this with those charged with their welfare and wellbeing, for fear of being blamed. This meant that the relationship either

continued in an inappropriate manner or completely broke down; with the young person experiencing distress in isolation.

In relation to contact not being deemed appropriate young people interviewed could not understand why practitioners would freely say that once they were not in care then they could see whoever they wished. They expressed that this was setting them up to fail with one young person expressing:

"I don't get it. You can't see them now, but when you are an adult you can. That is years away. What if it goes wrong? I will be on my own with no one to help."

Another young person wished to re-establish contact with her former foster carers when she was 15 years old. She stated that the social work department advised this would not be possible until she was sixteen. The young person thought that this was unhelpful and was confused as to why a few months would make any difference. The young person perceived that whilst the social work department had an obligation to her welfare they made decisions for her; but once she was an adult they were no longer bothered, as they no longer had any statutory obligation to her that they "weren't bothered anymore".

Following contact young people conversed about how if contact, in whatever form, was not a positive experience then they would feel a mixture of emotions but the words angry and sad were most used to describe this. Again, those who had established good relationships with staff and carers felt supported to deal with this. Others spoke of how they did not wish to break their families confidentiality and speak about personal things with people who "were just workers", as one young person said. All young people said that at this time they would like to be able to speak to someone that they love, trust and who will maintain confidentiality.

Throughout the semi-structured interviews it was apparent that the greatest distress to a young person is when contact arrangements were cancelled; with or without reason. Young people said they found this difficult and one spoke of managing those emotions as being "near impossible". All the young people who spoke about contact being cancelled or being withdrawn; stated their placement became strained following this. Young people were explicitly clear that when contact was withdrawn as a method of "punishment", then they would try and express their frustration and anger within the placement.

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4. Recognising Social Media

We encouraged the young people to discuss how social media can affect contact. Through our work providing advocacy to looked-after young people, we are aware of the value social media can have for young people in care, but at the same time we recognise the difficulties it can cause for ensuring safe and stable contact.

All the interviewees were of the view that care experienced young people should have similar access privileges to social media as there non-looked after peers. The semi-structured interviews informed that access privileges vary from placement to placement, and can also vary for each young person within a placement.

The young people we spoke with informed that social media enables them to keep in touch with friends and peers they know from school and also from their home town. For those who had experienced limited or restricted access they stated that they were made to feel different from others:

"Everyone uses Facebook and that every day now. If I was at home I would get to use it so I don't understand why here is different."

Young people stated that the use of social media can be informative and beneficial to their learning; along with making it easier for them to maintain relationships with others. One young person spoke of how at college that her classmates use social media to share information they had found for upcoming coursework and for planning revision sessions.

The majority of young people we spoke with affirmed that when no contact decisions have been made for certain people they know that they had or would utilise social media to arrange contact themselves. They stated that this way they would be able to have control over who they got to see instead of adhering to a decision they disagreed with, or couldn't understand the reason behind the decision. One young person said:

"The only way to solve this would be to explain 'no contact' decisions better to young people. Help them understand why."

Despite this, young people appeared to be aware of the risks arranging to meet individuals without others knowing. One young person explained:

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"I was seeing this boy and my social worker said I wasn't to see him. They just said I shouldn't see him because he was a bad influence. So I used Facebook to meet up and keep in contact with him. At first it was a laugh and no one knew. When he started making me upset, I still couldn't tell anyone because then I'd get into trouble and that".

The general consensus from the young people we spoke with was that when decisions were not explained to them, or they disagreed with them, then social media was a resource that enabled them to get around the restrictions the decision presented them for contact. However when things went wrong, they tended to utilise the support of their peers as they did not want carers or professionals disciplining them for not adhering to the decision, which they felt they had no say in or did not fully understand.

Other young people highlighted that some carers and professionals were reluctant for care experienced young people to have access to social media due to risks. Common risks included cyber bullying or a young person becoming more vulnerable if they were contacted by someone they did not already know. All of the young people we spoke with expressed that this is a risk to all young people, not just looked after ones, and parents at home would have to manage this risk. They felt that their corporate parents should move towards effectively managing this risk as opposed to limiting access to something which was described as a "normal thing, that everyone uses now".

The young people who wished to contact others they had met in previous placements, expressed frustration at it being deemed inappropriate to contact these individuals. One young person said:

"All I wanted to say was hello, and they said I shouldn't have because I didn't live there anymore. When I did they told me I should work with my keyworker and I told them everything

about me, but now I don't live there any more it feels like I have just to forget about them".

It is clear from our discussions with the young people that stable relationships are incredibly important to them. As professionals however, it must be recognised that these relationships may not simply be with the birth family. If a young person can have a stable, loving relationship with a staff member from a previous placement, or previous foster siblings, it was recommended that this must be recognised and supported where appropriate.

5. Young peoples' reflections and recommendations:

Those both facilitating and supervising contact must have a positive relationship with the young person. This will ensure the young person feels appropriately supported.

Any decisions made about contact must directly involve the young person and all discussions must be communicated clearly to and most importantly, with them. They must be supported to understand any decisions.

Contact provisions should be based on the needs and wants of the young person, as opposed to the needs of parents or the allocation of resources. The issue of 'best interests' and 'child protection' must be explained to young people too, on their terms.

Quality and flexibility of contact must take into account each young person's individual situation. Flexibility is important in creating a positive contact environment and experience. This includes venue and frequency of contact.

Telephone contact should only be monitored when it is deemed necessary. Again, 'best interests' and 'child protection' must be communicated to and understood by the young person, to help understand why monitoring is necessary.

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 states that the views of young people have to be collated, recorded, and taken into account when making decisions about their lives. Practitioners should ensure that the young people always feel included and respected when arranging contact.

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No-contact decisions are something which young people feel need to be reviewed regularly. If it is deemed inappropriate that they should not have contact with an individual then the young people must be made aware of the reasons why and feel that this can be reviewed.

Young people should be supported to manage and build trusting relationships with others in their lives, prior to making the transition into independent living. This will reduce the risk of the young person being unable to manage relationship difficulties when they are no longer in receipt of support.

Social media use should be managed and supported. Young people have to be informed about how to utilise the resource as safely as possible. Being too risk adverse appears to actually increase a young persons' vulnerability; according to the young people we spoke with.

At no point should contact be withdrawn as a method of punishment. This has a negative impact in the sustainment of placements, relationships with carers and professionals and also on the impact of family relationships both during and after care.