



The Minister's Discussion Group with Young People on Education for Children in Care

9 July 2012

A Children's Views Report

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1 INTRODUCTION

These notes set out the views of a group of children and young people in care and care leavers, who met with the Minister and the Children's Rights Director to discuss the education of children in care.

This meeting was one of a series of children's meetings which the Office of the Children's Rights Director organises to enable children to give their views on important policies directly to the Minister, Tim Loughton, who attends each meeting personally. Different children are being invited for discussions on different subjects, and these special meetings are being held every three months. We will put the notes of future meetings on this website as well.

As in all our children's views reports, we have included all the main points made by the children and young people, but we have not included any points that were made by adults at the meeting, including the Minister, the Children's Rights Director, or officials who were present.

The discussion group included 15 children and young people. Children's carers or staff were not in the room with the children during the meeting, so that the children and young people could speak freely.

These notes were taken by a member of the independent Office of the Children's Rights Director.

2 The children and young people's views on the questions discussed

2.1 What difference has being in care made to your education?

If you live with your parents, you don't concentrate much on your studies, and you take them less seriously. You take your studies more seriously if you are in care and want to do well and better yourself.

"Being in care, I stuck to education to get out of the cycle of my life."

One young person had been home tutored, others said that when they had to move placements, nobody had bothered to follow up their education. How well you did in your education could depend on the age at which you went into care. One young person told us their local authority was really good in supporting children in their care in their education.

2.2 Do you think you are doing as well as you can in your education?

We asked the children and young people to tell us by a show of hands how many thought they had done as well as they could in their education. The majority told us they thought they were doing as well as they could in their education

Those who told us they were not doing as well as they could gave their reasons. One young person said that being in school, they couldn't be bothered. Others told us that they thought that for them, being at home with parents makes it easier to stick to education as some social workers and local authorities are not good at supporting the education of their children in care. Not having stability in your life also made it difficult to do well in your education – to do well, children in care needed more stability.

Giving their experiences of higher education, we heard that there can be many barriers to getting to university, and that if come from London but you go to a university outside London you do not get much support.

We were also told that doing well in education depends very much on how much support and help you get from your own social network as well. Some got support from their school, friends and siblings. This spurred them into studying more.

2.3 Did you get taught to read well?

One young person said she is dyslexic. She had found it hard to learn and felt stupid being in a class where she was a minority of people who couldn't read properly. She had also found that if you weren't good at reading, you were given books to read that were for much younger children and you didn't like that and were put off reading. This became a major problem by the time you moved from primary to secondary school. There should be different classes and things to read for your age, according to your reading ability.

One young person advised that if you are struggling with reading, they should give you age specific stuff to read.

2.4 What help do you get to do well in your education?

We were told that this very much depends on how much you want to learn.

“I get help for myself because I am well motivated. You have to have courage to ask for help.”

It could also depend on how much support you had from your social worker. One young person said she did not get enough help in her own education - however, her brother had a good social worker and did well in education. It was also important that when your social worker changed, they passed on information about your education to your new social worker. Some were better at doing this than others.

Some had lots of support from foster parents, voluntary organisations and their youth club. There are people out there willing to help you and offering 1:1 weekly courses. There are lots of opportunities available, but you need to know what is available.

“I didn’t even get offered the help. I went to PEP’s not school. Found it hard to be in a room where everyone is smarter than me. My social worker is very bad.”

Many thought that Personal Education Plans are not effective. They are weakened when social workers and teachers come and go. This often leads to help only coming when it is too late. One young person told us that she had needed help with her education for a long time, but she only got some help when things were too late and a crisis had happened which nearly led to her being expelled from her 6th form.

We were told that the help a child in care gets with their education depends very much on where they are placed and the carers they are placed with. Children said that their carers have responsibility for them, and they make a huge difference to children’s education.

“My carer is lovely, tries to discuss things with me and talks about my education and which route I am going to take. It helps when they are around to speak to.”

2.5 Is there any other support you wish you had?

Members of the group told us about the difficulties of finding accommodation for the holidays when they were at university, since they had no home to return to.

“When in university in London I had nowhere to live during the holidays. They put me in a semi-independent place when I was already living in independent digs previously, this was a waste of time and a step backwards.”

One young man in the group told us that he has been disqualified from housing benefit. He and others told us that young people from care get better financial support while they are in further education colleges but that if they go on to university the financial support is limited if any at all is given. We heard that young people in care do not have information about what will happen to their benefits and what financial help they will get if they go on to university, and that this puts many off wanting to go there. One member of the group said that having heard of the experiences of others in the group she was now worried about whether her social worker had been right when she had assured her that everything would just be ‘fine’, without explaining or even knowing the details, and she was now going to go back to check this out in detail. There was a worry that social workers often do not know details of entitlements that young people need to know about.

“University was hard, I was broke all the time but then I was offered a scholarship and it enabled me to stay at university, otherwise I would have quit.”

We asked the group if they had heard about the higher education bursaries which the government has made an entitlement for young people from care going on to university. They had not heard of these, although some did know about the entitlement to a 16-19 bursary. Information about these government entitlements is not reaching young people in care, and more needs to be done to make young people aware of them. The overall view was that all social workers should make sure that all young people know of these entitlements.

“Shouldn’t our social workers know we are entitled to this and tell us?”

There is also a need for all benefits offices to know the details of entitlements for young people in care and care leavers, so that they are able to give correct advice.

There was a lot of uncertainty in the group about entitlements to benefits, and what happens to them if you go on to further or higher education. One young person had heard that if you are in full time education, you are entitled to help, but if you are in part time education you are not entitled to any help.

The group agreed that a guide to benefits and further and higher education for young people from care should be produced. They also agreed with the proposal from one member of the group that social workers should get regular updating training on entitlements for those from care, and on new government initiatives to help those in care and care leavers.

The group thought that Corporate Parent boards in local authorities need to look closely at how their authorities help those in their care, or leaving their care, in their education – and how they tell them what help and financial support is there for them. Having ‘corporate parents’ can be very different from having parents who will push for you and find things out for you. Corporate parents need to do what parents usually do for their children.

2.6 Is there a ‘Designated Teacher’ at school/college for children from care?

Most of the group had heard of designated teachers, but very few could say what they were or what they did.

“On my CICC, I was nominated to participate on designated teachers talking day...I hadn’t even heard of them before this.”

Most designated teachers are not visible to children in care in schools. Social workers need to tell children about them, and what they sorts of things a child can go to them about.

“The downside of this is that other pupils will be aware you are a child in care and you might be a victim of bullying because of this.”

The group told us that any help given in a school or college needs to be confidential, and not make a child or young person stand out as someone from care. Many do not want their friends at school knowing they are from care. Confidentiality about being from care is important. Designated teachers need to be there to help children, but not to make them stand out as coming from care.

2.7 When you last changed school because you changed placement, was that change a good thing or a bad thing for you?

Members of the group had different experiences on this. Some had a good change, others had found that changing schools disrupted their education.

Whether you have to change school depends on how far you have moved. If not too far you can stay in the same school. If having to travel back to that school each day though, funding might make a difference.

The timing of moves is also important to whether or not they disrupt education. Moves should not happen near exam time.

“It is not a good thing to change schools as you might be bullied.”

Some school moves are to a worse school, other moves can be good ones to a better school.

“I moved from a bad school to a good one. I then heard that my previous school was shut down.”

“I went from a posh school to a not so good one”.

2.8 Can you give the Minister one proposal for helping children from care do better in education in the future?

We asked each young person if they wanted to make one specific proposal to make to the Minister to help children from care to do better in their education in the future. Here is the complete list of their proposals.

- Teachers should keep confidential information to themselves.

- There should be a lot more support given from designated teachers.
- If a young person is happy at school, do not move them.
- Have a good place to stay during holidays whilst at university.
- Foster parents should push you all the time to achieve your best.
- Regular training / annual training should be given to social workers in order to update them regularly with correct information.
- More financial assistance in higher education.
- Looked after children need to know that designated teachers are there for them and be aware of what bursaries they are entitled to.
- Look into why there is better support for college as opposed to university for care leavers.
- More designated teachers.
- If you don't have a family you should not be discriminated against when applying to university.
- Information about support for young people from care in education should be passed on to social workers, schools and careers teachers and advisers.

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