



WHO CARES? SCOTLAND SIBLING SEPARATION AND CONTACT YOUNG RADICALS REPORT



INTRODUCTION

As an organisation, Who Cares? Scotland (WCS) has long emphasised the importance of love and relationships within the care system. Naturally, we therefore view relationships between siblings as an often-crucial part of a young person's life.

As a children's rights organisation, we also take a rights-based approach to the issue of sibling separation and contact.

Article 16 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states,

"No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, or correspondence."

Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (as protected under Scots law by the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Scotland Act 1998) states,

"Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence."

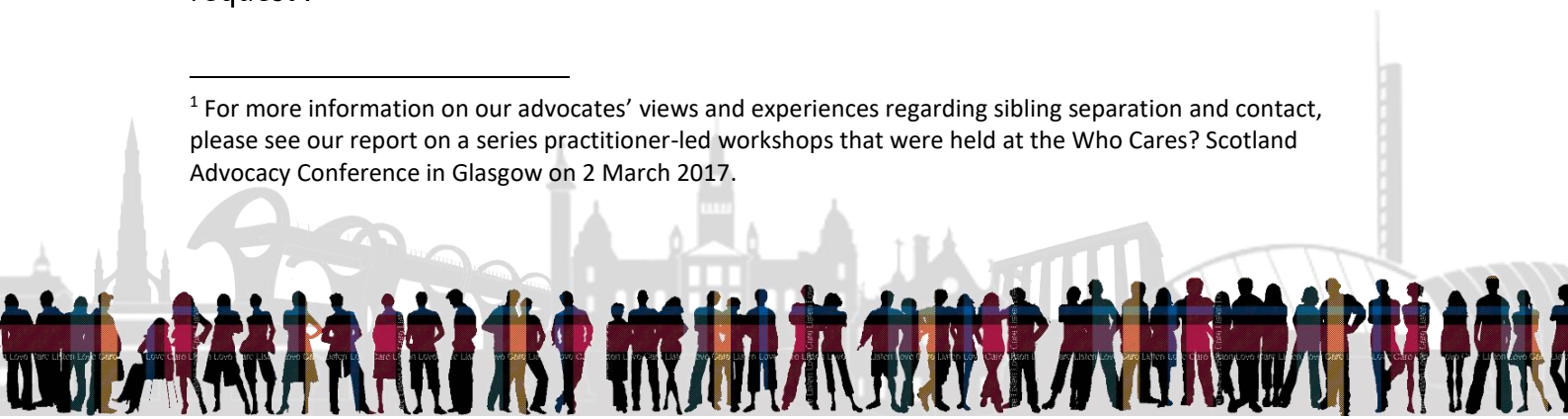
The UN has also issued Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. These guidelines set out how human rights should apply to care experienced young people. The guidelines state,

"...every effort should be made to enable siblings to maintain contact with each other, unless this is against their wishes or interests".

Unfortunately, despite the importance of love and relationships in their lives, and the clear human right that sibling relationships should be promoted, for care experienced young people separation from siblings is all too common.

Sibling separation is an issue that WCS has grappled with for many years through our experiences of providing independent advocacy for care experienced young people. Sibling contact has consistently been one of, if not the most, common advocacy request¹.

¹ For more information on our advocates' views and experiences regarding sibling separation and contact, please see our report on a series practitioner-led workshops that were held at the Who Cares? Scotland Advocacy Conference in Glasgow on 2 March 2017.



Following on from recent work with our advocates, we wanted to hear directly from care experienced young people so we could listen, understand, and amplify their views on sibling separation.

YOUNG RADICALS

Since March 2017, WCS has facilitated a regular issues-based group for care experienced young people called “Young Radicals”. The aim, as with all WCS’s work with young people, is to create a safe, welcoming, and nourishing space within which young people can build capacity and confidence and empower themselves and one another.

Young Radicals takes place at the WCS national office in Glasgow and is one of the ways we connect care experienced young people with the corporate parenting functions and broader influencing work of WCS. Through practical groupwork, the young people who attend are introduced to activism, the power of narrative and the challenge of thinking critically and structurally about the care system in its broader social context. Since the group began, workshops have taken place on a wide range of issues including gender identity, the role of the police, the effects of austerity on young people, and sibling separation and contact.

The views and experiences shared at the Young Radicals workshop on sibling separation and contact are reported below.

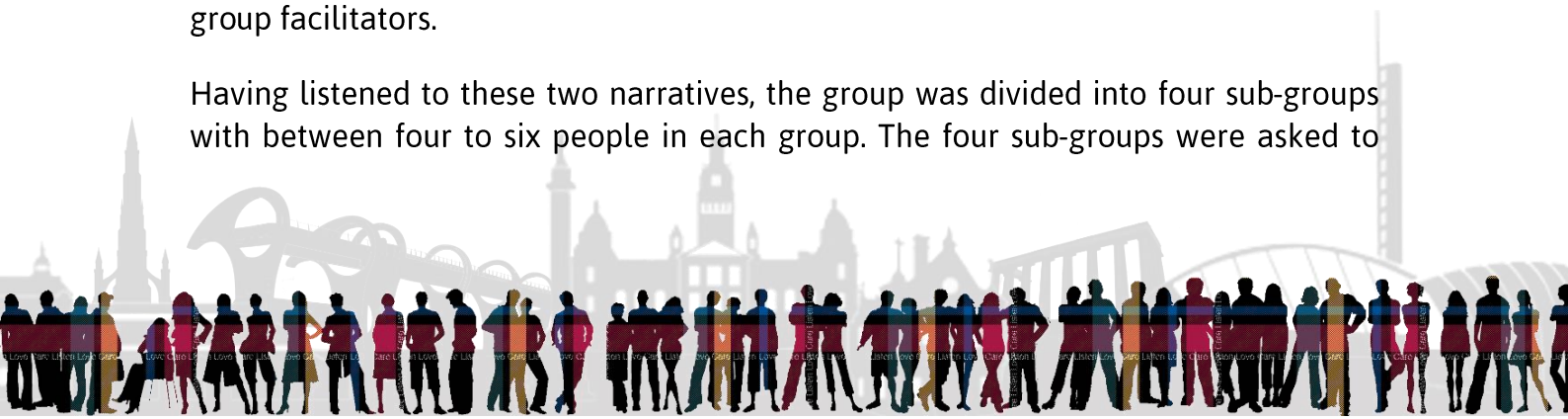
SIBLING SEPARATION AND CONTACT WORKSHOP

METHODOLOGY

The session took place on the evening of 14 June 2017 and began with the sharing of a fictional account of a young person’s experience with sibling separation and the issues they faced when they attempted to secure increased contact with their sibling. The narrative was read aloud to the group by one of the group facilitators and hard copies were also provided to the group. Whilst not specific to any one young person, this narrative was drawn from the experiences and views our advocates have gained in their day-to-day work supporting care experienced young people.

Following the sharing of the fictional account, one of our care experienced staff members shared their personal experiences with sibling separation through a prepared input that took the structure of a one-to-one interview with another of the group facilitators.

Having listened to these two narratives, the group was divided into four sub-groups with between four to six people in each group. The four sub-groups were asked to



reflect on the two narratives they had just heard and consider what could or should have been different in each case. Facilitators made it clear that members of the group were free to share views, opinions and/or experiences and could step back or leave the conversation at any point if they felt the need to do so. Support was available before, during and after the discussions and the whole group was brought together for a fun “cool off” activity at the end of the session.

These conversations led into broader discussions and across the groups five key themes emerged:

1. Personal experience of sibling separation.
2. The importance of sibling relationships to care experienced young people.
3. The impact of sibling separation.
4. Professional attitudes to sibling contact.
5. What should change.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF SEPARATION

Across the four sub-groups there were common experiences of separation from siblings after having been brought into the care system. Separation was seen as the norm and many of the young people said that, after separation, contact with siblings was maintained at a bare minimum and in some cases, there were long periods with no contact at all.

One young person, talking about their current circumstances, said,

“With my brother - I only see him once a month, for half an hour. We used to be so close.”

Another young person, looking back on a more historic experience, said,

“I only saw my brother twice in 10 years, then not for 4 years. Social work said it would be ‘confusing’ for him.”

Another young person talked about the suddenness of the separation they experienced and the effect separation had on their relationship with their brothers:

“When I was brought into care, overnight I was shipped all the way from Barrhead to Fife. That pulled the first straw out the relationship with my family. When I was in care, every so often I’d go months with no contact with my brothers at all. Every time you’re apart, the relationship is weakened.”



THE IMPORTANCE OF SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Sibling separation was given additional context with many young people expressing similar views on the special importance that sibling relationship can hold for care experienced young people specifically. The difficulties that siblings had faced, together, in the family home was felt to create a strong relationship. That relationship, with someone who understands you, was seen as a key part of life and something that could not easily be replaced.

One young person said,

“For families who have had it tough, sibling relationships are even more intense than normal. Trauma glues you together. But when you go into care, siblings become unusually distant. So it’s a huge turnaround. You really miss the simple stuff – playing football in the park, asking each other how their day was.”

Another young person, speaking about what family means to them and why sibling relationships can be even harder to lose than parental relationships, said,

“When I was younger, I’d define my family as mother and brothers. It was worse being taken away from my brothers than my mother. The relationship with your mum, you can get that relationship back. With my brothers, it’s difficult going back after six years – it’s not something you can get over. There’s so many things you miss.”

The groups also identified sibling relationships as an important source of consistency in fast-changing and difficult circumstances. On this theme, one young person said,

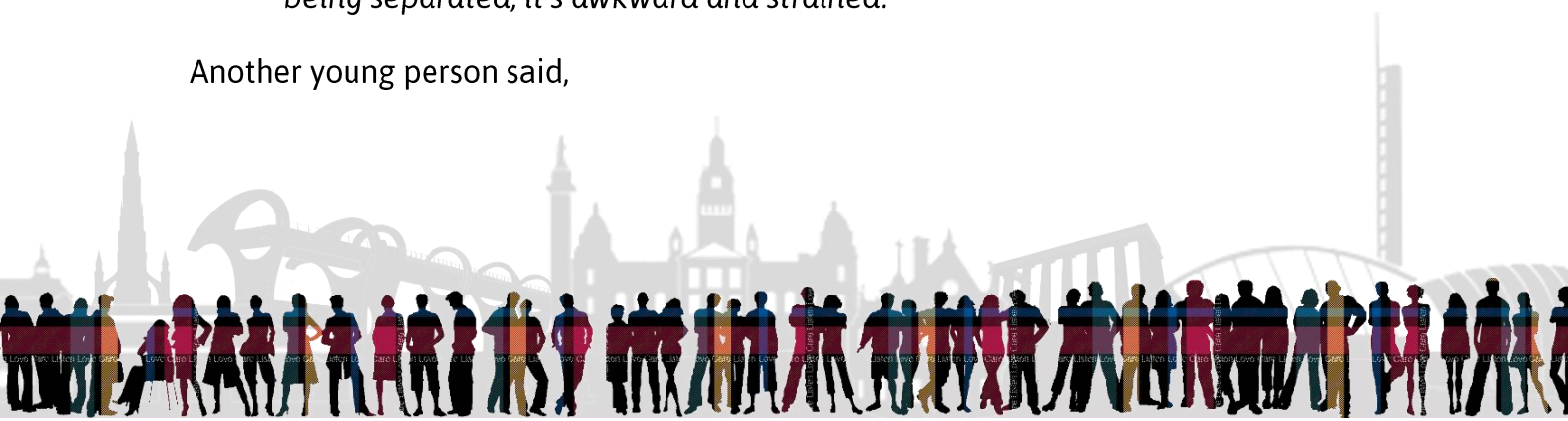
“When you’re brought into care, all your family has been ripped away. Your relationship with your siblings is your last shred of stability.”

THE IMPACT OF SEPARATION

From the group discussions, common themes emerged regarding the impact of sibling separation. It was agreed that separation made it difficult to maintain relationships. One young person said,

“I don’t have a strong bond with my sister because of the separation and now it’s hard to maintain a relationship with her. We used to be really close, but since being separated, it’s awkward and strained.”

Another young person said,





"...you enjoy spending time with people you have a relationship with. If you've gone years not seeing them, they've changed and you've changed, it's awkward."

Some young people expressed a clear sense of resentment at the "broken relationship". Others questioned why the relationship had broken down. On this theme, one young person said,

"These days I spend more time figuring out why I don't want to see [my siblings] than I do trying to see them."

The view that sibling separation negatively affected wellbeing was commonly shared, with some young people expressly connecting this experience with poor mental health:

*"I don't want to **live** with my brother – I parented him a lot and he needs to live his own life. But not seeing him has given me a lot of problems like depression."*

PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDES

Young people across the sub-groups agreed that professionals did not generally treat sibling contact as necessary. In their view, sibling contact was not given priority because it is not an issue of immediate safety.

One member of the group explained their view of the current approach:

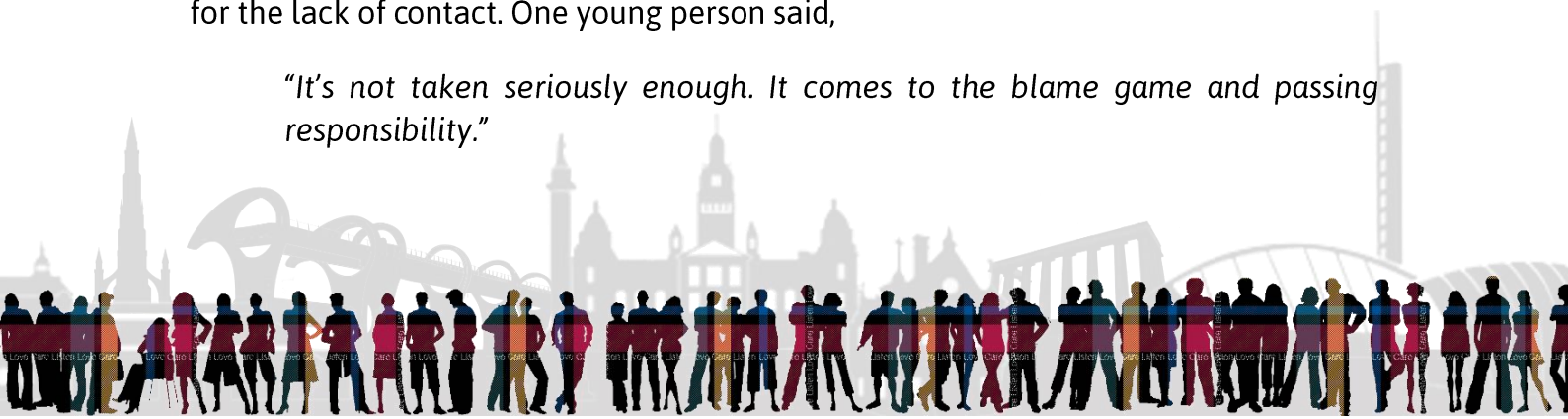
"It's crazy the way it works at the moment. If an older sibling has a few charges for weed or whatever then they don't get to see their younger siblings because they're considered a risk. That would never happen in a home."

One young person expressed their belief that when it comes to sibling contact "professionals don't care" and another young person went so far as to say that it "feels like they don't want you to see siblings".

However, others within the group agreed that it "depends what worker you have" with some professionals actively pushing for contact once they understood what the young person wanted.

There were many young people who felt that professionals were not taking enough personal responsibility for the issue and blaming one another or a lack of resources for the lack of contact. One young person said,

"It's not taken seriously enough. It comes to the blame game and passing responsibility."



Another young person said,

“Social work say that they don’t have enough people to organise more visits, and they don’t tell me the reasons I can’t see my other five siblings.”

WHAT SHOULD CHANGE

There were several different strands to this part of the discussion. It is important to note that whilst some young people feel that sibling contact should be mandatory – “a must” – others were clear this should be a choice, with one young person saying they did not want to see their sibling because contact was distressing as it reminded them of previous abuse they had experienced. As such, the key message from this strand of the discussion is that there should be suitable dialogue and support around sibling contact from the beginning of a young person’s care journey, with young people at the very heart of the process.

There was also general agreement that it was important to change expectations and attitudes around sibling separation and contact. Young people felt that it should be expected that siblings will stay together and there was a suggestion that information on sibling contact should be included in a welcome pack for every young person brought into care. In terms of the attitudes of professionals, there was a clear view that professionals should take the issue more seriously and focus on outcomes rather than processes. On this theme, one young person said,

“...don’t get caught up on risk assessments. When you’re talking about seeing siblings, the risks don’t outweigh the benefits!”

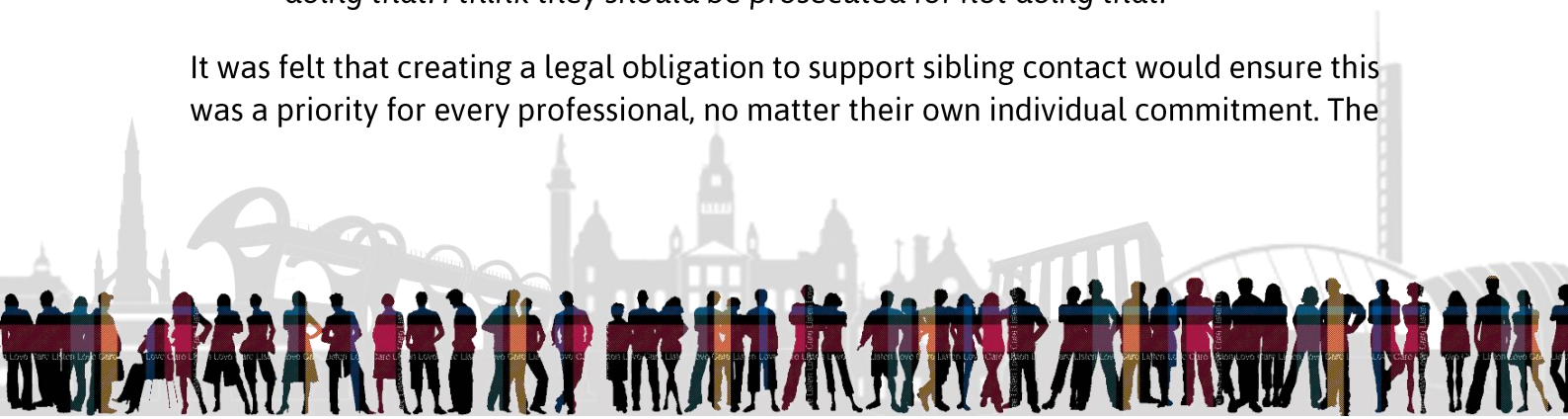
Another young person said,

“I don’t understand why you’d put in minimal effort though. You’re responsible for a child’s life. Would you let your own kids never see each other?”

Due to the perception of current professional attitudes to sibling separation and contact, the group were also keen to see changes on a more structural level. There was general agreement that the only way to bring about lasting change would be to change the law. One of the young people said:

“...[they] have a responsibility for your wellbeing and your mental health. If they’re not making sure you have contact with your siblings then they’re not doing that. I think they should be prosecuted for not doing that.”

It was felt that creating a legal obligation to support sibling contact would ensure this was a priority for every professional, no matter their own individual commitment. The





group were also clear that ensuring contact takes place should not be the young person's responsibility. As one member of the group put it,

"It shouldn't even have to come up at a hearing though...you should get contact without having to ask."

CONCLUSIONS

In line with the experiences of our advocates, the Young Radicals clearly identified the enormous difficulties that care experienced young people face when it comes to maintaining contact with their siblings. They described the way that separation weakens relationships over time and how this can eventually lead to broken relationships which are difficult or impossible to repair. They emphasised the importance of sibling relationships to care experienced young people in particular; often these relationships are a key part of a young person's sense of identity and stability. They made it clear that sibling separation can have a detrimental effect on wellbeing and mental health. And finally, a clear message came through that, as well as changes in terms of attitudes and practice, there ultimately needs to be a change to the law.

As such, as an organisation, Who Cares? Scotland believes the law needs to be changed to place a duty on local authorities to promote sibling contact between care experienced young people and their separated siblings. Such a law does exist when it comes to parental contact; section 17(1)(c) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 directs the local authority to "take such steps to promote, on a regular basis, personal relations and direct contact between the child and any person with parental responsibilities...".

Extending that duty to apply to contact with siblings, or introducing a new comparable duty in respect of sibling contact, should be relatively straightforward. Given the importance of these relationships, the adverse effect loss of those relationships can have on young people's health and wellbeing, and the clear human rights argument for maintaining sibling relationships, we believe this change should be treated as an urgent priority.

It is now over twenty years since the duty to promote contact with parents was set in statute. In that time, nothing similar has been done for siblings. As one of the Young Radicals said,

"The fact this is only being talked about now baffles me."

If you wish to discuss this report, please get in touch.

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