



Living in an out of area placement

A Children's Views Report

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Introduction

This consultation was carried out urgently to invite the views of children on the issues they face when living in 'out of authority placements'. This piece of work is part of a wider review of children's homes being carried out by the Department for Education.

The consultation was carried out by the Children's Rights Director for England and his team. The Children's Rights Director has the job in law of finding out the views of children and young people. The Office of the Children's Rights Director is hosted by Ofsted, but works independently and this report of views is made independently of Ofsted, and does not necessarily represent the views of Ofsted.

We invited a group of children to join us at the Department for Education offices in London on 6th September 2012 to discuss these issues. This report details the views of twelve young people who attended the meeting. Eight of the young people were in placements out of the borough, county or city where their social care service is based, and were in some cases a long way from there. Two young people, sisters, had been told they were moving to an 'out of area' placement and the final two children were placed in their own borough but had only just arrived in that area when they were taken into care. Therefore, although living in the same area as their parents, they had

just experienced a move, were living away from friends and had also experienced a change of school.

As always, we put questions to the children, and asked their views, as neutrally and independently as possible. We did not know their views and opinions beforehand, and we have reported all their views in this report. We have not added our own views or comments, and we have not left out any views that we, the government or its advisors might disagree with, so this report is as purely as we can make it the views of the children and young people themselves.

Young people's views on living in an out of area placement

The discussion started with the question **what are the good things and bad things about living in an out of area placement?**

The young people in the group gave two examples of the 'bad things' about these placements. The first was that young people don't see as much of their families and the second was that when you first move a long way from home you don't know anyone in the 'new' area, and that makes you feel even lonelier.

"You can't see your family as much, or it can take them ages to get there", one young person said.

Keeping in contact with friends, as well as family, was seen as important;

"You lose contact with friends and that's sad when you move out of Borough"

Lack of financial support to family, particular around travelling costs, was raised by two young people in the group. One young person's mother had asked for help with petrol costs and this had been refused, and the other talked of her sister's request for help with purchasing a train ticket being turned down.

Not everyone in the group had direct experience of living in out of area placements. Of the eight who were living in such placements, six thought being placed away from their home area wasn't a bad thing and that it had actually been a very positive move for them.

"It keeps you out of trouble with the police", one young person said,

Another young person said that her life was generally better and a number of others agreed with this experience.

"It gave me a better life. I was always getting into trouble, which stopped when I moved"

Another member of the group didn't agree with this. His experience was that he used to get in trouble in his home area and this continued when he moved. In his view;

"I started getting in trouble so they moved me, but that didn't stop it. If you get in trouble at home you'll get in trouble anywhere"

How are placements out of your home area different from placements in your home area?

The general consensus of opinion from the group was that this really did depend on the quality of your carer or care staff. Placements in and out of area could be good or bad, depending on who was caring for you.

What were the reasons for you being placed out of area?

Three reasons were given by the eight young people living out of their home area:

- Mixing with the wrong people
- Absconding from previous placements, or
- Getting into trouble with the police.

Two of the eight were not able to give us reasons for being placed out of area.

Six of this group of eight felt that the decision to move them away from their home area was the right one; two felt it wasn't right, although one of these young people said it had helped.

None of the young people had a say in the placement choice.

"I had no choice about moving. I did talk to people and I told them about the negative things, but no one did anything about it"

One said that placements in their home area should always be considered first. The young people gave us some reasons that might justify a placement out of area. They were:

- If a young person is absconding from their current placement a lot
- If a young person is getting into a lot of trouble with the police.
- If a young person was mixing with 'the wrong sort of people' and that couldn't be stopped any other way

However, the young people also added a proviso that even if there are reasons to consider a placement out of area, the following points must be considered:

- How much impact will the move have on the young person's education,
- How close are they to their family and what impact will being parted from them have,
- How well contact arrangements can be managed, and

- Whether the young person agrees with the move. If they don't, consider what the risks are of them running from the placement. This is particularly important if the placement is a very long way from the home area.
- How old the child is – the younger they are the harder it is because they may not understand what's going on and might be more dependent on their family.

We asked the group to indicate if they were happy to stay in their out of area placement or whether they wanted to move back, closer to their 'home area'. Of the eight in such placements, two said they wanted to go back, six said they were happy to stay.

"They're trying to move me back because they can't afford to keep me there. They've tried 6 or 7 times now but I'm fighting it, because it's not what I want"

"My social worker wants to move me, but I wouldn't be safe going back, she just doesn't listen"

Support from social care services

The next set of questions we asked focused on the support young people receive while in out of area placements, in particular from social workers and independent reviewing officers (IRO's).

The amount of contact young people had with their social worker varied throughout the group. Some saw their social workers on a weekly basis, some monthly or every 3 months, however, some said they never saw their social worker at all. The main reason for this completely lack of contact was a breakdown in the relationship between the young person and the worker. One young person also mentioned that she didn't have an allocated worker. She had been told her social worker had left and despite several phone calls to her social care service, she hadn't been able to establish what was happening or whether a replacement worker was being allocated.

The lack of contact related to visits as well as telephone contact. Trying to contact them at their offices was difficult for the young people who said they were frustrated when their phone calls didn't get returned.

Another complaint that was raised about social workers was their inability to make decisions.

"They don't make decisions, they always have to ask someone else and that just slows things down"

One young person felt that the problems she had with her social worker would have existed wherever she was living:

"Sometimes they are just bad, the distance between you isn't the real issue, it's what they're not doing for you"

We also asked about involvement of the young people's IRO's. We asked how many in the group knew who their IRO was. Eight said they did and four said they didn't. The majority of the young people said that they didn't see much of their IRO's, generally only at their reviews. One example of an IRO not being at a review was given, and that the IRO wasn't someone that they would contact if things were going wrong.

"Nothing I say at reviews happens. I've asked for a change of social worker but that hasn't happened"

"I've told them about my Mum not being able to pay for her petrol and so she can't come and see me, but it doesn't help"

However, one young person said that their IRO was 'fantastic' and was there for her whenever she needed her.

We asked what they would like to see change. The young people said that they would like the IRO to see them more and have more contact with them.

Since we weren't hearing many examples of positive support to these young people, we asked them what makes these placements work?

- Teachers and the help they give
- Staff in the home [children's home], or your carers
- Advocates
- Sometimes the other young people you live with, but that depends on their age and their experiences. "Sometimes the younger ones can be a pain".

A case of making one's own decisions

One young person described how he has arranged, on his own, a placement at a college. The college is situated close to his 'home area'. He now only stays at his placement one evening a week. The rest of the time is spent with his mother or other places.

"Because I'm only there one day a week they are saying I'm not engaging with the placement. They've said they won't give me any pocket money – but they are still paying of a placement I'm not using. Where's the sense in that?"

Following on from hearing this story several members of the group said:

"Let us make the decisions ourselves and not the social workers. Trust us to do it"