



Handle with Care

An investigation into the care system

HARRIET SERGEANT

CENTRE FOR YOUNG POLICY STUDIES

57 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL

2006

THE AUTHOR

HARRIET SERGEANT is the author of three widely-acclaimed and influential reports: *Welcome to the Asylum: immigration and asylum in the UK* (Centre for Policy Studies, 2001); *No System to Abuse: immigration and health care in the UK* (CPS 2003); and *Managing not to Manage* (CPS, 2003). She has also written three books: *Between the Lines: Conversations in South Africa* describes the effect of apartheid on some of its Indian, coloured, black and Afrikaaner inhabitants in the early 1980s. *Shanghai* is a history of the world's most international city between 1927 and 1939. *The Old Sow in the Back Room* recounts her experiences of Tokyo where she lived for seven years.

*Support towards research for this Study
was given by the Institute for Policy Research.*

The aim of the Centre for Policy Studies is to develop and promote policies that provide freedom and encouragement for individuals to pursue the aspirations they have for themselves and their families, within the security and obligations of a stable and law-abiding nation. The views expressed in our publications are, however, the sole responsibility of the authors. Contributions are chosen for their value in informing public debate and should not be taken as representing a corporate view of the CPS or of its Directors. The CPS values its independence and does not carry on activities with the intention of affecting public support for any registered political party or for candidates at election, or to influence voters in a referendum.

ISBN No. 1 905 389 35 3

© Centre for Policy Studies, September 2006

Printed by 4 Print, 138 Molesey Avenue, Surrey

CONTENTS

Preface

1. Introduction	1
2. Foster Care	10
3. Care Homes	34
4. Education	53
5. Leaving Care	74
6. Accommodation	85
7. Social Workers	101
8. Lost	114
9. Conclusions	122

Appendix: Children of asylum seekers

PREFACE

THIS REPORT takes a look at young people in care and what happens when they leave care. It is an attempt to look at the whole system and its aftermath through the experiences of the professionals working for it and the young people going through it. It does not try to cover why they are there to begin with. It is based on extensive interviews and research over a year.

I was fortunate to have the co-operation of people involved in nearly every aspect of the system from the state as well as the independent and the voluntary sector. I interviewed, amongst others, local councillors, social worker managers, social workers, housing officers, community resettlement workers, independent educational consultants, child psychologists, prison psychologists, prison staff, military recruitment personal, the directors and staff of a number of charities, academics, independent advocates, independent fostering providers, foster parents and, of course, the young people themselves. I visited two Children's Homes and took part in an outward-bound course. Obviously I have changed everyone's name when they asked. Their stories reflect the harrowing nature of their lives.

I also tracked down many who have left care. The failure of the care system means a high proportion of its graduates are prostitutes, drug addicts, homeless, criminals and, in the case of one young man with whom I went roller disco dancing, on the run from the police. Nonetheless they held strong views on how a child

HANDLE WITH CARE

should be brought up. They pointed out the weaknesses of the present system and offered ideas for improvements. No one, they explained, ever asked for their views. Their perceptiveness, enthusiasm and compassion brought home to me the crime we commit in wasting their lives.

Harriet Sergeant
September 2006

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

THIS YEAR approximately 6,000 young people will emerge from the care of the state. What is their future?

Of these 6,000, 4,500 of them will leave with no educational qualifications whatsoever. Within two years of leaving care 3,000 will be unemployed, 2,100 will be mothers or pregnant and 1,200 will be homeless. Out of the 6,000 just 60 will make it to university. Care is failing on a scale that is catastrophic.

It is not just a tragedy for the individual. A successful system of care would transform this country. At a stroke, it would empty a third of our prisons and shift half of all prisoners under the age of 25 out of the criminal justice system. It would halve the number of prostitutes, reduce by between a third and a half the number of homeless and remove 80% of *Big Issue* sellers from our street corners. Not only is our system failing the young people in care, it is failing society and perpetuating an underclass.

The size of the problem is all the more astonishing considering the small numbers of children involved. In the year ending 31 March 2005, 60,900 children were in care – the majority with foster parents or in Children’s Homes. The Government spends £2.5 billion looking after these children – the equivalent of over £40,000 on each child. In 2000 it passed the Children (Leaving Care) Act, appointed a Children’s Commissioner and ring-fenced £885 million to implement the new reforms. It is about to publish a Green Paper which will no doubt contain many new schemes. As

HANDLE WITH CARE

Susanna Cheal, Chief Executive of the Who Cares? Trust, the national charity for children in residential or foster care, put it, the Government's heart 'is in the right place.' So what is going wrong?

The children themselves are certainly not to blame. The majority of children are taken into care because of abuse or neglect (62%), family dysfunction (10%), or absent parents (8%). Only 3% are taken in for socially unacceptable behaviour.¹

The state makes a rotten parent. Looked after children are ten times more likely to be excluded from school than other children,² and only 11% get five good GCSEs compared to 56% of children from stable backgrounds. 20% were unemployed the September after leaving school compared to 6% of all school leavers. They are four times more likely to suffer from mental problems and three times more likely to have been cautioned or convicted for an offence.³

Even basics like dental checks and bedtime stories get overlooked. 18% of children in care in 2005 had not had a dental check. 20% had failed to have an annual health assessment while the immunisations of 23.5% were not up to date.⁴ No resident of a Care Home recalled being read a bedtime story. 'Bedtime stories!' said a homeless young man incredulously, 'The staff locked us in our rooms at night and left us to get on with it. I was lucky not to be raped!'

So why is this happening? The Government's best efforts have failed to address the three paradoxes at the heart of our care system.

¹ DFES, *Outcome Indicators for Looked after Children: twelve months to 30 September 2005*, 2006.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

INTRODUCTION

Failure is cheap, success a financial burden

The first paradox is that the failure of the care system is a long-term cost borne by us all. But the actual cost of the care system is short term and borne by local authorities.

For them it is a very high cost, one that according to the Local Government Association is increasing by about 10% a year.⁵ An annual survey of the 150 directors of Social Services in England in 2004 noted that the 'overspending' in 2003/04 was 'almost entirely attributable to children's services.' 74% of authorities 'reported overspending on these services'.⁶

New initiatives from the Government increase the burden. The 14% of local authorities who bothered to look into it discovered that the 2004 Children Act costs an average of £832,000 a year to implement. However the Government is not matching new demands with funding. In 2004 the gap between what councils spent and what they received from central Government increased to £708 million. As one care manager put it, 'We are expected to achieve more and more on less and less.'

The strategies of many local authorities to do just that accounts for much of what is wrong in the care system. The cost of the wasted lives this creates is huge. But it does not appear on the balance sheet of the local authorities. What a former Care Leaver is doing by the age of 25 or 30 is not a Government target.

The system dictates that the earlier a young person fails, the sooner they cease to be a cost to their local authority. It is better for the local authority's budget to have a young person go to prison, for example, rather than to university. Prison is paid for by the Home Office, university by the local authority. In the topsy-turvy world of care, failure is cheap, success a financial burden.

⁵ Local Government Association, *The facts – looking after vulnerable children*, 2005.

⁶ Local Government Association, *Social service finance 2004/05*, 2005.

HANDLE WITH CARE

‘We need objective, scientific social mapping’

The second paradox of the care system is that while the amount of money flowing through the system is ‘off the scale,’ as the head of one children’s charity put it, no one knows the best way to spend it. No one, not the Government, not local authorities or Social Services, knows what works.

What did a particular Children’s Home, drop-in centre or new initiative achieve? What makes a child more resilient? What turns a child into a productive and happy member of society by the age of 30? What made the difference between a university degree and a life on the streets? No one has discovered. The Government does not track young people once they leave care.

Young people in care have the right to expect that the professionals who intervene in their lives do so on a basis of knowledge. But, as Mike Stein, one of the leading academics in the area, wrote, ‘the majority of interventions in social care are not evaluated before they are introduced.’ Much of the work done with children is, therefore, ‘an uncontrolled experiment.’ This was written almost ten years ago but is still true today.⁷

In a debate in the House of Lords, Lord Dearing complained that when he looked for ‘detailed, authoritative research’ about foster carers, ‘I did not find it’. He went on, ‘If there is to be a sound basis for Government policy, there must be an evidential research base for it.’⁸

The head of one Children’s Home admitted he had no idea if his outward-bound programme did any good. This is despite charging local councils £4,000 a week per child. He was not given the resources to follow up former pupils and local authorities never got back to him. He did not have a clue how many of his young people went on to re-offend. He said, ‘We would like to know.’

⁷ M Stein, *What Works in Leaving Care?* Barnardo’s, 1997.

⁸ Hansard, 9 February 2005.

INTRODUCTION

Local authorities, despite spending these large sums of money, did not base their choice on the long-term outcome. As the head of one Social Service department said, 'By then the kids have disrupted so many places. It's more a case of who will take them.' A Social Services manager explained, 'They are only holding places,' – keeping the child safe until it is no longer the council's responsibility. John Bird, founder of the *Big Issue*, is clear what should be happening, 'We need objective, scientific social mapping. We have to turn intervention into a science.'

'I was fucked over by my Mum and Dad. Then fucked over by Social Services. I don't know which was worse'

The third paradox of the care system is summed up by one young man from a gangland family, 'I was fucked over by my Mum and Dad. Then fucked over by Social Services. I don't know which was worse.'

The hardest children to help are those who have been severely maltreated in their early years. How we are loved and cared for dictates the kind of people we become. Sue Gerhardt, in her book *Why Love Matters*, blames the hormone cortisol which floods the brain of a baby exposed too often or too long to stressful situations.⁹ From then on it will either over- or under-produce cortisol whenever the child is exposed to stress. Too much is linked to depression and fearfulness; too little to emotional detachment and aggression. Study after study emphasises the importance for these children of forming emotional bonds with adults. But attachment or 'stickability', as one social worker called it, is in scarce supply in the care system.

The care system should provide these children with continuity and stability. In reality, too often it mirrors violent and chaotic home lives and reinforces distrust of adults. Many young people I

⁹ S Gerhardt, *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain*, Routledge, 2004.

HANDLE WITH CARE

interviewed had lost count of the number of times they had arrived at a new foster carer or Children's Home, clutching their belongings in a plastic bin bag. As one 14-year-old girl who had been through 30 placements remarked, 'you feel like a bit of rubbish yourself who no one wants.' They had also ceased to count the turnover of social workers in their lives. Another girl explained, 'They come and go and never say goodbye – just like my Mum really.'

Even those settled and happy with their social worker and foster carer are forced to leave both in their teens. Nearly half of all young people leave care at just 16 or 17 compared to those from a stable background who tend to leave the family home in their mid-twenties. The break for the Care Leaver is dramatic. 'I was told I could not contact my foster mother,' said one, 'it was over.' These young people are then forced to undergo 'compressed and accelerated transitions to adulthood.'¹⁰ We expect the most in survival skills from those least capable.

Professionals in the care system emphasise the importance of the 'attachment theory' while themselves practising emotional detachment. All but two of the social workers and care home staff that I interviewed had no idea what happened to the young people in their charge once they moved on. It had not occurred to them to keep in touch.

'Shit always happens because shit's been done us'

The young people interviewed for this report only wanted what their contemporaries take for granted. One teenage girl described her dream. She saw herself coming back from school. 'Mum would be in the kitchen cooking dinner with the washing machine going. I would get a drink from the fridge and go into the front room to watch TV.' Its very banality is a rebuke. Her mother is a drug addict who told her child on her thirteenth birthday, 'Go out and sell your snatch. I am not feeding you anymore.'

¹⁰ Mike Stein, op. cit.

INTRODUCTION

Young people are taken into care because of what is done to them at a young age by adults. As they move through the care system, it is easy to focus on the problems their behaviour causes – not on why they are behaving like that in the first place. By the time they go to prison or end up on the streets, the reason why they entered care has long been forgotten by the professionals – although not, of course, by the young person.

A two year study of young people who had left care found the vast majority, 87% of the group, had suffered sexual or physical abuse. This had started under the age of ten. For some, sexual abuse was their earliest memory. Instead of love and security, home represented danger. Their emotions ranged from hate, fear, disgust and confusion to feeling worthless, unwanted, lonely, scared and distraught. One said, ‘I used to think, “Why does he hate me so much?” I felt so lonely and confused. I only did what the others did and I would get battered and he would laugh at them. I never knew where I stood. I was very frightened of him and he knew it.’¹¹ Another recalled, ‘My Dad used to hit me really, really hard when I was little and as I got older it got worse. He would batter me, get me up against a wall and really lay into me. He would always aim for my head, slapping, hitting and punching. Then I got a step-dad and he started to do the same.’¹²

One young man in his twenties now a criminal and crack addict cut down his mother’s dead body when he found her hanging in the kitchen, ‘That’s why I do crack. It takes the problems away for a couple of hours. But at the end of the day, problems don’t go away. You know what I mean? At the end of the day the past always come back to us. You can’t get away. The past is in us.’ Early abuse clearly affects their behaviour. One said, ‘I get so angry now I frighten myself... I feel I have to fight everyone to

¹¹ R Broad, *Improving the health and well being of young people leaving care*, Russell House Publishing 2005.

¹² *Ibid.*

HANDLE WITH CARE

prove myself. I am very violent and aggressive towards everyone. I am angry that nothing happened to him. He got off with it.' Or as another about to appear in court for GBH who, at the age of four, witnessed the attempted murder of his mother said, 'Shit always happens because shit's been done us.'

Four of the young men interviewed for this report were so starved and abused as children that it stunted their growth. One 19-year-old could easily pass as a 12-year-old, a 13-year-old as a child of seven. The only other place I have seen something similar was in Cambodia after the fall of the Pol Pot regime. Entering into the world of care is to enter a foreign country.

The Government wants an end to child poverty and social exclusion. Instead of flying to Africa, Gordon Brown might do worse than start on his own doorstep. For the children this Government needs to reach are already in their care. A successful care system would transform this country and go a long way to tackling child poverty and social exclusion. 'It's no good talking about ending child poverty,' said Felicity Collier of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), 'when the Government itself is creating the parents of tomorrow's poorest children.'

The Government insists it is not just children in care who suffer. There are other children, 'equally at risk of poor outcomes,' said Lord Filkin, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, 'we should not just focus... on those who happen to be in care at a particular time.'¹³

This is to miss the point. The state removes young people from their parents and makes itself responsible. Unlike children from disadvantaged backgrounds, it has complete control, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It should be a unique opportunity to transform these children's lives. Instead, vast sums of money are being spent on a system that contains rather than cares or

¹³ Hansard, 9 February 2005.

INTRODUCTION

protects. 'It gets kids out of sight and out of mind,' said a director of a children's charity. That is until they fetch up in our prisons, drug addiction centres and psychiatric wards, or as the parents of the next generation of children in care.

Many strong-willed and talented individuals survive the care system. Many local authorities, new initiatives and social workers make a real difference to the lives of young people. However the figures speak for themselves. Why, despite generous funding and good intentions, does the care system fail so badly?

CHAPTER TWO

FOSTER CARE

One woman recalled her experience of fostering. She had taken two boys aged 9 and 10, 'a bit of a handful' but they settled down well. After two years, Social Services decided to transfer them to a local authority carer because it was cheaper. By this point the boys were doing well at school and 'like brothers' to each other. She went on, 'The children did not want to go and I didn't want them to leave me. They were split from me, split from each other and split from their school.' Not surprisingly the new placements soon broke down.

The boys were now moved continually because of their behaviour. One had always had 'a thing' about the opposite sex. As a child he had kicked little girls. He had nonetheless been, the woman recalled, 'a most loving little boy, permanently asking for a cuddle and never violent towards me.' But at 16 he broke a girl's arm. He returned to his carer to tell her he was being put into a secure unit. She recalled, 'He had been such a sweet little boy but now his face was set and he looked hard and bitter.' She said to him, 'What happened to you? You are a different person!' She said, 'He's completely destroyed. If he had stayed with me he would have been OK.'

FOSTER CARE

FOSTER CARE can give a young person from a troubled background stability and the chance to enjoy a normal family. The impact of a good foster parent and their unconditional love is incalculable. 'One strongly principled person in your life makes a huge difference,' said a retired social worker. 'What carers put in today,' said a Social Services director, 'will not bear fruit until five or ten years down the line' – sometimes even longer.

Violet is in her forties and a sex worker. Abandoned by her prostitute mother on birth for being mixed race, Violet was discovered two days later covered in rat bites. She was placed with a family until the age of nine when her foster mother died. Her elder foster sister wanted to keep her but a social worker insisted on sending Violet to a series of homes. 'No one ever asked why I ran away.' Now, energetic and funny in a red turban and hoop earrings, she explained, 'I try not to be a nasty person that's thanks to my foster mother. She taught me things that carried me through. She showed me the really good things in this world.'

The majority – 68% – of children in care live with foster parents. Foster carers provide placements varying from a few months to several years. Short-term placements are needed for emergencies and during the assessment or preparation stages for long-term care. Foster care also provides long-term placement for adolescents who are unable to be or do not wish to be adopted.

'A toothless Scottish chick on drugs with an extra bed'

Foster care is cheaper than care in an institution and is meant to be much better for the child. However the majority of children in the failing care system are in foster care. So what is going wrong?

A major problem is the lack of good foster carers. The British Adoption and Fostering charity (BAAF) estimates that there is a shortage of 10,000 foster carers. This has a huge impact on the foster care system.

In the past, fostering was viewed as a voluntary activity. Many families still receive only out-of-pocket expenses. There exists no

HANDLE WITH CARE

standard payment to foster carers from local authorities. The Fostering Network publishes recommended minimum allowances which it updates annually. However half of all local authorities pay their foster parents less than the recommended rate. Payment ranges from £200 a week to as little as £50. In a recent survey, six out of 10 foster carers said their allowances failed to cover their expenses. Compare this to the £1,800 per week and more it costs a local authority to keep a child in a Care Home.¹⁴ At the same time, the closure of Children's Homes and the shift to putting more children in foster care, puts pressure on foster carers to take on more difficult children – often with no training and little support from social workers.

The shortage of foster carers means a lack of choice for the local authority – choice is available in only around 30% of cases.¹⁵ It also means that local authorities are reluctant to stop using bad ones. It leads to children living many miles from friends, family and school. It puts pressure on local authorities to recruit and retain unsuitable carers such as 'a toothless Scottish chick on drugs with an extra bed,' as one was described by her neighbour in Streatham. A 14-year-old girl in a Children's Home who had been through 26 different placements since the age of eight said, 'They should take more care when they pick foster carers. They just grab anyone off the streets. "Come in here and be a foster carer," they say. They shouldn't do it like that.'

A 15-year-old boy who plans to join the Army explained what happened when he complained about his foster family. The couple were fostering three children, 'getting money and not giving it to us.' It went instead on decking in the garden and a caravan. If a child left a bit of food at breakfast, 'we got nothing for the rest of the day.' The young man lost a stone in weight. They were 'just evil.' Other children had complained about the

¹⁴ Hansard, 9 February 2005.

¹⁵ Societyguardian, *Working with children*, 2006.

FOSTER CARE

couple to Social Services but, 'the bottom line was, I put in evidence. No one else got evidence. Everything I said I always had something to back it up.'

In the end he had to go to the NSPCC because Social Services refused to do anything. He re-enacted for me his conversation with his social worker. 'It's fucking right what I tell you and you must fucking do something about it. I can't be doing with this. You are saying nice things about this couple. You haven't lived here. I have.' In a new foster home, for all his bravado he admitted he was 'terrified' to go to school and bumping into the couple who lived just around the corner.

A social service manager explained the dilemma, 'We don't support foster carers. We put children into a placement knowing it's not right for the carers or the child. But we have not got anywhere else. We set them up for failure. But what else can we do with that child?' The Fostering Network believes the Government must spend £748 million to solve the recruitment and retention crises.¹⁶

A shortage of trained and qualified staff to support the child and foster carer is another barrier to successful fostering. The latest Government review of the social care workforce highlighted serious staff shortages with 75% of councils reporting recruitment difficulties.¹⁷ The average vacancy rates for children's social workers are around 12% with similar rates for residential care managers and staff. However, vacancy rates vary from place to place. In London, for example, they range from 8% to 39% with turnover rates of between 8% and 24% a year. In some local authorities, up to half of social workers are temporary agency staff.¹⁸

At a council meeting, Andrew Christie, Children's Trust Director for Hammersmith and Fulham admitted the turnover of

¹⁶ Societyguardian, *Working with children*, 2006.

¹⁷ *The Guardian*, 18 May 2005.

¹⁸ Societyguardian, *Working with children*, 2006.

HANDLE WITH CARE

staff 'led to a loss of focus.' It also contributed to the young people's complaints that social workers were not getting back to them or spending enough time with them.

This was a common complaint amongst young people in foster care. Many blamed placement breakdowns on the fact social workers did not listen to them. One crack addict in his twenties said, 'They see us all bad, all disturbed and just move us on. If I was a social worker I would talk to the kids. I would find out their problems.' A retired social worker said, 'They look at the immediate behaviour and label that young person. Rather than discover what is causing that behaviour, they just move the kids. It's a disaster.'

One advocate explained that social workers, buried under case-loads, dared not listen: 'They are frightened it will open a can of worms which they would have to deal with.' Foster carers and young people complained they did not see a social worker for months. 'They turn up just before the annual review,' one remarked.

This lack of support from social workers is crucial. Typically when a young person first arrives at a new foster carer, all goes well. The young person feels secure, relaxes and it is often then that their emotional problems surface as they test their foster parent's commitment. The first step, 'in the journey back to attachment' as Camila Batmanghelidjh, a psychotherapist and founder of the charity, Kids Company, put it, is to 'kick against the relationship.' To the untrained foster carer, this sudden explosion of bad behaviour is inexplicable. They give up just as the child turns to them. In a survey conducted by Voice for the Child in Care, children asked foster carers to be trained on 'working through problems' with young people, 'not just moving us when things get difficult. Of course they're gonna get difficult, we've had shit things happen.'

Mickey and Glen, two gay foster fathers, described what happened when they took in a difficult child with no training or

FOSTER CARE

support. They told Social Services they were prepared to take any child – except one that had been sexually abused.

The social worker telephoned, 'We have a dear little boy of six called Will for you who needs fostering until he's adopted. He's been in school.' This proved to be, as Mickey remarked bitterly, 'all lies.' The social worker arrived with the child who immediately threw himself on the floor and began to masturbate 'violently'. The social worker looked 'really surprised' and 'left us to him.'

Will's mother was a drug addict and he was born dependent on heroin. In the first year of his life he had ten different placements. At aged two he was finally moved to foster parents where he was sexually abused. His social worker had gone on long-term sick leave. Social Services forgot about Will for four years.

Far from 'the dear little boy,' Will had severe 'attachment issues' and, as the social worker put it, 'ending difficulties.' 'What do you mean ending difficulties?' demanded Mickey. Will had attached himself to his social worker. When she left, he became violent. He woke Mickey and Glen at night by punching them or smearing excrement on the bedroom wall. He associated masturbation with affection and demanded Mickey or Glen masturbate him or let him masturbate them. 'That was particularly difficult for two gay foster Dads. It could have been quite dangerous for us.' When Mickey and Glen refused, he threw tantrums and vomited. As Mickey remarked, 'We did feel quite set up.'

The two men sought help for themselves and the little boy. First they tried Will's social worker. 'Are his advances turning you both on?' she asked. 'That was all the support and training we got from Social Services,' said Mickey bitterly. He went on, 'It had a huge effect on our health and our relationship. Social Services rely on you getting attached to these children. But no way would we have ever given up this child up. Six years on we can honestly say he has brought enormous joy to our lives. We are very proud of his progress. Despite everything he has done well at school and we hope he will go to university.'

HANDLE WITH CARE

Mickey and Glen are exceptional. Most foster carers do give up and the child is moved on. The breakdown of placements is crucial for the failure of the foster care system. Research has shown that children who move three or more times once a care order is made, are unlikely to do well at school or later on.¹⁹

The Government has set two targets to encourage local authorities to keep young people in one place. No more than 16% of children who are looked after should have three or more placements in a year. In March 2004, the national average fell to 13%. There is, however, a wide variation between local authorities – from 2% of the fortunate children in Medway towns to 21% of the less fortunate in Northamptonshire and Wokingham.

The second target is long-term stability. Local authorities must measure the percentage of children who have been in care for four years and have spent two years or more with the same carer. In 2003-04 this was true for nearly half of children. Again it varied between local authorities from only 29% in North Tyneside to 64% in Redcar and Cleveland.²⁰

Even if children in care moved no more than twice a year – less than the Government's target – this would still mean over five years, ten changes of accommodation, ten different families or ten different placements in Care Homes or secure units. Compare this to children from a stable background. In a recent NOP poll commissioned by Barnardo's, 58% of the families surveyed had never moved home in the lifetime of their child. Only 8% had moved home twice or more.²¹

Most people find moving house stressful enough. But at least they take their possessions and their family with them. Children in care are often moved at short notice, with a few clothes in a bin bag, leaving behind the people and surroundings they know, their

¹⁹ Societyguardian, *Working with children*, 2006.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Barnardo's, *Failed by The System*, 2006.

FOSTER CARE

pets, their friends and usually their school. Often they do not know where they are going. They arrive in a new area to live with strangers. This would be a catastrophe for anyone to deal with once in a life-time – as any refugee will testify. Yet we expect children in care to do this on a regular basis.

It is no wonder that so many of the adolescents I met suffered from a sense of dislocation. One girl from Brixton said: 'There is nothing worse than sitting on your bed in a new room for the first time. Everything smells different. You know you have to get up and walk down those stairs.' A sex worker in King's Cross recalled: 'It was like I went to sleep in one bed and woke up in a different country. Everything was upside down and inside out. I just sat on my bed and wept.' A 16-year old from Brent remarked: 'It's kind of hard when you move from place to place and people expect you to know what to do, how to do it because everyone does it differently, you know, and they just think you are badly behaved but you're not.'

A former inmate with a history of violence remarked sadly, 'They don't like you in one place. I don't know why. Two months, all going nice, you happy, you trust your social worker and then it's just up and go. If you stay in a community, grow up in one place you would turn out a nice chap, you get me, 'cos you would get that love.' A former Care Leaver now in his thirties with a job and family, nonetheless sits on the stairs and weeps whenever they go on holiday. It reminds him of all the places he had to leave.

It is not only a lack of social workers and foster carers that leads to continual moves but a lack of planning in the first place. A social service director explained that an emergency in the family forces 'us to find an alternative now. We need to move the child out of the area and keep it safe and we need somewhere in the next few hours.' This, he admitted, often led to 'multiple place syndrome.' However one retired social worker put it down to poorly-trained social workers unable to plan ahead, 'No child should be left on the town hall steps at 5pm on a Friday. We know the families. We know the kids at risk. Why don't we plan in advance?'

HANDLE WITH CARE

Robert Tapsfield, chief executive of the Fostering Network said, 'Too often there isn't a strong enough initial plan and it creates huge disruption.'²² A director of children's services admitted that some cases may have been 'deliberated for too long' before a child was removed from their family. Other times children had been moved back to their family 'too optimistically.' Social workers were naturally keen to keep families together but 'a decision about long-term care needed to be reached earlier in the process'.²³

Good care comes at a cost

Another reason for the failure of foster care is the relationship of many local authorities with independent fostering providers. Local authorities use independent fostering providers because of a shortage of foster carers in the area. Andrew Christie admitted that, of the 419 children looked after by Hammersmith and Fulham, 65% lived outside the borough because it was 'hard to recruit foster carers locally'.²⁴

Independent fostering providers also help local authorities to achieve Government targets for placement stability and educational achievements. A private agency in the south of England explained that 75 out of their 100 children were doing well in long-term placements.

From the point of view of the foster carer, an independent provider offers all kinds of advantages: good pay, summer camps for the children, dinner dances for the parents and, crucially, 24 hour support from the provider's social worker. The one to whom I talked takes care of no more than 12 families. Previously he had worked for a local authority in London where his case-load was

²² *The Guardian*, 12 April 2006.

²³ Minutes from a Joint meeting of the Health & Social Care Scrutiny panel on 18 October 2004 of Hammersmith and Fulham local authority. See www.lbhf.gov.uk/Images/HSCSP2004181004_tcm21-44369.pdf

²⁴ *Ibid.*

FOSTER CARE

closer to 50 families. He said, 'I burnt out.' Local authority foster carers complained they could never get hold of social workers in an emergency (or any other time).

All this comes at a price. Private foster care is almost three times as expensive as local authority provision. This puts the local authority in a dilemma. Should they or should they not use independent fostering providers? On one hand they want to fulfil Government targets. On the other hand they cannot afford to do so. Caught in-between is the child in care.

Private agencies have another great advantage: the ability to find the right carers at short notice. In an emergency, they produce. However once the emergency has abated, local authorities fret at the expense. If a local authority carer suddenly has a bed, the temptation is to move the child and save money. This is despite the fact the child might have formed that bond crucial to its future happiness and success.

Kev and Tracy; and Spike and Shane

Two foster families with an independent fostering provider described the effect this had on them and the children they had taken in. Their experience incidentally exposed the euphemisms we employ around children in care. Here I learnt exactly what is meant by 'sexual abuse' and a 'chaotic' home life.

Kev was a small, wiry man in a singlet. He sported tattoos, two earrings in one ear, sunglasses pushed on top of his shaven head and a heavy gold bracelet. He said, 'I look after my lads. They mean everything to me.' His wife, Tracy, blond and round-faced in leggings and a T-shirt, described the council's reaction when she successfully fostered two boys, Spike and Shane, then aged seven and nine.

Spike and Shane's mother was a drug addict who funded her habit by selling her small sons for sex – often to groups of men. The boys claimed abuse and the mother was prosecuted. Before the trial, the boys went through seven different placements, even

HANDLE WITH CARE

being returned to their mother before arriving at Tracy and Kev's. At the trial, the mother was cleared. Courts are still reluctant to believe a mother can abuse her own children. Spike's social worker, for example, had been convinced of the mother's innocence by her reaction on first hearing the allegations. She had run out of the back door and vomited. 'As if that proved anything,' snorted Tracy.

Tracy had counted ten different professionals in court. But at the end of the trial, 'All those professionals went away and left me to deal with the after-effects on my own.'

The abuse had left both boys small for their age. Shane who was then seven looked more like a three-year-old. The boys could not sleep for nightmares unless Tracy sat on a chair between them, with the light on, watching their faces. Even the most innocent activities became a torment. At every meal, the boys cried and vomited. Swallowing recalled the countless blowjobs they had been forced to give as toddlers. A cold reduced Shane to hysteria. Blowing his nose brought back the memory of men pinching his nose as they came to ensure he swallowed hard.

Four years later life with Kev and Tracy had transformed the two boys. The 13-year-old Shane entered a room full of strangers, confident and articulate. Still very small for his age, he had spiked, gelled hair and wore a T shirt from New York and a gold necklace and ring. He explained, 'I always thought it was my fault those things were done to me. I felt like I was dirty, a bit of rubbish. Then when I came to live with Kev and Tracy, I felt I was worth something. I grew to love my new Mum and Dad.' Now he wants to go to university and be a barrister, 'So I can help children who have been through my experience to fight cases. But unlike what happened to us, I want to make sure they win and put the abusers in prison so it can't happen anymore.'

How did the council react to this success story? Money was their principal concern. They paid their own foster carers £200 a week. They had to pay the private fostering agency £700 a week

FOSTER CARE

for every placement, of which Tracy and Kev received £350 a week. For four years the council 'blackmailed' Tracy and Kev to leave the independent fostering provider and foster for them directly. First of all they threatened to remove the boys. That only stopped when a forensic psychologist assessed Spike and said that a sustained attachment to his carer was crucial to preventing him from becoming an abuser himself. They then tried to get Tracy to take out a permanent order – one step from adoption.

A permanent order would have given Tracy parental authority over the boys. For the council, it was even more attractive. It fulfils a worthwhile Government target – the number of children in long-term placements. More importantly it would have removed the independent fostering provider from the equation and allowed the council to pay Tracy directly and at the much reduced rate of £100 a week. As one social worker said, 'It lets Social Services halve payments and take away support.' Tracy would have lost the outings, therapy and social worker not to mention the income provided by the independent fostering provider. One social worker explained, 'It looks like a great performance target but in terms of helping a young person to heal – no, it is not a good target.'

Tracy said, 'Even now the pressure from the local authority has never really let up. When I started, I was all misty eyed. I thought everything would be done in the best interests of the child. In fact it is always in the best interests of the local authority. The child comes a very poor second.' As Kev remarked, 'Money shouts the loudest.'

Jake, Sting and their sisters

Bill and Jackie had a similar experience when they fostered two brothers then aged 14 and 17. The boys and their sisters had been taken into care as an emergency placement.

Jake, Sting and their sisters were the children of a drug-dealer and part of a large, extended family infamous in their town for

HANDLE WITH CARE

drug-dealing, violence and incest. Their mother had left when Jake was seven. The children grew up in a flat with never fewer than 20 people dropping in to buy drugs and drink coffee throughout the day and night. 'It was a B&B for them,' explained Sting. Schizophrenics came regularly to exchange their medication for drugs which their father took and sold. Jake described his youngest sister, then aged four, toddling up to her father with the first spiff she had ever made herself. Proudly she held it up to him, 'Breakfast Daddy,' she announced.

So desperate were the children to escape the flat that they joined several social clubs – including their local choir and scouts. Jake adored school, 'Primary school was excellent. I didn't miss a day.' Back home, he enjoyed setting his brother and sisters 100 general knowledge questions, 'They always asked for it,' he said proudly.

The father soon had his sons on drugs. Sting said, 'He told us drugs were good for us and he was a good Dad for giving us the experience. We weren't allowed to tell no one what happened in our family. That's the way he brought us up. We were never allowed to have friends. We only had ourselves. All of us were one person, we were that close.'

When the police raided the flat, they found a gun but not the drugs which their father had hidden in the freezer stored in a tobacco tin and covered in curry powder. He had been earning £2,000 a week but then fell out with a drug-dealer and his two side kicks who 'punched the hell out of him in front of me,' recalled Jake. He explained that in his home town, 'they take you out into the countryside, tie you to a tree and set you alight.'

In fear of his life, their Dad shut himself and the kids in the flat for weeks. To make it look as if they had run away, they drew the curtains and sat in silence in the dark. Pots of boiling water were set on the kitchen worktops in case the men came for their Dad. When the water cooled, 'we kids kept on having to replace it.' Finally they fled to London with just a few clothes, photographs

FOSTER CARE

and certificates of achievement from their headmaster, 'my Dad loved keeping them.'

In London his father started dealing again. What was the routine in this 'chaotic' household? 'The routine was...' Sting paused, 'There was no routine.' Sometimes there was nothing to eat. On a couple of occasions they ate cornflakes for breakfast lunch and dinner. When they came back from school, 'if Dad was on drugs, we joined him.' They took drugs and played computer games all night. 'We even took drugs on school nights,' Sting added.

Jake was now delivering drugs for his Dad. 'I was his best mate,' said Jake, 'he encouraged me to take coke and kept me up all night.' In the morning, 'I used to take a line of speed just to get me to school. My school work was still good.' Then the father took to 'going through' to their eldest sister, Rose. Jake stayed up all night in an effort to guard her. At 5am, he admitted sorrowfully, sleep would overcome him. His father would wait then slip past, 'in the hour before school.' Sting took over trying to protect Rose at weekends because, as Jake said, 'I was knackered. Sting added, 'Summer holidays were the worst.' Finally, in the middle of his mock GCSEs – in which he got good grades – Jake did something extraordinary. He 'shopped' his father, 'his best mate', to the police.

The father was found guilty and jailed. Jake swore to Rose that if she testified, they would all be safe and kept together. It proved an empty promise. Their local authority suddenly had their childcare budget thrown into disarray. They had several siblings in emergency accommodation with a private fostering agency each costing £700 a week. Their solution was to track down the children's mother. She was an unfit alcoholic living on benefits Jake recalls. But, for the council, she had one overwhelming virtue. Once the children were back with her, they would not cost the council a penny.

At that point the girls were just down the road from their brothers with another foster carer and they saw each other every day. Sting and the girls decided to return to their old flat to pick up their personal belongings. A social worker accompanied the

HANDLE WITH CARE

children. As they left, the social worker told the children to come back to his office with him.

The social worker sat the children at a table. He said he was giving them a choice. Either the council would split the children up and put each with a different carer in a different part of London. At this point everyone 'was crying around the table' – the relationship between the siblings was the only thing they had. Or, and here was the good news, he had traced their mother and they could talk to her on the telephone. Sting recalled, 'It had been traumatic to go back in the flat and then to be told that. He didn't ask us about our relationship with our mother.' Without further explanation or preparation, 'there was mum on the phone.' Sting said bitterly, 'It was emotional blackmail.' The youngest could not even remember her but agreed to go if it meant staying together.

The attempt by Social Services to place them somewhere they did not want to go left Sting and Jake anxious and angry. Life with their new foster parents, Bill and Jackie, was proving a revelation. Sting recalled their arrival. They had been driven for two hours out of London with no idea where they were going. The sisters were dropped off first at their foster home. They were upset to leave their brothers and were crying, 'I don't like that road even now,' said Jake. Then they turned into Bill and Jackie's street. As the boys drew up outside the comfortable, suburban house, they saw a lamp on in the living room and a big family portrait. 'It looked real cosy and warm,' recalled Jake. Inside, 'we met mum and we were shown our bedrooms. It was all the colours I had ever wanted.'

The next morning he woke up, walked downstairs and met Bill and Jackie's four grown-up children and their grandchildren. They sat down together for Sunday lunch. Sting and Jake had never sat at a table for a meal before. 'That was good,' they reminisced – or eaten roast beef or Yorkshire pudding. 'We had never had that before'. Later on Jackie offered them a chocolate bar and rented a film. As Jake sat watching it, eating his chocolate

FOSTER CARE

and surrounded by this new family he recalled thinking, 'There's a life to live now.'

Over the coming weeks, the hardest part was getting the boys into a normal eating and sleeping pattern. They could not believe they could eat what they wanted, when they wanted. Jackie recalled, 'For a long time they had a real difficulty about eating. They felt guilty because they had always gone without in order to give what there was to their sisters.' Lack of food and too many drugs meant they were both under size. At 17, Jake resembled an 11-year-old and weighed just six stone.

They were also coming off drugs. Jake was relaxing for the first time from the responsibility of caring for his siblings. Night after night for seven weeks, Jackie sat up with them talking and listening, 'about what had happened and discussing what was normal. They did not know what was normal. They had been so brainwashed and isolated by their Dad.' Sting, for example, barely spoke because every time he opened his mouth, his father had struck him. Jake recalled, 'the stability and those talks helped me more than anything.'

Social Services, on the other hand, 'made it worse'. As Jake said, they 'done my head in.' During this critical period, the brothers had no help from Social Services and, indeed, five changes of social worker. Before she left, one told Jake, 'Your files are a pure mess'. Jake explained, 'Stuff was missing. They put in new stuff to cover their backs.' At the same time they threatened to move the boys. Sting said, 'We did not know what would happen to us from day to day.' Jake said, 'How could we start to have a life, if we were going to be taken back again?'

The local authority blamed Jackie because she supported the boys' fight to stay. They accused her of being 'unprofessional' and getting 'emotionally involved.' As she said, 'What was I supposed to do? Who else was helping those kids? Certainly not them.' She went on, 'How can Social Services take a child that has been abused then add to that abuse?'

HANDLE WITH CARE

A social worker did finally visit the boys. It was not to offer help. Jake took her up to his room, 'Isn't it nice,' he said but she was not interested. Instead she asked, 'What nationality are you?' Jake, perplexed, told her he was British. The social worker picked him up, 'You don't say you are Welsh? That's your heritage, your ethnic background. You should want to go back there. When you are older you will regret it.' As Jake said, 'They tried every form of emotional blackmail to get us to go back.' The two brothers even wrote to Tony Blair pleading for help but he merely forwarded their letter to Social Services 'which made things a lot worse.'

Sting was so upset that he threatened to commit suicide. He said the only way he would leave Bill and Jackie was, 'in a box'. Jackie's GP referred the brothers to a psychiatrist who affirmed Jake might indeed commit suicide if moved as he had witnessed so much violence in his life. Social Services backed off. When Jake did eventually get therapy, 'It was not my past I talked about, it was what Social Services were doing to me. They were like a cold bayonet in the stomach.'

Rose and her sisters moved back to their mother. Social Services told the brothers that Rose would receive therapy once in a 'stable placement' – in other words back with her mother. She never did. Social Services promised to pay for the boys to visit their sisters three times a year. They never have. The mother told the girls that their brothers did not care about them anymore. Rose has left her mother and is now living in a hostel.

Spike, Will, Jake and Sting are success stories. It is despite, not because, of the system. They succeeded because their foster parents, all ordinary individuals, demonstrated heroic qualities. They loved and stuck to their children and fought Social Services to keep them. They deserve rewards and honours. They have received nothing. Indeed, instead of backing these exceptional people, the various local authorities did everything possible to hinder them.

FOSTER CARE

Without the help of these foster parents, what would have happened to the four boys? In all probability, they would have followed the same route as the majority of young people in care. They would have moved from home to home, their behaviour deteriorating, their trust in adults diminishing until they ended up in prison, on drugs or in a psychiatric unit, and, in the case of Spike and Will, possibly sexual abusers of children themselves.

The price of their failure, the cost of the secure unit, drug treatment, therapy – not to mention the expense of police investigations, court cases and imprisonment – is never calculated. As one social worker remarked, ‘The child is off our books. He will turn up later in the system but not at our expense.’

The rehabilitation of the boys has not brought any benefits to the councils. It has not offset the cost of using private foster care. The social worker went on, ‘What can’t be measured is a good relationship.’ A good relationship has saved these four boys, saved future victims and put a full stop to a cycle of deprivation and abuse – in Sting and Jake’s case, a cycle that is known to have gone on through generations of their family.

‘Love hedged with rules and qualifications’

These young men were fortunate in their foster parents. If even exceptional foster parents found their hands tied by bureaucracy, imagine the effect on the less motivated. Carers and young people alike complained that too many regulations made it hard for that all-important love and trust to develop.

Children in care desperately need love. But what they get is a love hedged with rules and qualifications or ‘safe caring’ as it is called. This is because local authorities are eager to protect children from abuse by foster carers, and to protect foster carers from unfounded accusations of abuse by children. A carer cannot perform the simplest jobs of parenting from putting on a sticking plaster to reading a story in bed. One carer complained, ‘I am not supposed to give Calpol or cough syrup. The local authority

HANDLE WITH CARE

expects me to take the child to the doctor every time he has a cough or graze in case he is allergic to sticking plaster and the parents sue!' Allegations of sexual abuse mean a bedtime story cannot be read in bed – but on a sofa in the living room.

At a Foster Carers Support Group, the majority of the conversation was centred, not on the children and their problems, but on possible pitfalls for foster parents. The emphasis was all on preparing for future hostilities rather than building trust. Carers keep a daily log recording the child's behaviour and any 'incidents', which the children have a right to read. Each week, children had to sign a Clothing Allowance and pocket money receipt to prove foster parents had not kept the money for themselves. 'You are supposed to be treating these children as your own,' said one foster parent. 'But you can't,' rejoined another.

Hair was another problem. Foster carers had to get permission from social workers for a change of hair style – 'if you can get hold of the social worker, if the child has a social worker'. One carer recalled her boy arriving with his hair matted and full of lice. Before she could do anything, Social Services had to agree. 'It drives you up the wall,' she said. A foster father asked, 'A hair style is not such a hazardous thing? Why is the Government making such a big deal?'

They complained of the need to get Social Services' permission for school trips. 'By the time they have signed the form, the school trip has come and gone,' or a police check for every member of the family if their child was invited to a sleep over. Another said sadly, 'Everything has to be so safe and documented and so completely impersonalised that the child ends up getting no loving.' One woman described how her little girl, like most children, hopped into bed with her for a cuddle in the mornings. This was strictly forbidden but the foster mother held strong views. The child had been sexually abused. The carer explained, 'I think it's important she gets lots of hugs that have nothing to do with sex.'

FOSTER CARE

Another foster carer said, 'If they entrust the child to us, then they should trust us to be good parents.' Stacy interviewed by Barnardo's Policy and Research Unit on behalf of Brent Council understood why there are rules to discourage touching within the care system but felt strongly, 'they should do something about that because there's really a whole, big, fat lack of love and affection in the care system, it's just dry.'²⁵

Children desperate for stability have their cases reviewed every six months by some local authorities who refuse to sign long-term agreements with foster carers. This can go on for years. 'What does that mean to me?' demands the young person. 'It means,' says the exasperated foster parent, 'that you are staying six months but who knows after that.'

Molly explained she had looked after a little girl called Celine from the age of two years. She said, 'The local authority promised it was permanent.' Celine had been sexually abused in a previous placement. Her behaviour could be unpredictable. 'But nothing you wouldn't expect after what she went through. I knew if she stayed with me we could sort it out together.' Molly asked Social Services for advice and some respite care. 'I thought this was sensible as a single mother with a challenging child. I never dreamt it would be used against me.' Then Molly got a new link worker with whom she did not get on. The link worker decided otherwise. Molly said, 'She had no understanding of the progress Celine has made in five years. She did not look at the files. She just took umbrage against me.'

The link worker claimed Celine's 'needs were not being met'. Social Services held a case review without informing Molly. 'The first I knew about it was when the link worker arrived and said they were moving Celine, 'in a planned way'. Molly was devastated. She and Celine had been together for five years,

²⁵ D Clay and R Dowling, *Improving Outcomes for Young People Leaving Care in Brent*, Barnardo's, 2004.

HANDLE WITH CARE

‘Celine loved me and called me Mum. There was just nothing I could do.’ She begged friends to come and pack up Celine’s things, ‘I couldn’t cope. It was like a death for me.’ Two social workers arrived and dragged the child away. Molly said, ‘She screamed and screamed. I have not seen or heard anything about my little girl since.’

‘You will be taken to respite and you know you don’t come back from there’

Local authorities might undermine the relationship between a foster carer and their child. However they pour resources into ensuring contact with the birth family. This is a statutory duty. Under Human Rights legislation, parents must have the chance to form a relationship with their children. Of course everyone wants a child to get on well with its parents. But as one social worker remarked, ‘It’s a crazy system. One moment the child is in such peril we have to remove them from their parents. The next day we are arranging contact’. Professionals complained that too often contact was implemented without taking into account the family or the personalities. As a contact organiser put it, ‘Social Services should get a lot tougher a lot sooner with those families where it is obviously not going to work and put more effort into those that could.’

She gave an example of a young mother on heroin whose newborn baby had been taken into care. The mother and father were asked to come in three times a week and spend two hours with the baby. It was a very traumatic two hours. The mother frequently threw a scene, sometimes attacking the father. Often the police have to be called. The contact organiser explained, ‘This continues week after week despite the fact these parents don’t have a hope of ever getting that baby back.’ She went on, ‘The money for these contacts keeps coming in and pays for things that don’t change anything.’

One foster carer noticed her little boy always returned deeply distressed from contact with his mother. He bit and kicked his

FOSTER CARE

carer and peed over the carpet. She questioned the social worker about the meeting. The social worker had no idea because he had not actually gone. It was attended by a social worker provided by an agency who had failed to report back. The foster carer offered to take the little boy herself. The social worker insisted the child and the mother were each escorted by their own agency worker. 'It's like an imperial guard and they all have to be co-ordinated!' said the carer. She went on, 'Each time it's a different agency worker which upsets Wayne.'

Wayne continued to throw a tantrum before each contact but insisted on going. Then the carer discovered the mother was showering Wayne with presents. She told the social worker and the presents stopped but not before the social worker had explained why to Wayne. 'He thought I was horrible so that did not help.' Wayne now complained his Mum made him play a game which ended in him touching, 'her boobs.' The carer rang the social worker who, as usual, had not received the report of the meeting from the agency worker. The report eventually arrived but made no mention of anything inappropriate. The carer wanted to question the agency worker herself but he had returned to his home country. The next contact went ahead as usual.

The carer discovered the family courts had awarded the mother contact. 'Until I came along, it had never been questioned. No one stops and asks whose benefit is this for? Certainly not Wayne's.'

A social worker insisted Spike and Shane, the two boys sold by their mother for sex, have contact with their mother and elder brother who had sexually abused them. When the boys refused, Spike recalled the social worker shouting at them, 'If you carry on with this behaviour you will be taken to respite and you know you don't come back from there.' Tracy, Spike's foster mother, sniffed. 'So rude,' she said, 'I had to tick her off for talking to the boys like that.'

HANDLE WITH CARE

The meeting between Spike, Shane, his mother, elder brother and the social worker went ahead in a Little Chef just before Christmas. Afterwards they all returned to the mother's flat. The social worker, obviously cheered by all this family interaction, let the mother take Spike into her bedroom to fetch their gifts. She immediately threw her son onto the bed amongst the Christmas presents, hitting him and threatening to kill his foster parents. Spike's foster mother was furious, 'From then on they were that afraid. They kept on saying, "Mum (It was noticeable in the interview that Spike called his real mother by her Christian name and his foster carer, 'Mum') there's someone watching us from the bushes. There's a man following us in a car." ' Contact with their mother 'undid the good work of months.'

The contact organiser complained that local authorities refuse to describe what they hoped to achieve from these meetings. They set targets purely on, 'through-put.' She said, 'it just drags on and on and is awful for the children.'

Young people in care are desperate for affection and stability. But even their best option only provides it in patches. The University of Kent followed up 596 children all of whom had been in foster care in 1998. By 2001 only 40% were still in care. Nine out of ten of those aged 15 and over were no longer living with their foster carers. This is just one year after the Care Leavers Act came into force. But the numbers are still startling. Disruption was a risk even for those who had been with the same carer for some time – especially so in the teenage years. 41 – or 7% – of the young people had simply disappeared.²⁶

²⁶ The University of York. 'York Research on Foster Care and Adoption'.

CHAPTER THREE

CARE HOMES

On a rainy summer's day in Wales a 14-year-old girl was standing on a high rock. Staff from the Children's Home were daring her to leap into the lake below. Toyah has been a prostitute and heroin addict since the age of 11. Now she was attending an outward bound course run by a Children's Home in Wales. In full make up and large, hoop earrings, she hardly looked dressed for the high jump. Beneath her wetsuit, she wore a frilly pink G-string and a pink top on which was written, 'I have to be a Bitch to live with a Bastard like you' – a present, she explained, from her pimp.

Finally Toyah leapt. She surfaced spluttering with excitement. None of the other children had dared to do it. Back on shore she ran about, screaming with triumph. The rain and swim had washed away her make up to leave her face soft and child-like. That evening, she told me, they were going to camp out and cook sausages. I should join them. Abuse, I realised, had deprived her of a childhood. She was just discovering what she had missed. She said, 'Before I was never happy unless I had loads of drugs and sex. I thought that was the only way to enjoy myself. I did not know you could be happy just doing things.'

HANDLE WITH CARE

CHILDREN USUALLY END UP in a Home after foster care has failed. The director of a Social Services department explained the progression.

Except in cases of severe physical and sexual abuse, the local authority tries to keep the child with the family by offering support. If that fails, the child is moved in with a member of the extended family, then with a local authority foster carer and, if they cannot cope, a foster carer with a private agency. If the child's behaviour continues to be unmanageable, they are moved to a Children's Home. Then, if they are a danger to themselves and others, they enter secure accommodation. Each stage costs more than the last.

The social service manager insisted, 'Price does come into it but it is not the deciding factor'. The young people have disrupted so many places, it is more a case 'of who will take them.' For many young people in care, Children's Homes are their last chance before secure accommodation.

Children's Homes and secure units account for 11% of children in care or about 7,000 children in 2004. After a series of paedophile scandals, local authorities closed their larger Children's Homes and switched to specialist private care. In March 2000, for example, there were 12 police investigations going on into alleged abuse in Children's Homes in London alone.²⁷

In a debate in the House of Lords, Baroness Howe of Idlicote and chairman of an inner London juvenile court for 20 years, recalled discovering, 'that we had often been sending already physically and sexually abused and disturbed children to be further sexually abused in those homes.' She felt a 'very real sense of responsibility' for what happened to those children.²⁸

²⁷ *The Economist*, 4 March 2000.

²⁸ Hansard, 9 February 2005.

CARE HOMES

Sexual abuse is, hopefully, rarer than in Baroness Howe's day. Nonetheless Children's Homes still contribute to the failure of the care system. How is this happening? And should we still be feeling a, 'very real sense of responsibility' for sending children to them?

The old Care Homes held a broad mix of children. Now, with the majority of children fostered, Care Homes contain, as one Social Services director put it, 'a small, select group of very troubled people.' The average number of children in a home is just six.

They may be small in number, but quite what a challenge these children present I discovered on a canoeing trip organised by a Children's Home. My partner was a 14-year-old girl, up next day in court for Grievous Bodily Harm. Angeline was slim and neat. She wore glasses and her blond hair in a pony tail. She was not good at steering and we were progressing in slow circles. Despite her appearance, she had attacked a male carer at her previous Home.

She explained that she had been on the telephone one evening when 'this bloke says to finish the conversation.' Angeline was allowed to use the phone up to 9.30pm. It was only ten past eight. He pulled out the extension lead. 'My mate was still on the other end,' said Angeline, outraged. She punched the man in the face. He tried to restrain Angeline but, as she remarked, 'he had no restraining technique. I have been restrained for eight years so I know all about restraining.'

She went on, 'I lifted him onto my back then knocked him on the floor and kicked the shit out of him. When he tried to put a hand around my neck, I bit it.' Afterwards she went outside for a smoke. A fight always calmed her down. Then the police turned up and arrested her. She paused from paddling to explain, 'I have been in loads of Children's Homes and have had a warrant out for my arrest.' On another occasion she had smashed up a kitchen and staff room. It had taken six policemen to hold her down. One had said to her, 'You can be a really strong little bitch when you want to be.' Angeline saw that as a compliment.

HANDLE WITH CARE

She had found a solution to her outbursts: 'a friend advised me to try self-harm. So instead of getting a criminal charge, I slice my arm and I feel better, you know, calm.'

She sliced her arms because of 'the amount of shit I been put through and the amount of shit Social Services put me through. Then they ask me why I self-harm?' Her boyfriend said he did not like her scarring herself. He told her to write to him when she felt violent. 'So I write him six-page letters. I met him in secure last February. He's just got transferred to prison because he's over 16 now.'

She had been in care for eight years, 'No foster family will put up with my behaviour. There's no point in getting to know people because they just get taken away from me. I might give it a try then they just go away.'

She had had no idea she was coming to a Children's Home in the countryside or when or where she would be moved next. She was lonely, she said. It was hard to make friends when you kept on being moved and Social Services insisted on vetting them. 'I want to be with young people who have had the same experiences as me. Can you see me socialising with a normal kid who has two parents and visits their grandparents at weekend? Don't make me laugh.'

She owned a hamster and a guinea pig who suffered frequent 'accidents'. She lent forward over her paddle, recalling the trips to the vet and relishing the attention she had received. After the hamster 'fell' off the bed, the vet told her to let it die in peace. Angeline was not having that. 'She was proper struggling for her life,' she explained. 'I carried her around in my handbag or in me pocket. I took her everywhere with me so she wasn't on her own.' After that Social Services refused to let her keep pets. Angeline was indignant. 'If I hated animals, why did I spend £80 taking them to the vets?' I asked who had not let her down, 'My teddy bear,' she said. We made another circle, 'Why are we fucking going nowhere?' she said. Angeline is now pregnant.

CARE HOMES

Devon, like Angeline, had just arrived in his Home when I sat next to him at lunch. He was 13, had large green eyes, three studs in one ear, and a Mohican hair cut. He was one of four brothers, all at risk. 'I have been drunk, been stoned, been laid,' he announced, 'I have done it all.' He described picking up a smaller child at school and hurling him through a pair of double doors which Devon then slammed on the teacher, coming to help. He recalled the kid's distress, 'crawling away.' His conversation was centred on death and pain, 'Our body is dying minute by minute,' he said with relish. 'I know about death, you see. I tried to commit suicide when I was ten.'

These are the kind of young people with whom Children's Homes now have to deal. 'Every day,' said the head of one, 'is dominated by a power struggle with the child. They have a pseudo-maturity and want control. They battle with everyone and anyone to get it. You have to negotiate with them.'

He pointed out that the children had been so 'chaotically parented' that they lacked any moral sense. 'They don't think anything they do has any bearings on outcomes.' The same behaviour earned them a slap one day, the next a £5 note. The Head of another Children's Home emphasised, 'these kids need to know where they are. If they overstep, there must be consequences.' Too often parents and those in authority rewarded their bad behaviour with lots of attention – and ignored them when they behaved well. To reverse this needs money, experienced staff and time. The head of Devon's Home said, 'My aim is to intercept the cycle of deprivation.'

'Buy a place at Eton eight times over'

Money is an issue when a week's stay in Toyah's home costs a local authority £4,000 a child and weekly fees in other Homes range from £3,000 to £6,500. These children require a high level of supervision. Toyah, when not jumping into a lake, lived in a cottage on her own with staff on duty day and night. The cost

HANDLE WITH CARE

continues to rise. Between 1999 and 2004, unit costs increased in privately run Children's Homes by 45% and in local authority provision by 28%.²⁹ The Local Government Association points to 'cost pressures, particularly in relation to residential care and agency foster care.'³⁰

Despite the difficulties, residential Children's Homes are a growth business as the journalist, Polly Toynbee, discovered when she received a prospectus from Catalyst Investment Group. Two to three children costing £3,000 a week will be, 'producing an estimated pre-tax profit in excess of £100,000 a year per house.' Badly behaved children, costing a council £6,500 a week, earned the company a million pounds a year profit after an outlay of just £120,000. When Polly Toynbee asked the Catalyst broker why councils agreed to such high profits, he admitted, 'I don't really understand why myself.'³¹

These sums, as Polly Toynbee pointed out, would buy a place at Eton eight times over. Or a place at Eton with a full-time personal mentor and intensive psychotherapy. Or a room at the Ritz with a full-time private tutor. With such poor outcomes for young people in care, why is so much money being spent with so little effect? And why are councils not asking for better returns on our money?

'It can fuck up your mind'

Care homes, whether run by a private company or a local authority, suffer from one major drawback. They have no means of controlling their charges. They are unable to keep young people safe in the Home or to stop them wandering off. One community resettlement worker explained, 'young people are very up on their rights.' Even when their behaviour is

²⁹ . Local Government Association, *The facts – looking after vulnerable children*, 2005.

³⁰ Local Government Association, *Social service finance 2004/05*, 2005.

³¹ *The Guardian*, 28 January 2005.

CARE HOMES

‘outlandish’, what can the Care Home do if the young person refuses to engage and the staff lack the personality or inclination to enforce discipline? The resettlement worker explained, ‘I have found myself in some tremendously violent situations because of a lack of policy.’

This lack of discipline makes Care Homes dangerous places – sometimes as dangerous as the homes from which children have been removed.

In Scotland, for example, local authorities have seen significant increases in the numbers of assaults between children. In 2004, figures obtained from more than half of Scotland’s 32 councils showed there were more than 400 incidents of children attacking other children in the same Care Homes – a rise of 30% in four years – and 1,191 incidents of children assaulting staff. Of the assaults between young people last year, 80 involved physical violence, seven involved a weapon and 28 threw an object. Police were called out 2,025 times.³²

As well as young people in Care Homes, I talked to many who have since left. Their main concern was the lack of discipline in the homes which they interpreted as a lack of care and interest in the child.

Jane is small and blond and lives in a hostel. Her step-father beat her with a belt when she was a toddler. At five, her mother abandoned Jane and her twin brother and then went on to have twin boys by her own brother. ‘They are both autistic and have to go to hospital every day,’ explained Jane who was then put in a Home, ‘I was one of those little kids just shoved anywhere.’

Jane was clear why her Home had not been successful, ‘People couldn’t be bothered to discipline you. The other children were running out of the door and everything.’ Just like her home life, ‘they used to come along and just hit you with things.’ She enjoyed playing cricket but some children used the bats to smack

³² Evening Times online, 16 May 2005.

HANDLE WITH CARE

each other on the head, 'so we can't play no more cricket.' She also recalled the gym which was also off limits because the staff were, 'afraid we were going to fall off. It was rubbish.' However fears for the children's safety did not extend to bedtime. Jane was indignant. 'Normal people get read a good night story at night,' but in her Home the staff, 'just shut the bedroom door and locked it.' She rarely got much sleep because of kids, 'jumping on my bed all night long.'

A 19-year-old boy, now living in a hostel, recalled being taken into care at the age of eight when his mother suffered a nervous breakdown. 'She was crying and we were dragged away from her.' He too complained at being locked up at night with other children. 'The staff sat at reception with their backs to the bedrooms. I was only eight but I nearly got raped by an older boy. Luckily I was big for my age and I beat him up. I saw lots of stuff there I shouldn't have. It was not a good place. It can fuck up your mind.' He was clear what should have happened, 'They need more staff and they need to watch carefully.' Or as young people told the charity Voice for the Child in Care, residential workers should 'spend more time with young people and stop cotchin [hanging around] in the office.'³³

When I met Jason he was on the run from the police after biting off the ear of a bouncer. He is 22, a crack addict and has already been in prison for robbery. His mother is a crack addict and a prostitute and he started taking drugs to please her. At four, he watched his step-father attempt to murder his mother in the kitchen with a rolling pin. 'I seen blood spattered everywhere.' The step-father also beat up Jason. When the step-father came out of prison, Social Services insisted that the mother choose between her husband and her son. She chose her husband and Jason was put into care.

³³ Voice for the Child in Care, *Young People...*, 2004.

CARE HOMES

What did the Care Home offer this troubled child? More of the same. 'It was violent in the Children's Home,' he recalled, 'they are supposed to take care of you but they don't give a shit, you get me? They don't do nothing. At the end of the day, they go home at night. We don't.' At eight, Jason started smoking weed in his room and shop-lifting food, 'Anyway you don't get no food in the home because the big lads snatch it all so you have to do for yourself. The kids have to grow up fast, learn the street because other kids stab you in the back. We been brought up violent, rape and shit like that, get abused, sick shit like that. We got a different attitude because we been brought up violent.'

Not only are many Care Homes unable to enforce discipline, they cannot stop their charges leaving. A social worker from South London explained that a Children's Home was not a prison or a secure unit. 'You cannot stop a 15-year-old from walking out of the door and straight back into their old life on the street.'

A number of private Children's Homes have solved this problem by siting themselves in remote countryside. The majority of their charges are from the inner cities and are 'spooked' by roads with no street lights. Runaway children have to trudge down country lanes with nothing but sheep and fields to provide distraction. Most only tried it once.

The director of one Home explained what happens. When a child opens an outside door at night, an alarm goes off. The member of staff on duty will go down and talk to her. With no locks on the doors, persuasion is all he has to keep the child in care. If talk does not do the trick, and she still insists on leaving, the member of staff will try another tack. 'Well, at least have some tea and biscuits before you go,' he says. Usually by the time they have drunk their tea, they are happy to return to bed. However if they still insist on going out, the member of staff will fetch his coat, 'I'll come with you,' he offers, 'I could do with a walk.'

This is a good Home with well-trained and motivated staff. Too many Homes are not so well run. The damage done both to the

HANDLE WITH CARE

individual and to society by this lack of discipline is incalculable. Six months after entering a Children's Home, 40% of young people with no previous cautions or convictions had received one.³⁴ The young man convicted of murdering Damilola Taylor was then a 12-year-old living in a Care Home in Peckham where 'there was little if no discipline and it was far from secure,' as Victor Temple QC pointed out in court. 'For much of the time he could come and go as he pleased.'³⁵

One MP explained that, in his constituency, six children in a private Care Home generated 23% of the crime figures. They all came from an inner city borough. Inner city authorities with no suitable places locally send young people to private Care Homes elsewhere. This might be many miles away. Social workers from the borough are meant to visit regularly but, went on the MP, they 'don't monitor how kids are getting on.' At the same time the local authorities of the area to which the children have been sent, are unaware of their existence until they start appearing in front of the local magistrate – Homes housing six children or fewer do not require planning permission. The children find themselves free to come and go as they please and living with 'several like-minded children.' The MP went on: 'it's not surprising, they go off the rails.'

'Passed round like a fucking parcel'

The effect on the children is equally disastrous. Jason began staying out over-night from his home in north London from the age of nine. After a few nights away, the Home called the police. When they brought him back, the staff shrugged. 'Back are you?' they remarked. As Jason said, 'They don't give a shit.' So then he began to stay away for days at a time. At the age of ten, he moved into a ticket box in Waterloo station. 'I didn't live like no tramp,'

³⁴ Societyguardian, *Working with children*, 2006.

³⁵ *The Daily Mail*, 27 June 2006.

CARE HOMES

he told me, explaining how he would wash himself in the public toilets. When it got cold, he sneaked into people's houses. Eventually he got a knife and took to crime, 'Bad things I did for money,' he looked down, suddenly ashamed, 'This is making me sound bad.'

After a moment he went on earnestly, 'it's difficult to live if you are not getting that love and affection. If you see a lot of evil, you turn evil. If you see good, you turn good. It's true man. I don't know one kid in care who done well.'

Jason might be a crack addict and on the run from the police but he identified a lack of discipline with a lack of care and commitment from the authorities. 'You know if there is a caring person. A caring person is on your case. When someone cares and you don't listen and walk away, they make you feel bad inside. The staff in the Children's Home don't discipline you because they don't care. They just sat in their office or call the police. At the end of the month, they get paid. Another kid, another problem, that's all it is.'

For girls this lack of care has additional consequences. 40% of girls in care are aged between 10- and 15-years-old.³⁶ A former social worker said, 'Social Services are not equipped either ideologically or on a practical level to deal with adolescent girls'. At least one in seven young women leaving care is pregnant or already a mother.³⁷ At the same time, half of all prostitutes have been in care. A former residential social worker who has worked with prostitutes asked, 'where is the strategy in place for these teenage girls? When is someone going to put their head above the parapet and say we have got to do something?'

For too many girls in care a lack of education means their only career options are pregnancy and prostitution. 'Boys do crime and girls do sex,' was how one social worker put it. Girls from

³⁶ Department of Health, *Children looked after in England 2001-2002*, 2002.

³⁷ Societyguardian, *Working with children*, 2006.

HANDLE WITH CARE

stable backgrounds avoid pregnancy because they want qualifications and a good job. The majority of girls in care cannot think of ever obtaining either. They are brought up, said one social worker, 'not expecting to achieve and that's what needs to be tackled.' Jane explained that her route out of a 'crummy room' in a hostel was by getting pregnant. For many girls, a baby gives them the same sense of value and purpose as a job – not to mention the financial benefits and housing. After years of being rejected, suddenly they have a role in society.

Even for those young people who have done well, the lure to create the warm and loving family they never had can be overwhelming. One woman described how her foster daughter, Chloe, with whom she enjoys a close relationship, recently became pregnant at 18. 'From the minute she moved in with me as a teenager, it was a battle to stop her getting pregnant. Her sisters and mother had all got pregnant at 14. So I knew it was just a matter of time.' Social Services forbade the foster mother from giving Chloe advice on contraception, 'So I used to leave leaflets around in the hope she would pick them up.'

Chloe explained she has met a 'lovely guy' in a good job. Having a baby was a way of putting right the past 'madness' of her life. She went on, 'I am now going to have my own family and care for them as my foster parents cared for me and do everything the right way and teach my Mum what parenting skills are.'

A lack of confidence and affection makes girls in care vulnerable to exploitation. As one remarked, 'I was looking for love and that's how I got on drugs and with my pimp.' They need protection but who cares enough to provide it?

A former residential social worker explained what is going wrong. She helped set up a 'therapeutic' Children's Home for girls between the ages of 12 and 17 who were deemed vulnerable to sexual exploitation through prostitution. Despite this, the Home was sited in the middle of a street dealing area. Within days of the Home opening, local pimps began to hang around outside.

CARE HOMES

They called out to the girls, flattering them and offering drugs for free. 'Spend some time with me and you can wear the bling bling,' and 'I'll give you all the loving you've never had.' They know girls in care are desperate for love and easy to manipulate into prostitution.

Far from being in a place of safety, the girls now became 'organised targets.' Every night, the care workers watched the cars queue up and the girls run out to the men. 'No one wanted to restrain them,' explained the social worker sadly. These girls knew the major players in the drug world. 'They could be back to their old network in minutes.' Despite all the money spent on the new centre, 'we did nothing to stop them continuing their old life.'

In a Children's Home, Emma was painting stars on her nails. She was considered such a risk that she lived on her own with two members of staff with her at all times. A thin girl with a red streak in her blond hair and a soft, pretty mouth, she never stopped moving. She talked too loudly, her eyes darting like a trapped animal, afraid of the next mood swing and where it would land her. She took heroin, had worked as a prostitute and said of her pimp, who she considered her boyfriend, 'I know he's unfaithful but I am keeping my eye on him.' Emma was 14. She had been taken into care at 11. In three years she had 14 placements. 'I have been passed about like a fucking parcel,' she said.

In her first Care Home she started staying out until 11pm with a group of older girls. The late nights meant she dropped out of school. Then she began to stay away altogether. Every day the Home would ring and ask where she was. 'I would say I was with my mates.' The Home did not inform the police, 'as long as I stayed in contact.' Within three or four months, 'I was on heroin and doing my jobs.' For the first time, her eyes focused, 'Now don't cry,' she said impatiently.

HANDLE WITH CARE

‘I was a right little terror until I got here’

Care Leavers were equally clear on what made a good Home. Two middle-aged men now living in a hostel in Brixton recalled the tasty food and the three Jamaican women who ran their local Home (which has since closed down). The giant Rastafarian shook his head. ‘They would all be on my case if I came home late.’ One Home I visited held meetings three times a day with all the children. Those that had achieved something in the intervening hours received praise and rewards. Those who had not, got jobs to do. ‘I was a right little terror,’ one admitted, ‘until I got here.’

An old-fashioned Care Home inspired enthusiasm from an unlikely source. Walking down an alleyway in the West End of London, Anita did not look like a homeless person. Her clothes were clean. She wore a woollen hat pulled over clean hair and carried a pink rucksack. She was on the way to the public lavatories in Covent Garden to wash her underwear. Only rotting front teeth and a stiff gait gave away her condition. She was a heroin addict who had lost her four children. A few nights before, she had been raped in that alleyway.

Care had taught her to survive on the streets, ‘A lot of people couldn’t handle it. I have been on my own since 13.’

Anita tried to escape a violent father by attempting suicide at 13. She was taken into care and placed in a Children’s Home run by nuns. She said, ‘I was happy there. There was no violence.’ Children who behaved well were allowed home at weekends. On Fridays Anita always ‘tried to be a bad girl because I didn’t want to leave.’ She recalled the nuns were strict, ‘but they showed us love.’

The inmates earned pocket money and four cigarettes a day on a point system. ‘They worked us hard. I was down on the floor polishing and buffing the floors. But the more I worked, the more money I got. It was a good system.’ The nuns took them shopping to buy new clothes. She said, ‘It was the happiest time of my life. If only I had been allowed to stay until I was 19, my life would have been a lot better. I was learning to become a hairdresser. All the

CARE HOMES

girls who stayed got jobs and did well.' Instead at 16 her father insisted she return home. After two months he started to beat her again. Shortly after she ran away and ended up in a hostel, pregnant with her first child.

Apart from discipline, the difference in Anita's recollections of her time in care is the attitude of the nuns. She felt they cared. Certainly she received no care or guidance from any other adult in her life.

'I'd give you 2½p for the service'

Staff are crucial to institutions looking after the country's most difficult and troubled children. To deal with young people like Angeline, Emma and Toyah, they need to be of the highest calibre. This is hardly the case when salaries for a carer in a Children's Home are as low as £12,000 to £15,000 a year.

It is not just a lack of pay. There are over 680,000 managers and staff working in residential care settings. Six years ago, 65% had no relevant qualifications. One MP recalled finding four ex-security guards from Sainsbury's on duty in one Children's Home and two ex-bouncers from a local night-club in another. By 2005 the Government set a target that 50% of care staff should have a relevant care qualification to NVQ level 2.³⁸ But as Lord Listowel stated in a debate in the House of Lords: 'we have not trained, supported or remunerated those who care for those young people, with dire consequence for them.'³⁹

NVQ level 2 is still a basic qualification. As one Care Home director remarked, 'I was trained as a psychiatric nurse and worked with child murderers and arsonists but these kids are still a challenge to me!' In Poland, for example, people working with children must complete a three- to five-year degree course. 'How come,' said one director of a Children's Home, 'that these

³⁸ *CareandHealth*, Children's Care Finder, 2005.

³⁹ Hansard, 9 February 2005.

HANDLE WITH CARE

countries are much poorer than us but still train their people?’ He always ‘leapt at the chance’ of employing graduates from Poland and could not get enough of them.

Staff are meant to train on the job but this also causes difficulties. The head of a Children’s Home pointed out, ‘Who is meant to care for the children in the staff member’s absence? Training eats into their time with the kids. It causes an awful conflict.’

Poor pay and a stressful job lead to a high turnover of staff. 20% to 30% of staff in the Children’s Homes I visited depart every year. ‘That is the norm,’ I was told. The average stay of a member of staff is just nine months. This means few staff stay around long enough to complete their training. A high turnover of staff hardly helps children desperate for stability and continuity. One boy complained, ‘You never know who is going to be on shift when you return from school.’ Seven years after leaving her Home, Anita returned to show off her children to the nuns. It did not occur to her that she might find unfamiliar faces.

A consequence of the failure to train staff is that the work has become bureaucratised. Poor training increases reliance on inspectorates and regulations. In a job where every child is an individual and requires a different approach, workers are increasingly losing their creativity and confidence. A recent report asked staff in different European countries about their responsibilities towards the child whom they knew best. 59% of English staff said that their main responsibility was to follow procedures. 5% of Danish workers and 4% of Germans responded in a similar fashion. On the other hand 97% of the Danish staff and 93% of German staff said that their main function was to support the children. Only 41% of the staff in English Children’s Homes responded in that way.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid.

CARE HOMES

An independent education consultant arrived at a Home to be told that her pupil was unavailable. She demanded to know where he was. 'He's on the roof,' said the staff. He had kicked in a door and punched someone. 'Well, that's ridiculous,' said the consultant and called him down. She went on, 'I insist on certain standards of behaviour and the children live up to my expectations. I have never seen him anything but charming and co-operative.' She thought the homes charged a lot of money: 'I would give you 2½p for the service the staff provide.'

Good staff are essential to deal not with just one troubled young person but the dynamics within a group. A confidential report by a consultancy group in health care and related areas states: 'Small changes in occupancy in the individual units significantly impact margins.' In other words, it pays private Care Homes to take on the more challenging children that local authorities press upon them – often without a rigorous assessment to check if they can cope with the child. The placement crashes, the child is given the impression it cannot be managed and huge sums of money are wasted.

One 11-year-old girl expressed strong views on her Home since it had been taken over by a private company, 'They bring in children they think they can help, but they can't control them. At lessons, I am trying to concentrate but you can't because everyone is being stupid. Nothing works anymore. I can't wait to leave.' In the workshop she showed me a rabbit hutch she had made, 'it's not the best in the world,' she said diffidently. Like many children in care she did not value anything she had done herself. Nonetheless she proudly pointed out a feature unique to the hutch – a shelf for the mother rabbit to withdraw, 'when she gets tired of her babies.'

The best Care Homes have the potential to transform lives. The proof is in the difference between new arrivals and those young people who have been resident for some months. They had relaxed, were able to concentrate on their work and enjoy activities. They had learned to control themselves, most of the time, and develop a rapport with adults.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Toyah of the high jump was one such success story. She had gained confidence and discovered a world outside the narrow pleasures of drugs, sex and crime. She had even dumped her pimp and talked about going to college. So what would happen to her next? How would Social Services build on success?

Unfortunately the Home is less about long-term success and more about short-term containment. Too often the young person enters a Home because their behaviour has left Social Services with no other option. Too often they leave to ‘anything,’ as the head of Toyah’s Home put it, ‘as long as it is cheaper than here.’ As far as local authorities are concerned, he explained, ‘after us, the cheapest option is the best option.’ For Social Services the outward bound course had done the trick. It had kept Toyah safe and off the streets until her 16th birthday when she becomes a Care Leaver. They have no plans to build upon Toyah’s achievement and ensure a successful future.

In the end, we have no way of distinguishing what makes that crucial difference to a young person’s life. Local authorities do not track young people past the age of 19. They do not know which Homes work or why. The same confidential consultancy report advises investors that ‘buyers (local authorities) have relatively little knowledge on product differentiation.’ It continues, ‘Similarly very few performance measures are in place. There is too much reliance on word-of-mouth.’

The staff of Toyah’s Children’s Home did not know what would happen to her. She would most likely move into a flat or hostel on an inner city estate. Despite the thousands of pounds spent, her outlook is bleak. Statistically she is likely to drift back into her old life. In ten years time she will have turned into another Anita, homeless, on drugs and her children in care. The jump – that dizzying moment of happiness and accomplishment – nothing but a memory.

CHAPTER FOUR

EDUCATION

Stella, a 21-year-old aspiring actress from South Africa, was working in a pub in Brixton. She got friendly with two boys, one black and one white, who hung around the bar on roller skates. Jason and Dwayne were about 13, in care and illiterate. 'They had never been out of Brixton,' said Stella, 'because they could not read the signs on the buses and tubes.' In between shifts, Stella gave them reading lessons at the bar. 'They were really interested,' she recalled.

When Dwayne ran away from his strict Jamaican foster parents and Jason from his Care Home in North London, Stella took them in. 'They were brilliant boys,' she said, 'really bright and funny and very forgiving. They had been fucked by their parents and fucked by the system.' They moved into her squat and slept on her sofa. She took them home to meet her parents and tried to get them to go to school. Despite her care, they drifted into drugs and crime. When Jason was arrested, Stella wrote to the judge. 'This is your shit. The kid has been in your hands since four years old and he can't even read.'

Jason got off.

HANDLE WITH CARE

TOYAH'S FUTURE is so grim because, like the majority of people interviewed for this report, she can barely read or write. The state is failing to teach even basic literacy to many young people in care.

There exists a huge chasm between the educational achievement of young people in care and their more fortunate contemporaries. Up and down the country pupils may sit in the same classroom but, 'For all intents and purposes,' states research commissioned by Who Cares? Scotland, young people in care, 'are in a different class.'⁴¹

The majority of young people enter care in their early teens – just as they start their GCSE course. A disturbed childhood means many have missed out on education and are already struggling with school work. Unfortunately in this area, as in so many, their experience of education reinforces their problems.

In 2004/5, less than half (43%) of looked after children obtained at least one GCSE or GNVQ on leaving school. This compares with 95% of all children. The Government considers one GCSE such a low level of achievement that it does not bother to report the statistic for children not in Care.⁴² Only 6% of looked after children leave care with five or more GCSEs. This is in stark contrast to other children. In the same year 56.3% achieved the equivalent of five GCSEs.⁴³

The figure varies widely from region to region suggesting that this is more a failing of individual local authorities than the child in care. In the best performing local authority 83% of Care Leavers achieve at least one GCSE or GNVQ; in the worst it is as low as 16%. 41% of looked-after children failed even to sit an examination. Certainly only one of the Care Leavers I interviewed had passed an exam.

⁴¹ *The Times Educational Supplement*, 29 October 2004.

⁴² NCH, *Close the Gap*, September 2005.

⁴³ Barnardo's, *Failed by The System*, 2006.

EDUCATION

Contrary to perception, most young people from care know how important education is for them. They understand that education is the key to escaping a lifetime of disadvantage. Lancashire local authority surveyed social workers, foster carers and young people to discover what each group considered the important issues for those in care. Bedtime and pocket money responded social workers and foster carers. 93% of young people disagreed. They listed education as their top priority. They complained of changing schools and lacking a quiet place to do their homework. They wanted a computer and someone to help them.

The Government has set a Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI 161) to measure the number of 17-year-olds in care who are engaged in education, training or employment at the age of 19. Despite this target, education gets short shift.

‘Why is it that they always move you just before exams’

Mike Stein, a leading academic in this area, believes two crucial factors are needed in order to educate the Care Leaver successfully: ‘placement stability and the young person having an environment which encouraged studying.’⁴⁴ Stability is a luxury for the child in care. A recent report by Barnardo’s compared the experiences of 66 Care Leavers between the ages of 16 and 21 to a NOP survey of 500 parents of children not in care. Almost half the Care Leavers had attended on average six or more schools. Seven of the group had attended more than 10 schools. On the other hand 85% of the parents said their child had only attended two or three schools.

The degree of instability suffered by the child in care is mind-boggling. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) found that 29% of the young people in its study had three or more educational placements during secondary school. 25% had six or more care placements (up to 21) during the same period.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ M Stein, *What Works in Leaving Care?* Barnardo’s, 1997.

⁴⁵ F Fletcher-Campbell and T Archer, *Achievement at Key Stage Four of Young People in Public Care*, NFER, 2003.

HANDLE WITH CARE

As one child remarked, ‘I went to six schools from when I was eight and I first went into care – to when I left. It didn’t help.’⁴⁶ Another commented, ‘I just wished they’d not moved me around so much, it affected my education for one thing. I did alright at school before all this moving around.’

Young people can find themselves moved in the middle of the school year or to a school with a different syllabus – disastrous just before exams. One commented: ‘Why is it that they always move you just before exams – I was only two days off my GCSEs and they came and told me I’d be moving within the next three weeks. That wasn’t right – I knew nothing about that before then and I’d been there three years – it wasn’t even as if they told me where I was going.’⁴⁷

‘I used to get them ready for school then go out onto the streets’

Children require an environment in which education is ‘valued, encouraged and supported,’ in order to achieve academically.⁴⁸ Many young people in care do not receive that support. 40% of foster carers in Scotland and Wales have no educational qualifications at all. 26 of the 66 Care Leavers interviewed by Barnardo’s said no one had attended their school parent’s evening or other school events. When someone did attend, it was more likely to be a foster carer than a residential or social worker. In the same survey, nearly half the young people interviewed said they were never praised or rewarded if they did well at school. Almost all said that praise would have encouraged them to try harder. This is in contrast to the behaviour of the 500 parents interviewed whose children were not in care. 96% of them attended parent’s evenings and 97% rewarded children who did well at school.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ J Vernon, *Audit and Assessment of Leaving Care Services in London*, National Children’s Bureau, 2000.

⁴⁷ J Vernon, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ S Jackson et al., *By Degrees: the first year from care to university*, The Frank Butler Trust, 2003.

⁴⁹ Barnardo’s, *Failed by the System*, 2006.

EDUCATION

Again and again I asked young people in care if anyone had checked they had done their homework or even if they were attending school. They looked at me as if I was talking a foreign language.

School becomes just another arena, points out Bob Broad, a leading academic in the area, where children in care suffer stigma, bullying and exclusion 'yet again.' Efforts to do well become 'lost and entangled' in the struggle just to survive.⁵⁰

Many find themselves grappling with problems unimaginable to the pupil from a stable background. After a night taking drugs with his father Jake was up first thing to get his sisters ready for school. Before leaving himself, he took speed to help concentrate on his lessons. In the middle of his GCSEs, he had to visit a police station in order to get a panic button installed at the home of his foster parents. His father, against whom he had testified in court, was coming out of jail the same month as his exams.

To Donna, a sex worker, school was a luxury. Brought up in the Caribbean, her mother had sent for her when she was 12. As a drug addict and a prostitute, she put Donna to work immediately in the same business. When the mother went to prison, Donna took care of her two half sisters and brother. 'I used to get them ready for school then go out onto the streets,' she recalled, 'I was as much an adult as you are now. I never had a family before. I loved them. They don't remember but I do and I had to take drugs to get through it.' I asked about her schooling, she burst out laughing. 'School? I was beaten if I was found in school. I had to go out and make money.'

'Those who get left behind'

Too often schools remain impervious to the extra help a young person in care might need. In 2000 the Department of Education and Skills in England and Wales required schools to designate a

⁵⁰ R Broad, *op. cit.*

HANDLE WITH CARE

teacher trained in all aspects of the care system. They should have 'enough authority to make things happen and be an important resource for the child.'⁵¹ In a recent survey by Barnardo's of 66 Care Leavers, 55 were unaware of any such teacher.⁵²

Schools have other priorities. They are judged by the number of pupils who obtain five GCSE passes at A*-C – in other words five good passes. Dr John Marks of the National Educational Research Trust argues, 'There is plenty of anecdotal evidence' to show teachers put in a disproportionate amount of effort to raise pupils on D grades, 'while those predicted to get less than that are left behind.'⁵³ One Coventry teacher said, 'I think that we should be raising the level of emphasis placed on kids in danger of getting no passes at all.'

The Government is hardly helping either. A Public Service Agreement target to improve educational attainment of Care Leavers by 2006, had to be 'revised' after it failed to happen. In 2005, only 25% of councils had 15% of their children achieving five good GCSEs (or equivalent). The target states that all authorities should reach this standard by 2006.⁵⁴

The Children's Act places a duty on local authorities to promote the educational achievement of looked after children. Despite lobbying from many children's organisations, it did not place that duty on schools. New statutory guidance states that children in care should be given priority in the admission process. However this only applies at the beginning of each school year. Most looked after children enter school throughout the year. Like

⁵¹ Barnardo's, *Failed by the System*, 2006.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ J Tate and G Clark, *The Children Left Behind*, Conservative Policy Unit, 2002.

⁵⁴ DfES, *Statistics of Education Outcome Indicators for Looked after children, Twelve months to 30 September 2005*, 2006.

EDUCATION

so many initiatives for children in care, it sounds good but has little to do with what actually happens.⁵⁵

The same indifference pervades local authorities. A report by the NFER looked at young people in the care of 12 local authorities. Of the 377 young people surveyed, Social Services could only provide a complete picture of educational history and attainment for one of them. 26% of the children in the research sample were not entered for any GCSEs. There was no data on a further 31%.⁵⁶

Schools fail even to ensure young people attend. In their final year of schooling, only 9% of Care Leavers turned up at school every day. The report by the NFER revealed 9% of young people in care were absent at least a quarter of the time, 5% were absent half of the time or more and 7% never attended. Shockingly the local authorities could produce no attendance figures for 29% of the young people in the survey.⁵⁷

In 2003 the Social Exclusion Unit noted that children in care were ten times more likely to be excluded than other children. Barnardo's discovered that 41 of the 66 Care Leavers it surveyed had been excluded from school for periods lasting between one day and two years. 18 young people had received no alternative education in the time they were excluded. This compares to a NOP poll of parents of children not in care. 93% said their child had never been excluded from school.

Children excluded from school are still meant to receive an education. An independent Education Consultant whose job it is to teach them described her pupils in care as 'running wild.' She found them scarred from abuse and, 'like little animals – violent, aggressive with no social mores at all. They are used to going completely insane when anyone asks them to do anything.'

⁵⁵ Societyguardian, *Working with children*, 2006.

⁵⁶ F Fletcher-Campbell and T Archer, *Achievement at Key Stage Four of Young People in Public Care*, NFER, 2003.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Societyguardian, *Working with children*, 2006.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Two little girls she taught had been discovered crawling amongst excrement and heroin needles, eating dog food and afraid to make eye contact with an adult. She went on, 'Most middle-class people don't have a clue about what's going on. It's a sub-class.'

She insisted that these children – and she was recommended by a Care Leaver as being exceptional at her job – were 'very amenable to education.' In her local authority, however, they received only the minimum entitlement – just three hours tuition a week. What good did that do the 15 of her pupils who had been excluded from school since the age of 11? How were they going to learn to read and write let alone pass any exams? And even those meagre three hours she had to fight for.

Once again it was a lack of money being spent at the right time. Inner city boroughs sent young people to private foster carers living in her local authority. 'It's almost like an industry,' she remarked. Her local authority had no knowledge of these young people and no control over the numbers moving to the area. They lacked places in schools and specialist provision. 'The specialist schools have all been closed,' she explained – a drawback when so many children in care have learning difficulties. The NFER discovered that 36% of their survey had a statement of Special Educational Needs and a further 14% had some learning difficulties.⁵⁸

Many of her children appeared to be no one's responsibility. She was teaching one 11-year-old girl who was drinking vodka, having sex and smoking weed. When the child failed to turn up for a maths lesson, the education consultant went in search. She found the girl, 'wandering around the town centre in her pyjamas, covered in blood and distraught.' When she rang Social Services, they claimed the girl was fine. Incensed, the Education Consultant reported the case to the local MP. This did her no

⁵⁸ Quoted in Societyguardian, *Working with children*, 2006.

EDUCATION

good at all. She recalled, 'I was castigated by my line manager and abused by the MP for interfering. I was disgusted. It's all about money.'

That girl was not the exception. The consultant recalled the deaf and schizophrenic boy for whom she could get no help. 'I was told, "keep your nose out of it. It's not your responsibility."' Well, who else is going to do something for these kids? Nobody. It's a degrading and debilitating system. No one speaks up for them. There is no one to fight for these children but me.'

Nowhere to go

By the time young people arrive in a Children's Home, they have gone through several placements and are very disturbed. The director of education in one large Home described the effect this had on them. They had usually been thrown out of every school and every special school in their area, and so had 'very low' literacy rates. Their lack of education is a 'leading factor in low self-esteem.' They are bullies or they have been bullied and are convinced they will be made fun of in class. They therefore distrust and fear school. When pushed, they invariably assault people and throw things. He said, 'that is the nature of our young people.'

Sometimes it takes six months to coax them into the classroom. Some arrive with cuddly toys for security. He explained, 'It's about plugging away, not letting them take control and making sure they understand school is not an option. It's a priority.'

He taught no more than four to a class. Once they finally settle to learning, 'they catch up very quickly. They really enjoy maths. Even when they can barely read, they enjoy figures.' When a new pupil joins the group and misbehaves 'they get extremely irritated.'

All this good, not to mention expensive, work – the Home in question charges £4,000 a week for each child – is undone once the young person leaves. Six months previously a local authority moved

HANDLE WITH CARE

one young man who had ‘done brilliantly’ to foster carers. He still does not have a place in a school. When the director rang him, he said, ‘Two weeks ago a tutor spent an hour. I have not seen him since.’ The director went on, ‘Social Services promise to set up his education and then do nothing. This happens a lot. All the effort we put in to building up their confidence, getting them to engage in education, all wasted. It makes a mockery of our hard work.’

He was also angry at the lack of continuity. ‘We had a girl who discovered she was gifted at languages and really enjoyed studying French and Spanish. She wanted to learn German.’ The girl was moved. ‘We are quite often not consulted on the next placement or its timing.’ Her Social Services department failed to contact him to learn what the girl had achieved and what she should do next. ‘They are supposed to show a continual educational history. All I know is that she is somewhere in Kent.’

It was the same story when he enquired about a child’s former education. ‘We never get work from the previous placement. The child tells me what they did. I ring up “No,” I am told, ‘We’ve thrown that out,” or “She never did it.”’ He believed that education ‘boosts their confidence. They are proud of what they achieve. What does it say to them when their work is just thrown away or lost?’

He went on sadly, ‘Child care is meant to be child-led. At the end of the day it’s resource-led. That does upset me. I have seen it so many times.’

From school to...?

It is no surprise to discover that 20% of Care Leavers are unemployed by the September after leaving school.⁵⁹ This compares to 7% of all school leavers. In the study done by the NFER, 19% of all Care Leavers and 30% of those with no GCSEs were not in education, training or employment after the age of 16.

⁵⁹ DfES, *Statistics of Education Outcome Indicators for Looked after children, Twelve months to 30 September 2005, 2006.*

EDUCATION

There is little future for young people without a qualification, let alone the basic living skills to budget, read labels or make sense of a letter from the bailiffs. When you have watched a young person struggle to do what the rest of us take for granted, you understand what social exclusion is all about. A lack of education condemns them to a life sentence on the margins of society.

The market for youth labour, in particular unskilled youth labour, has collapsed in the last 20 years. To get anywhere, young people need training, higher levels of education and above all, support. Where does that leave the 16-year-old unskilled, barely supported Care Leaver?

Before being elected in 1997, the New Labour Government announced its intention to place education, training and the transition into employment at the centre of its policies for young people. As Blair said in 1999, 'the best defence against social exclusion is having a job and the best way to get a job is to have a good education with the right training and experience.'

The state cannot make up for the lack of parents but it can provide young people in its care this 'best defence.' Its failure to do so undermines the policies closest to the Government's heart – to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. As a retired Manchester teacher said, 'The number of kids who finish school with absolutely nothing to show for it is appalling. What are you supposed to tell kids like that? Careers advice is out of the window: the challenge I suppose is just to keep them out of jail – anything else is a bonus.'⁶⁰

This system lets down clever Care Leavers as surely as those barely able to read or write. Only an estimated 1% of looked after children go on to university⁶¹ – an astonishing figure considering the Government wants 50% of all young people in further education. The dearth of official statistics is startling. None exist

⁶⁰ J Tate and G Clark, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ S Jackson et al., *op. cit.*

HANDLE WITH CARE

on the performance of Care Leavers at A level or the numbers who make it to university.⁶² A Who Cares? Report asked 170 youngsters in care with 29 Scottish local authorities their plans for higher education. Out of 170, only 11 aspired to college or university. None were male.⁶³

The experience of Prince, aged 18, who I met in a hostel in south London, explains why. He was obviously bright but his intelligence was not an asset in the care system – in fact the opposite.

Things ‘had gone sour’ between Prince and his foster mother when he was 12. Shortly afterwards his brother, to whom he was close, died. Prince had dropped out of college but was eager to resume his education or get a job. He wanted Social Services to help him find a flat. In order to get the referrals from the hostel for that to happen, ‘you have to interact with the courses offered by the hostel otherwise they don’t let you out.’ This gave him little time for job-hunting. In fact, getting a job would land him into difficulties. It would put a halt to the all-important ‘interacting with courses’ and his plans to move out. He said of the courses, ‘That’s all management here seems to care about.’

The problem was most of the courses were ‘the basic of the basics,’ and designed for the barely literate. ‘They have nothing at my level.’ He finished the IT course with ease but then he had already done IT for GSCE – something his key worker had failed to spot. The IT teacher offered to teach him to a higher level but the manager said they lacked the funds. Instead he praised Prince for his intelligence. Prince dismissed this as ‘patronising.’ He said bitterly, ‘Don’t tell me I am clever just because I know how to use a knife and fork. That’s insulting.’

He had had four support and development workers in two months and ‘one stress after the next with the staff.’ He conducted a running battle with his key worker. ‘I don’t like him. He is

⁶² NCH, *Close the Gap*, September 2005.

⁶³ *The Times Educational Supplement*, 29 October 2004.

EDUCATION

useless and he doesn't listen to a word I have to say.' But then Prince, I suspected, was a great deal brighter than his key worker. Once a week he received counselling for his brother's death and his foster mother's (and his mother's) rejection of him. 'A waste of time,' remarked Prince. His counsellor spent the first 15 minutes of a half hour session smoking outside. When Prince remonstrated, he stubbed out his cigarette, saying 'Well, we can still do it in 15 minutes,' 'Get lost,' returned Prince.

The hostel had sent him on a Prince's Trust course. This, I heard from other Care Leavers on the same course, had proved a disaster for Prince. Many were illiterate and on crack. One girl stole a computer and smashed up two classrooms. Prince admitted, 'Some of those people blew my mind away. They were seriously mixed-up.' They assumed the well-spoken Prince was taking the piss out of them. He had to stand up and formally apologise to the group – apologise, in essence, for being educated and articulate. He had to explain that this was the way he spoke and he was not trying to belittle them, 'I saw it as an insult,' said Prince. The morning of my visit his key worker had suggested he do a cookery class. Prince said, 'I think he is being spiteful.'

The hostel's low expectations distressed him. 'They don't promote things that actually help you. They think I am very smart so that's it. I don't need to do more.'

The hostel might be failing Prince but they still made good use of him. One morning he was invited to come down stairs and sign up for a photography course. Prince arrived in the lobby to find it full of smartly dressed men and women. He went back to his room to change. When he returned, the manager apologised. Prince had just missed the people arranging the photograph course. Instead, would he mind meeting a minister and various wealthy sponsors? Prince, black, well-dressed and articulate pushed all the right buttons. Everyone lined up to shake his hand and be photographed with him. The next time the manager wanted to

HANDLE WITH CARE

show him off, 'I refused.' He added, 'I never did get to meet the people arranging the photography course.'

His experience in the hostel, the lack of support and the sense that his future was shrivelling up in front of him left Prince depressed and bitter. 'What next will they do to me?' he demanded, 'I am surprised when I moved in here there weren't some ropes and a razor laid out on the floor waiting for me.'

Prince had dropped out of college complaining of the 'lack of support.' This is not the Government's intention. The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 clearly states the local authority has a duty towards the Care Leaver who enters further education 'which extends beyond his twenty-first birthday.'

There is a huge gap, however, between Government intention and what is actually happening. For many young people in care exams coincide with placement changes, leaving care and the turmoil of adolescence. They wake up to the importance of education too late. In two large research studies, Care Leavers called for a 'second change' or if necessary a 'third chance to return to education.'⁶⁴

'The system has made it hard for me to achieve'

Unfortunately there are serious financial disincentives for 19-year-old Care Leavers to seek further education. Many find themselves unable to afford college as this affects the benefits they receive. Despite a chaotic childhood with his drug-dealer father, Jake had done well at school and received a glowing report from his headmaster. He was determined to go to university and become a teacher. He found himself facing almost insuperable difficulties.

When Jake reached his eighteenth birthday, Social Services informed his foster mother, Jackie, that all payments for him now stopped and that he needed to move out. Like many young people in care, he had missed out on chunks of his education. At

⁶⁴ R Broad, *op. cit.*

EDUCATION

18, he was still in school determined to pass his GCSEs despite being in a class of much younger kids. When Jackie asked where he was supposed to live, she was told to put him in a hostel for the homeless. 'You must be kidding,' she replied.

Jake stayed with his foster parents for a further year. When he turned 19 the local council offered him a flat. He moved out and another fight began.

Jake was entitled to income support, £44.50 a week, until his nineteenth birthday only. On his nineteenth birthday, Social Services advised him to sign on for Job Seekers Allowance despite the fact he was still in school and unable to look for work.

Jake now found himself in a predicament common to many Care Leavers seeking further education. As he was still in school, he was not available to work and so could not claim unemployment benefit. For three months he received no money at all. When school broke up for the summer holidays, Jake was finally able to sign on for Job Seekers Allowance. He had to go back several times. At the end of the summer he received about £80.

By this time he had got a place in college starting in September 2005. He planned to study A-level History, English, Sociology and Psychology and teacher training. This was all part of an access course to help him enter university to train as a teacher. It was normally a two-year course but Jake planned to do it in one year. He also had to study GCSE Maths and Science in the evenings. It was a lot of work, even without the problems Jake now had with Social Services.

In June he sent faxes to his local authority with his results, start date and course details. Jake had a discussion with his then social worker who assured him he would receive an income of £44.50 a week. This income from Social Services would also allow him to claim housing benefit from the council to cover council rent and rates. Neither Jake nor his foster mother, Jackie thought, there would be any problem. As Jackie pointed out in an e-mail, 'he is in full-time education and I had been informed by the 16+ team how

HANDLE WITH CARE

his local authority were on a real drive to encourage and support those in full-time education.' How wrong they were. A series of e-mails sent by Jake and Jackie to social workers and advocates over the next nine months records his struggle.

In September Jackie went on holiday and Jake began college. When she returned three weeks later, she discovered that Jake had received no money from Social Services. 'He hadn't got one thing in the fridge to eat or drink and he had lost loads of weight.' After a childhood of never getting enough to eat, Jake is small for his age anyway. First his family had starved him. Now it was the turn of Social Services. Jake said, 'I kept thinking the cheque would come tomorrow.'

He had no money to pay for stationery or his bus pass to get to and from college, 'He is the only person in his class without books,' wrote Jackie. At the same time, he discovered his rent and rates had not been paid.

Jake had fallen into a bureaucratic black hole. While he received income support, he was entitled to housing benefit. However in a curious quirk of the system, only those receiving an income (either from social security or earnings) are entitled to housing benefit. At nineteen he was entitled to Job Seekers Allowance but he could not claim it because he was in full-time education. As he was in full-time education, he had no income therefore he was not entitled to housing benefit. A student's allowance exists but he could not claim that until he was 20.

In order to claim housing benefit, his local authority had to provide him with an income. Jake had been assured by his social worker in the summer that this would not be a problem. She failed to tell him this had to be agreed first by the Placement Management Group Panel (PMGP) which only met on 20 October. At the meeting they decided to pay Jake £44.50 from that date. Why had they not discussed his case before he started college? As Jackie put it, 'What did they think he was living on in September and October? Air?' No one from Social Services

EDUCATION

bothered to inform Jake about this all-important meeting. The cheque simply did not arrive. Only support from his foster parents allowed him to survive. Without them he would have quickly become just another homeless Care Leaver.

The local authority ignored Jackie's e-mails. They did finally respond to an independent advocate who had taken up Jake's case. The practice manager e-mailed, 'I realise that Jake does have some debts and that these must be a worry to him.' He had therefore asked Jake's social worker to prepare an 'addendum' to her last report 'so that we can approach the Service Manager' to see if she might 'consider making a payment' to cover the lost two months of October. However, that could not be decided until December and the next PMGP.

In the meantime he suggested Jake pay off his 'outstanding utility bills' by standing order. 'How,' demanded Jackie, 'did his local authority expect him to pay the demands for the bills he has when he is already paying weekly instalments on all his bills as well as food, transport and so on – all out of £44.50 a week?' He had received a summons from the Water Board. Did Jake's local authority really think the courts would wait until the next Panel meeting in December?

Jackie dismissed the practice manager's view that Jake's debts must be a 'worry' to him. As she e-mailed back, "Well that is the biggest understatement of the year! Worry doesn't even come close to what Jake is experiencing at the moment. He should be concentrating on his college work and not having all this extra stress put on him; he has enough to cope with regarding some stressful family issues at the moment.'

She was referring to the lack of contact with his sisters and the pending release of his father from prison. This was apart from his studies. It a lot for any 19-year-old to cope with. Jackie said, 'They promised he would receive support then left him to starve. Surely it contravenes some human rights act to do that to any young person?'

HANDLE WITH CARE

Jake's advocate e-mailed some good news. She had finally worked out who it was in Social Services they should contact. It was not the practice manager – 'equivalent to a deputy manager' – but the team manager. Meanwhile Jake also had a new reviewing officer not to mention a new social worker. The practice manager confirmed that Jake's social worker had written to the Housing Benefit Office explaining that Jake would receive payments of £44.50 a week from 20 October. This would allow him to receive housing benefit. Jake now assumed that Social Services were finally paying his rent.

In January he received a letter from the housing department. They were taking him to court to evict him. He owed them 12 weeks rent, some £800. Jake was 'pretty distressed and Jackie, 'bloody furious'. As she put it, 'The council is issuing a summons to a looked after child!'

His social worker had never sent the letter. Jackie wrote, 'Again he stands to lose everything including his home. Jake was so happy as well, he had just applied to University and it just seems unbelievable that Social Services are set to destroy him totally after all his hard work and efforts he has made to make a decent life for himself. How can this keep happening?' The new social worker had already left. Jackie tried to telephone the Duty Officer but failed to get through. 'What a surprise!'

Nothing, it turned out, could be done. The next PMGP did not meet until March. At the end of January, Jake discovered he was not entitled to housing benefit anyway. Social Services, after promising he would receive it in October, had not thought to inform him otherwise. Nor had Social Services, despite their other promise, back-dated his allowance to September. He had no means of paying his debts. Jackie wrote, 'Last night he looked so defeated. I could cry.'

In March even his allowance stopped. When he phoned Social Services, they proved 'aggressive'. Jake had not received any money 'owing a break down to some system that wiped him off it.'

EDUCATION

There was no apology and the call left Jake 'very angry and upset'. They told him his allowance would start again in the middle of March.

At the end of March, Jackie received a phone call from the college. Jake had not attended for two weeks. Had he left, they wondered? Jackie went round to his flat to find Jake lying in bed. 'He was a broken man,' she wrote. He said he could not cope any more 'being on his own and not knowing if he was going to be able to pay for his transport to and from college, food or get more aggravation for not paying his bills.' He had not been sleeping for weeks over 'all the pressure at college and the lack of income.' Jackie felt 'devastated'. She had regularly invited him over for meals. He had always refused to take more than £5 or £10 at a time insisting his money from Social Services would arrive tomorrow.

Jackie packed his bags and brought him home. 'He looked totally relieved – at least he knows he is going to get fed every day and I am going to drive him to and from college and with a bit of nurturing, I am hoping we can get him over this hurdle.' He had eight more weeks of college and his interview at University. She finished, 'He feels totally beaten by the system.'

Once again the local authorities were not paying Jake's rent and rates 'because of some technicality.' Jake was meant to have sent a letter of agreement but no one from Social Services had informed him of this.

Jackie wrote, 'I want to know how anyone at his local authority would survive with no money for a month, no food in the house, no savings and still get to work and be able to do their job without losing it – yet they expect a young person like Jake to do just that.' It has been 'an ongoing battle for the whole year of his course and Jake is now on the verge of a breakdown because of it.' She went on, 'I'm not sure if Jake is going to pull out of this, this time.'

Jackie encouraged Jake to speak to his tutor on the phone with her next to him. His tutor agreed if Jake sat a timed essay and handed in some course work as soon as possible, he could return.

HANDLE WITH CARE

She wrote, 'I have brought him some books he needed today to help him and I'm going to type his work while he dictates it.' She went on, 'Jake knows that we all believe in him and if I can keep him here until he feel ready to cope back out there, hopefully he will be on his feet and get his well deserved place at University.' She noted that once she started doing things for him, he started 'to come back and take over himself.'

In May Jake received a conditional offer of a place at university. He wrote, 'I am very excited. All I need to do now is work hard and not give up. The system has made it hard for me to achieve what I have achieved. Without my family and friends to support me in everything I would never have got this far.'

Here is a bright young man who despite his family and his upbringing will now become a teacher and be a benefit to society. However this is no thanks to Social Services.

Jackie stated, 'If we had not been here, he would have had nothing. I keep on thinking, what the hell would have happened to him? No chance of his dream to go to university. He would have been destitute and in a hostel. It's disgusting that Social Services did that to someone who has been through so much and who has worked so hard. How many other kids are out there with their dreams? How many have no food to eat? How many have been left destitute with their futures going down the drain? It's frightening, isn't it? What kind of people work for Social Services? You have to be pretty hard to go home to your own children at the end of the day and know you have let a young person down.'

CHAPTER FIVE

LEAVING CARE

Nenna is tall, square shouldered with a big mouth and eyes, a cap pulled over brown curls and sensible clothes for the cold weather. She looks like a primary school teacher except for the missing front teeth.

She went into care at 8. Five years later her foster mother handed her back. After a series of placements, Nenna found herself, at 17, in a half way house. She said, 'I couldn't cope. No one came to visit me. No one checked if I was eating. I didn't even know how to collect benefits. No one explained.' Her foster mother, who had rejected her, nonetheless signed her up for a course at a horticultural college. 'I always liked flowers but when I discovered she had organised it, I just walked out. It took me until I was 26 to speak to her again.'

Nenna is now a sex worker.

HANDLE WITH CARE

FROM THE AGE OF 16, young people leave care. They exchange their social worker for a 16+ Leaving Care Team and their foster home or foster parent for independent accommodation.

It is a traumatic and dangerous period. Some do survive and succeed. The majority of Care Leavers experience a variety of troubles, including loneliness, debt, unskilled and poorly paid jobs, depression, homelessness and unemployment. Why is leaving care such a dangerous rite of passage?

The Government hoped to improve the situation with the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. Its aim is to delay the transition from care until the young person is ready, to improve preparation for that move, and then support for the Care Leaver and provide financial assistance. Or as the Act states, 'to advise, assist and befriend him with a view to promoting his welfare when they have ceased to look after him.'

In order to achieve this, the Act placed a number of statutory requirements on local authorities. All young people aged 16 and over must have a Pathway Plan covering immediate and long-term needs including accommodation, education, training, career plans, life skills, family and social relationships. This Plan must be revised every six months and runs until the person is 21 – or older if they are in education. Each young person aged 16 and over should have a personal adviser. Local authorities must keep in touch with the young person until they are at least 21.

The Act is a brave attempt to improve the lot of Care Leavers. How well is it working?

Leaving Care Teams are themselves unsure. 52 Leaving Care Teams working with 7,000 Care Leavers filled in a questionnaire on the subject. 55% to 65% of respondents reported that their assessments, services and outcomes for young people leaving care had not changed since the legislation. 20% to 35% saw, 'a slight improvement'. Teams with higher staff ratios to young people did better. All were concerned about the future. Ring-fenced funding for leaving care work has just ended. How are services to improve

LEAVING CARE

without more funding? Transition costs are rising and so is the number of children taken into care every year.⁶⁵

One social worker explained the problem. 'It's up to a local authority how they interpret the Act.' The funds could go on retraining social workers or upgrading computers. She went on, 'All this is seen as services to Care Leavers – but the money is not actually getting to them.' A social worker in Brixton commented, 'The Government puts it all down on paper but they don't put in the money.' A tattooed foster father from Kent agreed, 'it's a nice bit of paper but it doesn't do the business.'

The Act is full of good intentions but fails to address the central issue. Why are we removing adolescents, at the most critical time of their life, from everything they know or care about?

43% of young people leave care before 18. There is no going back. Contact with their foster family, Care Home or former social worker is not encouraged – however well they might have got on. It is a brutal end. A completely new set of adults looks after them in a new place. We would all immediately sympathise with a 16-year-old refugee, separated from family, friends and locality. Yet the same Government puts young people in its care through similar trauma as a matter of course. Pathway Plans and Special Advisers are small consolation.

Compare this to what happens to children from a stable background. Most don't leave home until their mid-twenties – ten years older than the Care Leaver. Most have two or three attempts at independence and a career, coming home if things do not go to plan. They take for granted they can always return for advice, support and the odd loan – not to mention Sunday lunch. This is a luxury denied the young person leaving care. When things go wrong, they go very wrong indeed and rarely is there a second chance.

⁶⁵ *Communitycare*, 8 July 2004.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Early abuse leaves young people in care often immature and emotionally ill-equipped for independence. They are often ‘years behind’ said the head of Social Services for one London borough. Yet they are expected to live on their own ten years before their more fortunate contemporaries.

One young person living in a semi-independent hostel described the move as ‘a big step.’ Social Services ‘literally took me out of foster care and chucked me into a hostel... they moved me when I was not ready for it. It was a shock.’ Another remarked, ‘one moment you are cared for and the next you’re on your own – it’s too great a jump.’⁶⁶

Many young people feared the loneliness of ‘coming home to an empty house’, with nowhere to return for a helping hand and sympathy. As one remarked, ‘When you are ready to leave you should be able to visit home as much as you want to.’⁶⁷ The sense of loss is clear. One said, ‘because I’m 18 I have to move, but I’m still 18, no different – they used to care about me.’ Another regretted ‘not having no parents and love and affection. I was abandoned once and then again at the age of 18’.⁶⁸

This abrupt severance of emotional ties is a key reason for so many young people failing. A successful life depends on forming relationships. The aim of a care system should be to nourish attachment. Instead it does the opposite. Affection is a bureaucratic nuisance. In one report, a social worker wrote, ‘child is very well attached to foster carer.’ Rather than cause for congratulation, the social worker complains, ‘perhaps too well’. Then goes on, ‘Difficulty will be in moving her on effectively. She is like “part of the family”... it is difficult for her and the foster carer to think about her having to move on just because she is a

⁶⁶ Voice of the Child in Care, *Young People...*, 2004.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ J Vernon, *op. cit.*

LEAVING CARE

foster child. If she were a natural child of the family, she could stay until she wanted to move out.’⁶⁹

The director of Social Services for a local authority explained many of her Care Leavers suffered from ‘completely fragmented’ self-esteem and a ‘negative perception’ of the care system. She then discussed the importance of ‘trying to break down’ the dependent relationship a 16-year-old might have with their social worker or foster carer. This was vital if they were to join ‘our successful Leaving Care Team’ and enjoy a bright future of ‘cooking skills’ and ‘learning to keep appointments with Social Services’. She saw no irony in her efforts.

‘It’s all such a short-term fix’

Local authorities have to pay for a young person to stay on in foster care. That young person is taking up a place, which the local authority desperately needs for another child. The relationship between the young person and their foster carer is not part of any Performance Assessment Framework, Best Value Performance Indicators or even the Public Service Agreements. No target measures what former Care Leavers are doing at 30. Are they contributing to society? Or are they on the streets? The relationship with foster parents or social worker that might have made the difference is abruptly terminated by institutional decree.

Foster carers criticised this sudden and arbitrary departure from home. They felt the move to independent living was ‘premature’ and many young people ‘ill-supported.’ A support group for foster carers explained, ‘This is not a one-off complaint but a consistent theme.’ She went on, ‘You see young people make improvements then it all gets thwarted. It’s so frustrating.’ Another said, ‘Once a placement is closed, that is it. It’s all such a short-term fix.’

⁶⁹ University of York, *York Research on Foster Care and Adoption*.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Foster parents find themselves caught between affection for the young person and loss of income. A woman in her late fifties fostered a young man of 18. He had been living with her since the age of 12. His inner city borough ran a scheme which allowed him to stay on as an independent lodger. This sounded promising, but the woman complained, 'I am not happy.' First of all the scheme only lasted a year which she felt was not long enough. She, like many others, pointed out that early abuse arrested development. 'He is very immature and needs caring for,' she insisted, 'I do everything for him.'

Then finance was an issue. As a foster carer with a private agency, she received £350 a week. As soon as her foster son became an independent lodger, it dropped to £150 a week. The inner city local authority was in debt and 'so cutting back'. She could not foster a new child at the full rate, because her foster son was taking up the bedroom. 'So I am missing out on a year's money,' – or £11,200. She went on, 'You can't refuse because you have grown attached to the child and them to you. But it is definitely a sacrifice.' Another foster parent said, 'The child has been part of the family. Anyone worth their salt goes and fights for that child. Don't they?'

The financial implications are not lost on young people either. These are children who have been rejected or mistreated by their own parents. Now they discover that the care and affection they receive from their foster parents comes at a price. When the payments stop so does the care. It is a hard lesson to learn at any age, let alone at 16.

This was a frequent complaint amongst young people in care. As one said, 'I have lots of people to talk to in my life, but they are all paid to be there.'⁷⁰ Another remarked sadly, 'When you are in care, any relationships you make are special and mean a lot to you, because you don't have many people in your life that truly want to be there.'

⁷⁰ Voice of the Child in Care, *Young People...*, 2004

LEAVING CARE

'I had left Laura to go back to this bullshit'

The complaint of Leaving Care Teams is somewhat different.

They found many Care Leavers resistant to help. Any parent of teenagers will be sympathetic. 16 to 18 is a traditionally rebellious age. But the unpredictable and aggressive behaviour of some Care Leavers (usually the ones that most need help) form 'a considerable barrier' to them getting services. Yet Leaving Care Teams seemed unable to imagine that their own policies might have contributed to a young person's anger and their determination to go it alone – often with disastrous results.

What can go wrong is illustrated by one girl and her foster mother. Laura has fostered Tasha from the age of 13. Laura is white, in her late fifties and wore a pink shirt with a Peter Pan collar. Tasha is black and in a short, silver puffa jacket. Despite appearances, they had immediately hit it off. Tasha said, 'Laura is like my mother, father, sisters and best friend all rolled into one. If I had not gone into Laura's care, I would never have had a sensible head.' For the first time she had been able to act like a carefree teenager, 'I didn't have to worry about where my clothes were coming from or if they were clean. I didn't have to worry where my next dinner came from.' Laura bought her 'a wicked school coat, new shoes, new everything. It was great.' Before Tasha came into care, explained Laura, 'She had been living the life of a grown up, partying, clubbing, boyfriends. With me she regressed to being a normal teenager.'

Social Services arranged contact between Tasha and her mother, 'I was desperate for it but Mum never turned up. I had a picture of how Mum should be but Mum couldn't meet it which would upset me. Then Laura would always pick up the pieces.'

After two years Tasha's mother announced she wanted her daughter back. Tasha admitted, 'I was devastated to leave Laura.' Laura was angry. Social Services 'were not thinking this through and looking at the past history.' She believed they made the decision, 'on economic grounds.' Tasha back with her mother did

HANDLE WITH CARE

not cost them anything. Social Services did little follow up. Tasha said, 'It was not long before she was back in the pub. Then she fucked off to Jamaica for one month leaving me on my own to look after my little brother.'

Tasha's mother had got her home specifically to care for the boy while she went on holiday. Tasha said 'I couldn't believe I had left Laura to go back to this bullshit.' Tasha went to Social Services but discovered that they had closed her case. No one was monitoring her and she had no allocated social worker.

She asked to return to Laura but Laura already had another placement. She was moved to three different foster carers. Each time the placement broke down. She explained, 'I found it so hard to adapt to another family's rules. To sit at the dinner table with Laura just came to feel normal, like my very own family.' Now, 'I turned into this horrible teenager, being rude, not coming back overnight. I hated the person I had become. I hated being in care. I hated my life.'

Meanwhile Laura was asking Social Services how Tasha was doing, 'Fine,' they told her. When Laura questioned why Tasha had not kept in touch, they said that was normal. Tasha, too, was asking after Laura. But Social Services had 'drummed into me' that once a placement ended, there was no going back. It was over. Tasha said, 'Not a day passed when I wished I had not left Laura.'

Tasha moved in with her sister, quarrelled, then was moved into a B&B by Social Services. She was told, as she was about to turn 16, she could not be fostered any longer. At this point she met a drug-dealer with 'a flash car' who bought her clothes and introduced her to coke.

'I want sex,' he announced one evening to the 16-year-old. 'I don't feel like it,' said Tasha. He said, 'I am not asking you. I am telling you.' Then he hit her. The man turned out to be a violent gangster who terrorised the area. He locked her up and beat her when she tried to escape. She discovered he had other women and children he kept in locked rooms around the neighbourhood. She

LEAVING CARE

escaped, went into hiding but he found her and beat her up. She escaped again. Laura was on her way to the shops one day when she passed Tasha slumped on the pavement, begging. 'She had two black eyes, a split lip and her clothes were not clean. She had always taken a lot of pride in her appearance. I was deeply shocked.'

Laura's immediate reaction was to take Tasha home. But she had a new child from the local authorities. Anyone staying the night had first to undergo a police check. She had to take Tasha to a woman's refuge. Later Tasha moved in on her sofa. Laura said cheerfully, 'I broke loads of social service rules. But I was not letting her go back on the street. How long would she have survived?' The gangster was arrested and imprisoned.

Social Services proved less than sympathetic. Tasha had made herself intentionally homeless and therefore was not their responsibility. They accused Tasha of manipulating the situation in order to get a social worker and housing. Laura described the relationship between Tasha and Social Services as 'volatile.' She went on, 'Like many 16-year-olds, she has a lot of street bravado. Social Services don't see the vulnerable side. They completely overlook her past history, her mother's neglect and betrayal, the separation from me, three further breakdowns. They can't see it might have some bearing on her behaviour now.'

'Young people come out so unprepared it's almost criminal'

The Children's (Leaving Care) Act requires young people to be prepared before they leave care. What preparation do they receive for this sudden transition to adulthood?

Preparation varies from local authority to local authority and remains, as one study points out, 'an enduring challenge' to the care system.⁷¹

⁷¹ University of York, *Young People Leaving Care: a study of Outcomes and Costs*, 2005.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Brent local authority commissioned Barnardo's Policy, Research and Influencing Unit to look into how they might improve their services to young people leaving care. Of the 23 young people interviewed, none felt they had received sufficient preparation. Those aged between 14- and 16-years-old had not even had a conversation on the subject with their social worker. Another study undertaken by the University of York over the last eight years, and working with seven local authorities on a major programme of foster care research, concluded: 'Hardly any social workers felt that the young people's situations fully met the criteria of being satisfactory, safe and materially adequate'.⁷²

One member of a Leaving Care Team said, 'Young people come out of care so unprepared it's almost criminal.' He went on, 'They don't know what bleach is. Or that you even need to clean a bathroom. None of them know how to cook. Half of the time they had a meal put in front of them. They all want a microwave. No one has given them any dietary advice.'

An experienced instructor in the Army which recruits widely amongst Care Leavers complained of the lack of basic personal and social skills. He said, 'I thought I was coming here to teach them to be soldiers, I spend the first couple of weeks teaching them to shave, shower and shit without them cocking up'.⁷³

Foster parents worried about the Care Leaver's ability to handle every day finances. One man said, 'One moment my lad is living with us and getting £32 clothing allowance and pocket money. The next he is on £44.50 a week for everything, utility bills, food, transport, everything. He will either be in further education or unemployed. So how's he going to survive unless he's got supportive foster parents or takes to crime?'

⁷² University of York, *York Research on Foster Care and Adoption*.

⁷³ Lieutenant Colonel D G Strutt PWRR, "I'm your mother now", *Culture Shock and the Infantry Recruit*, MDA Dissertation, Department of Defence Management and Security Analysis, July 2003, quoted in House of Commons Defence Committee, *Duty of Care*, 14 March 2005.

LEAVING CARE

This is what happened to the 18-year-old Mawgan Nurdung. After leaving care, he went from one foster parent to another and then to prison. On top of the £44.50 Care Leaver allowance and housing benefit, he receives £5 a week towards utility bills. He admits he finds it impossible to budget. 'I spent my money in 10 seconds,' he jokes. What on? 'Drugs (cannabis) and a bit of food.'⁷⁴

One young man told Barnardo's: 'Well I know it's not going to be easy, I know that for a fact 'cos actually I don't really know too much, I know bits and pieces but I don't reckon I know enough.' He went on, 'I know there is only a limited amount of money that I will be given to look after myself with, so I will have to learn how to budget, how to pay the bills like shopping by myself, all of that.'⁷⁵ A 16-year-old remarked, 'They say they do but they don't do budgeting, they just leave you to it.'

Another admitted, 'It's really scary – you've no idea how much you will have – nobody tells you – how are you expected to know these things. I was in a Children's Home and you never had money of your own. When you wanted money, you just asked for it. It's a crazy system.'

Young people complained they had no control or choice about where they would now live. In a survey of 11 Care Leavers all over the age of 16, only two were aware of where they would be moving next and both of these were uncertain about when the move would happen.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ *The Guardian*, 23 November 2005.

⁷⁵ D Clay and R Dowling, *op. cit.*

⁷⁶ J Vernon, *op. cit.*

CHAPTER SIX

ACCOMMODATION

I was sitting in a bedroom of a hostel in Brixton with two teenage boys, one black, one mixed race and both Care Leavers. They were ticking off all the people responsible for them; social workers, key workers, councillors, advisers.

'We are just a job to them,' they said casually, 'and they change all the time.' I looked around the grim little room. The furniture was falling apart. The small window was dirty and the paint peeling from the walls.

Despite the large numbers of staff, no one cooked them breakfast in the morning or asked how their day had gone in the evening.

'Aren't you lonely?' I asked. They had to look away.

ACCOMMODATION

READY OR NOT, the Care Leaver, their belongings often in two or three black plastic bin bags, now moves into a hostel or flat. This is a crucial period. Success depends on their accommodation, their relationship with Social Services and whether they are in education, training or work. Failure sees them on drugs, homeless, into prostitution or the criminal justice system. This all happens over a short period. Two or three years after leaving care, the majority and their children have become permanent members of the socially excluded.

However good the accommodation or efficient the Leaving Care Team, the young person is alone. It is a bleak prospect. A survey of 39 young people who had left or were about to leave care identified ‘coping alone and companionship as their greatest need.’⁷⁷ One recent survey of nearly 300 young Care Leavers found that 45% were often very lonely or depressed and living alone.⁷⁸

Local authorities are keen to promote ‘half way houses’ – accommodation offering the young person support. However a girl in a flat attached to her former Children’s Home complained, ‘It was lonely in the flat and I couldn’t stay there.’ She considered the ten people in her former home as family and wanted to socialise with them. But she was not allowed back into the house. She kept sneaking in to watch TV and ‘nick’ food. She went on, ‘They asked if I could cook, make a cup of tea but they didn’t ask if you can sit in the flat for two hours alone.’⁷⁹

Leaving home, severing contact with parents in the middle of GCSE or AS levels and then managing on a budget of £44.50 a week might challenge even the most organised and mature of teenagers. How many middle-class parents can imagine their 17-year-olds getting up in the morning on time, eating breakfast, getting to work, school or training again on time, shopping for

⁷⁷ J Vernon, op. cit.

⁷⁸ A National Voice, *No Place like Home*, 2004.

⁷⁹ J Vernon, op. cit.

HANDLE WITH CARE

dinner on the way home, preparing a meal, doing homework and then putting themselves to bed at a reasonable hour all on their own? How many can imagine those same teenagers coping with an emergency: a stolen wallet, illness, an unexpected bill, unlimited sex or the sudden arrival of ten new friends ready to party – again on their own? As one 16-year-old boy said, ‘No one is around to tell you it’s bedtime, no one to tell you, you have to come home around 9pm. You can get drunk...’⁸⁰

Most parents do not trust their 16- year-olds on their own for a weekend. Yet we expect the most immature, emotionally damaged and ill-prepared teenagers to cope with little more than a text message every six months from their Adviser. And for those who are single mothers, to look after a child as well. When Care Leavers fail, it is not just because Social Services are doing a bad job. It is because that job is almost impossible in the first place.

What helps?

So what does help young people make this transition? Unfortunately little evidence exists. The excellent report by Barnardo’s Policy, Research and Influencing Unit commissioned by Brent council to improve outcomes for young people leaving their care admitted, ‘No evaluations of the effectiveness of different models were found in the course of the review. This is likely to reflect the lack of evaluation that is conducted or commissioned by leaving care teams.’⁸¹

Accommodation is certainly a factor. While they are in accommodation they remain a member of society and have a chance of a normal life. However there is ‘considerable’ evidence that young people who have been in care are at risk of homelessness. In a 1995 study, 15% had experienced homelessness within nine

⁸⁰ D Clay and R Dowling, *op. cit.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

ACCOMMODATION

months of leaving care and over a fifth were homeless within two years of leaving care, some on several occasions.⁸²

Despite the Leaving Care Act, little has changed. In Scotland, for example, one in six young people was homeless a year after leaving care.⁸³ Barnado's website reports that one third of the young homeless have been in care.

You're abused at home so you get put in care. You're abused in care, so you leave. You end up in a hostel...

Why is accommodation failing to offer the stability so many Care Leavers need?

Many young people complained that leaving care meant returning to a world from which they had escaped. They might have done an outward bound course in Wales, come off drugs, passed an exam – all at some cost to the taxpayer not to mention themselves – only to find they are moved to an estate where the majority of their neighbours are unemployed and on drugs. One moment they are in a place that costs more than the Ritz, the next on £44.50 a week, sharing houses with, as Jim Goddard, Association Secretary of The Care Leavers Association said, 'some fairly unsavoury characters.' This is typical of the lack of planning and consistency in our care system.

Social Services put one young man from a family of drug-dealers who had given up drugs and got to college, in a flat over a known drug-dealer. He said, 'My flat is a horrible place. A Goth used to live here and it's all painted black. It's sort of putting you back to the same atmosphere you've been in the past. Sad memories.'

In one survey of Care Leavers, 42% of the young people's accommodation was listed as 'waiting for repairs', half of these classed as 'urgent'. These included broken door and window

⁸² N Bichal et al., *Moving On: Young People and Leaving Care Schemes*, HMSO, 1995.

⁸³ *The Daily Record*, 27 October 2004.

HANDLE WITH CARE

locks; smashed doors and windows; broken fires and central heating units; exposed electrical points; no hot water and, in some cases, no water at all. Outer communal security doors were regularly vandalised so they did not lock which allowed anyone to wander around the flats. The lack of security left young people stressed and scared. The local council appeared indifferent. One said, 'One of my windows has been broken since I moved in six months ago, and it is still broken. They say it isn't urgent so I have to put a board in it... It doesn't make me feel safe... and I don't sleep well at night.'⁸⁴

The same survey revealed nearly half of the young people felt unsafe in the area to which they had been moved. They complained of hearing gun shots at night, and people shouting, fighting and throwing things off the top of flats. One said, 'My neighbours come in and take my things and my money. I'm so scared of them. I feel like killing myself.'⁸⁵ A housing support worker said, 'I don't understand Social Services – what does it say to young people about themselves when they are put in such dumps and then told that's it, you're grown up now, get on with it?'⁸⁶

Some young people placed out of borough have a particularly difficult time. They have been living with foster carers often miles from the inner city local authority to which they belong. Social Services offers these Care Leavers accommodation in their original local authority. This means moving away from foster carers and friends. As the head of an independent fostering provider remarked, 'Once they move out, we lose contact.' One member of Social Services said, 'it can be very difficult for them. They spend years in leafy Chingford and then the best we can offer them is a place in a tower block on a pretty grotty estate. They don't know

⁸⁴ Bob Broad, *op. cit.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ J Vernon, *op. cit.*

ACCOMMODATION

anybody, they don't want to know anybody there and they can be a long way from what they consider to be home.⁸⁷

A shortage of accommodation, particularly units for single people means many Care Leavers are put in a B&B or hostel that might offer emergency accommodation to an age group ranging from 16 to 60. Young people complained of drug use and violence from other residents. One Care Leaver, abused as a boy, was raped by another resident. He then murdered the older man.

Many young people announced that they preferred to sleep rough than stay in a hostel. One homeless girl said, 'They put me in a B&B and said it would be a couple of years before I got my own flat. I was mad with them – then I got beaten up there and so I came to live on the streets.' Another young man asked, 'What do you do? You're abused at home so you get put in care. You're abused in care, so you leave. You end up in a hostel and you can't get away from drugs... I've no idea where I'll be next week, next year or in ten years. What I do know is that there is nobody there to help me except myself and you won't catch me going into a hostel again – never.'⁸⁸

'It's a fucking madhouse here'

Prince appeared to live in an exemplary hostel. The freshly decorated lobby boasted four new computers arranged on elegant glass consoles. They failed to impress Prince. 'This place is a rip-off,' he said bitterly. He pointed to the computers, 'State of the art? They're just to show visitors. Half the time the staff shut off the internet. The other half they block off websites for no reason.' It was, for example, impossible for him to do a job search.

His room was in stark contrast to the lobby. He showed me the peeling walls, the filthy carpet, the shower with its trickle of water and the window that never closed. When he bought curtains, a

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ J Vernon, *op. cit.*

HANDLE WITH CARE

man from Maintenance had spotted him carrying them in. He said to Prince, 'We are supposed to provide you with curtains, take them back,' But no curtains ever arrived. 'They made all sorts of promises at first,' recalled Prince. They promised to paint the place, provide a new carpet and a Starter Pack. When nothing happened, 'I used to go every day to complain,' said Prince, 'every day.' The manager told him there was a backlog. Prince discovered the backlog had lasted seven years. 'They couldn't even provide a mop and bucket to keep the place clean.'

A week before his cooker had blown up. 'I warned them it would,' he said. He had had nothing to put out the fire. The fire extinguisher was empty and the emergency blanket missing. In the end he had grabbed a pot and banged it over the flames. 'I didn't want it destroying my things,' he said. He went on, 'if it's not an emergency, it takes months to get anything fixed. If it is an emergency, it still takes months.' He complained of noise from the other rooms. 'If you basically say the wrong thing to the wrong person then it's all over for you.' He had tried complaining to the staff but, 'they do nothing about it. They just go through the procedure. "Fill in the form and drop it in the box," they say.'

He admitted grudgingly that they had started to decorate: 'but it's the staff rooms they are doing up first.' When his telephone broke, the manager accused him of 'stomping on it' and warned it would cost £150 to mend. Prince was incensed, '£150 for two little wires. He was belittling me. Just because I live in a hostel doesn't mean I have no common sense!'

His neighbour, Gabriel, was 16-years-old, of mixed race with soft, sad eyes and clearly on drugs. 'I have had a horrible life,' he said. His mother had died recently. 'I had lived with my step-dad for 13 years but he gave me up when my Mum died.' Had he wanted to come here, I wondered? 'I had no choice. My local authority put me here.'

On the floor were crumpled up posters and bits of clothing. A banana skin lay on the desk which had lost a drawer and a leg. Gabriel showed me a photograph of his mother and two, younger,

ACCOMMODATION

half-sisters. Otherwise the room was empty of anything personal. 'Well, things get nicked,' he said matter-of-factly. As well as weed, Gabriel took medication, 'for all the sad stuff in my head.' Like many Care Leavers, he complained that so many staff knew his personal history, such as the anti-depressants. 'They're so high on their confidentiality but they always know everyone's business.'

Prince explained the staff knew Gabriel received both disability and bereavement allowance. This left him comparatively well-off. 'He should get a little money every day,' said Prince, 'so it don't all go on drugs. His key worker is meant to give it to him. But then his key worker don't turn up or goes off sick and Gabriel is left with nothing.' Prince, who had a low opinion of the staff generally – 'most are agency staff and know nothing' – believed they were stealing money from Gabriel. Gabriel glanced admiringly at Prince, 'He tells it how it is,' he said, 'he's my only friend.'

The last time staff had failed to give Gabriel his allowance, he had picked up a fire extinguisher and smashed the place up. Gabriel looked sheepish. He explained, 'It gets pretty lonely here.' His other neighbours were ex-cons and drug addicts. He went on, 'It's a fucking mad house here. It's very easy to get yourself in shit and you can't get out of it.' He apologised, smiled dreamily and slumped back on his bed.

A lack of resources dictates the service received by Care Leavers

Young people end up in hostels because there are not enough flats – let alone suitable flats. Councils are in a bind. They have a limited amount of housing stock with ever-increasing numbers qualifying for it. The 2002 Homelessness Act required councils to compile a five-year strategy for preventing and tackling homelessness in their area. At the same time, regulations have extended the groups judged to be a priority. This now includes young people leaving care. But as one social worker remarked:

HANDLE WITH CARE

‘That’s all very well but if there is nowhere to put them, then there is nowhere to put them.’

In October, 2004 Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council found itself in a typical predicament. The additional people in its care had squeezed council housing resources. Councillor David Thorpe, cabinet member for housing, said, ‘Last year we had a budget of £7,000 for bed and breakfast and had to put it up by £40,000. This year the projection is it will run to £110,000. We cannot ignore it. We have got a situation where we are spending this money, which isn’t budgeted for and having to have supplementary budgets.’⁸⁹ They planned to convert a block of flats into 20 single-person units.

Scarcity dictates council strategy at every level. Trevor Watt, homelessness prevention adviser for Shelter’s south west region says, ‘Councils are under pressure from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to reduce homelessness applications. In my view this has led to creative interpretations of what the law says. Where they might get away with it, they are trying to evade their duty.’⁹⁰ Or as a member of a Youth Offending Team put it, ‘We are always fighting a running battle with our local authority.’ Kate Morris, one of the few Care Leavers who went to university, remarked on Radio 4 recently, ‘Local authorities just don’t have the accommodation so how can they keep up their duties within the Act?’

Despite Government targets, it is this lack of resources which decides the service Care Leavers receive. Some Care Leavers find themselves in a new, decorated and well-maintained flat. Others are not so lucky. One young man described the flat Social Services provided for him. ‘It was filled with rubbish, beer cans and that. The windows were broken, the electric wires just hanging loose and, out the back, I found a three foot high rubbish tip. Social

⁸⁹ *The Leicester Mercury*, 22 October 2004.

⁹⁰ *Communitycare*, 22 September 2005.

ACCOMMODATION

Services had not even looked at it themselves. They put on all this pressure to get me in it – then offered little or no support.’

Councils even cut back on the pots of paint they are meant to provide. A housing officer said, ‘When the Care Leaver first sees the flat, I have to say to Social Services, “what about the painting allowance? How many tubs of paint do we get with this one?” “Oh yes,” says the council, “you know about the painting allowance then?” They never volunteer the paint to the young person.’

Of course, councils want to do their best by Care Leavers. Budgets push them in the opposite direction. It is cheaper to have Care Leavers in independent accommodation than to keep them in care. So the pressure is to move them out of care. If the young person is then evicted, the council claims they made themselves intentionally homeless. The council has no further duty towards them. It is therefore in the council’s financial interest to move a young person out of care prematurely and have them fail. A housing officer admitted he was, ‘very cynical.’ He did not believe the Act had provided the safety net campaigners had hoped for. He went on, ‘You are talking about vulnerable young people, some with behavioural problems, being asked to live on their own for the first time and they simply can’t handle it.’

The housing officer was trying to help one 17-year-old girl. After a chaotic upbringing she had entered a secure unit at 13, but still remained in touch with her mother. When she came out, she returned home. After a month, her mother threw her out. The girl started sleeping rough interspersed with periods of living with older men who ‘looked after’ her. ‘We would go weeks without seeing her,’ remarked the housing officer. When things went ‘pear-shaped’ she would be back in touch. He applied to the local authority for housing but was turned down. The council claimed that by leaving her mother, the girl had made herself intentionally homeless. She is now back on the streets. As the housing officer said, ‘And they are seen as a very good authority! But they work to

HANDLE WITH CARE

a budget. If they can make savings, they do,' he sighed, 'I am very cynical. They put up a lot of barriers.'

The experience of Andrew Hughes is fairly typical. Andrew left care at 16 and moved back to his mother's. When that did not work he was 'chucked' in a hostel which 'was disgusting, and later shut by environmental health.' After that he moved into accommodation provided by a housing associating. But by now he was taking drugs. His family had moved away, his relationship with his mother had proved a disappointment. He felt abandoned. He said, 'It wasn't a good time. I started taking ecstasy, amphetamines, just to escape it. It make me ill and I looked awful.'

It also led to his eviction. He stopped taking drugs and found a flat at the local YMCA. He was still depressed. 'I was kicked out again. When I get depressed I become destructive because I can't cope. It's to get attention to show I need support but that behaviour gets me kicked out.'

Finally Hughes went to Shelter. He hopes to get a job and a new flat. 'The most stressful thing is trying to cope with it. At 16 I was too young to deal with the situations I was in. It's not been a great start in life but it's made me stronger.'⁹¹

The desire of many councils to evade their responsibilities is equalled by the Care Leaver's to escape care. Bitter against Social Services and adults generally, 'any sort of problem that an ordinary teenager has, they get in spades,' said the head of one social service department. 'They are much more damaged by ordinary teenage life than those with parents to pull them back from the edge.' The Thursday before two 17-year-old girls had gone out on a bender. He saw them on Sunday afternoon. One of the girls had a big gash on her arm. 'How did you get that?' he asked. She had no idea. She had woken up on Sunday morning in a police station with the gash.

⁹¹ Ibid.

ACCOMMODATION

Teenagers on their own, in a flat, attract pimps, drug-dealers ‘and a whole lot of new friends,’ as one remarked. Structure and normality quickly disappear. ‘There is,’ said one home tutor, ‘no routine in their day and they find it really disconcerting.’ She described how the young people she was supposed to teach (they have missed too much education to attend school) get up at lunch time, go around to their mate ‘who has been excluded from school’. They get drunk, take drugs, maybe break into a few cars then go out clubbing. She said, ‘They always have unexplained amounts of money and never eat properly.’

Early abuse leaves its mark

This is not altogether surprising. The stress of leaving care and living on their own brings to the fore the emotional and mental fragility of many young people with a care background.

Early abuse leaves its mark. The more adversities a person experiences as a child, the more likely they are to suffer from mental health problems. 45% of looked after children between five and 17 are classified as having a mental disorder. Overall 37% have clinically significant conduct disorders; 12% suffer emotional disorders such as anxiety or depression and 7% are rated as hyperactive. Compare this to the general population where about 10% of children and young people present with mental health disorders at any one time. Young people from care are four to five times more likely to suffer mental health problems.⁹²

They can frequently suffer from outbursts of rage or self-harm. Two-thirds of the 33 female Care Leavers interviewed for one survey admitted being violent towards others – usually siblings, someone at school or their partner. The violence included hitting, fighting, beating, punching, stabbing and slapping. The majority started to become violent in their early teens.⁹³

⁹² H Meltzer et al., *Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in Great Britain*, ONS, 2005.

⁹³ R Broad, op. cit.

HANDLE WITH CARE

In a large research project in Glasgow into the health of young people leaving care, it was found that 45% had self-harmed. There existed a direct link between self-harm and depression.⁹⁴

It is no wonder so many take drugs, 'it helps me forget,' as one remarked, 'and cheers me up.' A survey by the Home Office of 200 Care Leavers found they took much higher levels of Class A drugs such as ecstasy, cocaine, crack and heroin than the general population. 13% had used crack and 9% heroin in comparison with 2% and 0.6% amongst other 16- to 18-year-olds.

The survey found that where drug use became established while in care, the 'peak' period of drug use coincided with leaving care usually around the age of 16 to 17. Their lives had 'fallen apart' for a time. They felt they had left care prematurely and could not cope. They suffered homelessness and formed inappropriate and exploitative relationships. 'Such chaotic transitions were closely associated with heavy drug use.' So was living in a hostel. Peer pressure and loneliness made resistance difficult. They saw other residents as their 'family' offering friendship and support when no one else did.

Unfortunately there is a shortage of specialist provision for young people with both drug and mental health problems. Few professionals had a good word to say about CAMHS (Child Adolescent Mental Health Services). It was difficult to access and often inappropriate for Care Leavers while the transition to adult mental health services could mean weeks or even months on a waiting list. Even when help was available, Care Leavers had become disillusioned with Social Services. As the Home Office survey on drug use states: 'there is a long recognised difficulty with effective communication between providers and young people.'⁹⁵ When I

⁹⁴ Quoted in R Broad, op. cit.

⁹⁵ J Ward et al., *One Problem among many: drug use among Care Leavers in transition to independent living*, Home Office, 2003.

ACCOMMODATION

asked one young man his opinion of the drug rehabilitation course he had just started, he shook his head. 'Same old, same old' he said.

A man working for a supported housing agency – and one of the few social workers recommended to me by Care Leavers as doing a good job – said of the young people he looked after: 'They have huge emotional, mental health, drug and alcohol issues. They are angry against just about everyone. You have to find the person underneath who you know is there.'

How did he measure success? In conventional terms, he had done well. In the last nine months, 27 Care Leavers had been through his supported accommodation. In two years, two have abandoned their property and only one has been evicted. He, however, measured success, 'in very small steps.' If, for example, a Care Leaver is able to offer him a cup of tea when he drops around for a chat. 'It means they have stocked up with tea bags, sugar and milk. The cup is clean so I know they have bought washing up liquid. The milk is fresh which shows they have remembered to buy it and put it back in the fridge the night before. That's a huge achievement for many of our young people.'

He was an exception. Most social workers admitted to finding the 16 to 18 age group a challenge. As one said, 'They are the most troublesome. No one wants to deal with them because you can't produce results that look good.'

Another noted that the 16+ service in his area contacted their young people only once a year. 'That's all.' If they want help, 'they have to come and ask for it. There is no attempt to engage them.' He went on, 'I sometimes wonder if Social Services are doing that because we don't want them to use the service. Care Leavers are, after all, so demanding.'

The personal adviser in an inner London borough contacted her clients by e-mail and text four times a year. She said, 'If the young person contacts me more than I have to offer a service. This puts the onus on the young person.' She admitted, 'The only time they come to our attention is when it is too late.' A legal aid

HANDLE WITH CARE

lawyer said, 'the age group is not a national priority. They are a lost group of people.' A social worker commented, 'the Government concentrates its resources on children in care under the age of ten. Young people just get laws.'

The loneliness, lack of support, total freedom and too little money proves lethal to many young people. All too often it is, 'the beginning of a downward spiral which leads to enduring poverty, homelessness, early parenthood and drug and alcohol misuse.'⁹⁶ One young man who found himself in prison admitted, 'It is a relief really. I just couldn't cope any more.'

A social service department decided to follow up young people discharged from care some years before. To their surprise, even those who they had considered the most 'settled and coping' of Care Leavers, had lost or given up their tenancies after a couple of years. The department tracked down a number. Some Care Leavers had moved in with a partner. The majority had been evicted after running into difficulties. Significantly the social service department had no record of these young people approaching them for advice or assistance. The Care Leavers had just disappeared.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ J Vernon, *op. cit.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

SOCIAL WORKERS

A prostitute in her mid twenties complained of Social Services. 'They ranted and raved at me that I wasn't an adult until you're 21, where were they for me at 16? Cos by 21, I'd worked the streets, worked saunas, been raped, been beaten – like everything you could imagine – had a baby, a drug problem, given it up, I'd done all that by the time I was 21.

Between 16 and 21. Do you know what I mean? Where were they?'⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Quoted from M Coy, *Between the self and the other: young women's experiences of the links between care and prostitution*, paper presented to the British Sociological Association Annual Conference 2003.

HANDLE WITH CARE

WHEN A YOUNG PERSON ENTERS CARE, the state becomes their parent. Like any teenager, that relationship is vital to their future. When asked what they would do if in charge, 'by far the most frequently cited changes,' found a survey by the Rough Sleepers Unit, 'all related to the young persons' relationship with Social Services.'⁹⁹ Certainly the failure of Social Services dominated the majority of interviews for this report. 'Social Services,' as one educational consultant put it, 'are as much use as a chocolate tea pot.'

For many young people in care, their social worker is the only adult in their life. Yet, they complained, this important adult was overworked and had no time for them. Social workers were bound by rules, taught that it was unprofessional to get too emotionally involved and did not stay long in the job. One young person said, 'I feel social workers come and go a bit quick. I don't care anymore, I'm used to it. My latest social worker, I've already been told he's only temporary. If you know someone's not going to be around you don't bother talking to them.'¹⁰⁰ Another voiced a common complaint, 'I'd tell social workers to read the files! I hate having to retell my life story every time I get a new social worker – it upsets me.'¹⁰¹

Social workers inspired a feeling of helplessness amongst many young people. Jason, who signed himself out of care at 16, said, 'It's not a good idea to piss off your social worker. They got the power.' Many complained of their social worker's indifference. One girl from Brixton said, 'Social Services did not want to see me. "We are wasting our time with her," they said, "Let her do what she wants." So I smoked crack and ended up in the Maudsley.' Young people complained Social Services forgot about them for months, sometimes years, at a time. Then a social worker

⁹⁹ J Vernon, op. cit.

¹⁰⁰ Voice for the child in care, *Young People...*, 2004.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

SOCIAL WORKERS

would appear and make, with little knowledge or consultation, life-changing decisions on their behalf.

‘When I started in 1991, we were the iron fist in the velvet glove. Now we are just the fist’

Social workers, of course, see it differently. Most find themselves in a dilemma. Young people in care believe their social worker is there to support them. But in a world of limited resources, social workers must act as gate-keepers to the support available. As one said, ‘Social workers are being used to balance the books. A lot are having a really hard time.’ Another complained, ‘I feel I am an agent for the state. When I started in 1991, we were the iron fist in the velvet glove. Now we are just the fist.’

It is these limited resources rather than what is best for the child that too often dictates the social worker’s response. As one remarked sadly, ‘I am not happy. I am a qualified social worker. It is a massive contradiction. We can’t do what we want.’

In the shadow of a death enquiry

Today’s scarcity rather than tomorrow’s result dictates every aspect of the care system including the effectiveness of the social worker. Scarcity has forced local authorities to raise the eligibility criteria for people seeking help, admits the Local Government Association. In response to rising costs, 8% of local authorities propose to ‘tighten eligibility further,’ so ‘only the most needy and vulnerable children can be helped.’ The report goes on, ‘With budgets tight, the focus on fewer, most needy children has limited, and will continue to limit the ability to fund preventative work.’¹⁰²

What this means in practice was described by one social worker manager. He explained, ‘In the past we used to get heavily involved earlier with a family in difficulties – if there were obvious signs of debt for example.’ That no longer happens. The family

¹⁰² Local Government Association, *Social service finance 2004/05*, 2005.

HANDLE WITH CARE

situation has to be much worse before he will intervene. Now his concerns are more fundamental. The 12-year-old girl in foster care who is running wild and taking drugs, 'is she going to be found dead and will we be criticised?' As one advocate said, 'So much of social work is done in the shadow of a death enquiry and the fear of future failure.'

A child is removed immediately if there are signs of chronic physical or sexual abuse. When parents have mental, drug or alcohol problems, then he explained, 'we try and support the family and monitor the situation.'

Five or six professionals will meet every two or three weeks and spend an hour discussing the child. 'Are we making the child safe? Have we met the threshold, for example, for secure accommodation?' What was the threshold? Her life has to be at acute risk. He went on, 'If she is found unconscious from a drug overdose, that is acute risk.'

The alternative is 'they will end up dead'

What dictates the timing for taking a child into secure accommodation, for example? He admitted it was a balancing act between three things: the cost of the accommodation, the bad publicity if the young person came to harm and the harm done to the young person by the care system itself. It was, he admitted, 'an agonising decision'. Young people emerged from secure units, 'so destructive.' But the alternative was, 'they will end up dead.' At least in a secure unit there is 'hope'. Hope that he or she might respond to intensive therapy. Hope that he or she may bond with some adult. He admitted, 'It's a very thin hope but it's all the hope we have.'

This was a dilemma shared by many social workers. Do you leave a child with abusive parents or take them into a system that signs up the majority to a lifetime of failure? One woman described her anguish when she discovered she had put a child abused by her parents with foster parents who then sexually abused the little girl again. She said, 'So I work with the elderly

SOCIAL WORKERS

now and would have nothing more to do with child care.’ Or as another remarked, ‘You have high levels of intervention by people petrified of doing it.’

Social workers complained they found themselves faced with an impossible situation. Children from abusive families are often fiercely loyal to their parents. They hope against reality that their parents will change. It is difficult for them to break free from even the most destructive of family relationships. The guidance underpinning children’s legislation is clear: ‘children do best in their own families’. Social workers are aware of this and are also aware of the harm done to children by the care system. This drives them to try and keep children in troubled families against the odds. The children are further damaged by their parents. They then enter the care system late, around 11 or 12, when it is least likely that they can be helped before they hit adolescence. ‘We are,’ said one, ‘in a Catch-22 situation. Nothing we do is right.’

Social workers had another complaint. As one said, ‘We are totally driven by a performance indicator agenda at present and this has significant impact on what social workers can achieve.’ Too often these targets distort practice and lead to poor outcomes. Social workers do not want to deal with 16- to 18-year-olds because it is so difficult to produce good results. As the head of children’s services in one local authority said sadly, ‘Looking good has taken precedence over really “being good” at something’. Another complained, ‘Time spent on paperwork eats into time spent with children.’ Highly-skilled social workers estimate they spend only 30% of their time on direct work with young people. This is a significant change from 20 years ago.

Incompetence

This does not entirely explain the sheer incompetence of many social workers – a complaint made by nearly everyone interviewed for this report. An insight into what is going wrong comes from an unlikely source – a guide to IT for children’s Social Services.

HANDLE WITH CARE

The report involved consultation with child care and IT experts in 13 local authorities in England and Wales and detailed discussions with over 50 staff working at all levels in six authorities.¹⁰³ It came to a simple conclusion. Staff cannot get the information they need to do their work. They lack the tools, the skills or both.

The IT system is set up to provide statistics to Government rather than information to social workers. As one social worker explained, ‘The priority is for a system that will enable us to produce our performance indicators and make the required statutory returns.’

Of course departments must be accountable to Government. Equally they must help the people they are there to serve. Each case of a child in care consists of a huge number of details. This information is vital to the social worker and vital for the smooth handling of the case. Is the child’s dental check overdue? What is the child’s relationship with his aunt? Is his case review coming up? These details are not entered into the computer by the social worker but by IT specialists and administrative staff. This creates all kinds of difficulties. For a start, as one social worker pointed out, ‘The admin staff don’t know the children and families, so they get a lot of the information wrong.’

The screens are designed for entering information rather than retrieving it. As one social worker remarked, ‘Management information is for managers, so it won’t help me do my work.’ The report discovered no facility for browsing through records or setting filters in order to examine similar records. It was impossible to collect, for example, something as basic as all the cases assigned to one social worker or all girls in foster care aged 11 to 16.

¹⁰³ M Gatehouse et al., *The Knowledge: How to get the Information You Need Out of Your Computers and Information Systems – A practical guide for children’s Social Services*, Institute of Education, University of London 2004.

SOCIAL WORKERS

Social workers had difficulty accessing this information vital for their work. Often they were just too busy, they had to find a member of administrative staff or they did not even have a computer. They might not be attached to the network or the connection might be too slow. Their printers were sometimes not connected, and were also too slow, located too far away or restricted in use because of the expense of the ink. Managers in county hall were unaware of what was happening in other offices. 'Most social workers either don't know how or can't be bothered to use the computer properly,' said one.

In these circumstances, social workers keep their own records. Obviously these are only as good as the social worker. One said, 'My case files contain all the correct information – I never look on the system.' However an advocate for children in care who sees the files complained, 'lots are not written up correctly. Things get lost and are not followed up.'

Individual file-keeping by social workers makes it difficult for managers to keep on top of events. It is startling to discover that managers do not have at their fingertips the number of cases allocated to each social worker, let alone what action the social worker is taking – an up-to-date record of visits, assessments, care plans, reviews and court processes. The report comments that 'ideally' a manager will bring 'rapidly up on screen' details of individual cases 'so that you can discuss them with members of your team'. In any business, this is a basic requirement. In some Social Services, it is a distant dream.

There is a lot of talk about a 'holistic' approach to child care which involves communication between numerous agencies. This may remain just talk when even a single authority has different electronic information systems, introduced at different times, provided by different suppliers, often incompatible and unable to communicate with one another. Placements of looked after children, for instance, are usually managed by children's services.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Payments to foster carers, on the other hand, are managed separately by a system in the finance department.

The report points out that performance indicators, set by Government local performance reviews, depend on statistics put together from day to day work with children and stored in the main EIS. 'The quality and completeness of that operational information is crucial,' states the report. If social workers are not filling in this information, or doing it only half-heartedly, this makes a nonsense of the performance measurement work coming down from above. This in turn means social workers are 'reluctant to make the changes in practice and organisation which may be necessary.'

'It was out of hours and we don't get overtime'

Whatever the inadequacies of the organisation, a good social worker can have a tremendous impact on the life of a young person. One girl in Brent liked her current social worker because 'he listens and he's just a lot more speedy at things and a lot more things are being accomplished.'¹⁰⁴

Donna, the sex worker, had been left in charge of her step-sisters and -brother when her mother was imprisoned. At 13 she would get her siblings ready for school before going out onto the streets to earn money for the four of them. 'They don't remember that horrible time. Maybe it's better that way. But they also don't remember all the care and love that I gave them. But I do and I had to take drugs to get through it.'

Her drug addiction means she is no longer close to her siblings. They were saved by a social worker when he took them into care. 'At the time I was full of rage. I didn't appreciate what he did until much later. It's only now I understand. He looked at me and saw I had all this responsibility and I was still a kid. He tried to give me something precious that I had never had – and that was a

¹⁰⁴ D Clay and R Dowling, *op. cit.*

SOCIAL WORKERS

childhood. He showed me a lot of patience. He helped me see what was acceptable behaviour. What he put in place is still inside me today. I was so angry at losing my brother and sisters that what he said did not sink in. But he done good for them. They done well. He put me with a foster family in Hampstead. It was like going to the moon, it was so alien. He tried but it was too late for me. Out of the four of us, there is just one “negi” – me. Better one drop out than all four of us. He affected my grown up life so much. I would like to see him again and shake his hand.’

I asked the social worker manager for a success story. He also recalled a young prostitute then aged 11 and working in Piccadilly. He would go into ‘some bloody dangerous areas’ to drag her out of her pimp’s flat. Finally he put her into secure accommodation. Now she is 17 and still a sex worker but lives locally and has a regular bunch of customers. He said, ‘So that was the best we could do. On her terms she is a successful prostitute. From my point of view, she is safe.’ He paused and smiled. ‘She has a gorgeous personality. You can’t help but warm to her.’

Good social workers are too often victims of their own success. One in Brixton said, ‘I do go the extra mile for my kids but I don’t get funded.’ One of the girls in her care was in a play at school. ‘She begged me to go so I went.’ The girl was delighted. There were four other girls in the play, all in care. Neither their foster carers, nor their social workers, had turned up. ‘It was out of hours and we don’t get overtime.’

Another complained that for too many, ‘it’s just a nine to five job. They see a kid on the streets after hours, they don’t even acknowledge him.’ She was one of the few workers in the care system who kept up contact, ‘and I have worked with hundreds of children.’ She invited former children in her care over to supper and attended their kids’ birthday parties. But even she had to step back when one teenage girl got too attached to her. The girl had dropped out of college. She said to her social worker, ‘You never once asked me if I went to college – so I just didn’t go.’ The social

HANDLE WITH CARE

worker said, 'She wanted me to take an interest and tick her off. In other words she wanted me to be her mother. I explained I could not be her mother. There had to be a line.' The social worker took the girl out for a goodbye meal. 'The cab dropped me off then drove her home. We both cried.' But she had to understand, 'there had to be a cut-off point.'

She was not the only social worker to feel frustrated by the sheer 'neediness' of young people in care. They are, one said, 'extraordinarily demanding' and 'take up all our time'. In the end nothing can assuage the hurt and anger of adolescents who have suffered, 'plain, outright rejection' by their family. As another said, 'We are medics on a battlefield sticking plasters on people with limbs blown off. It ain't going to help.'

Over and over again when asked what they wanted to change in the care system, young people demanded someone to be available 24 hours a day. As one said, 'What you need is someone there that you can talk to and can help you. Not just when you know you're already in trouble but when you can see the difficulties coming – and you shouldn't have to go and ask, they should be there with you, ready for you, supporting you through it.'¹⁰⁵ Another called for help from an adviser who had never worked for Social Services. She went on, 'This person needs to be the same person always.'

In other words they want the one thing the care system cannot provide – a parent.

The voluntary sector

The Government is increasingly paying charities to provide services to young people in care in the belief that the voluntary sector must succeed where the state sector fails. The voluntary sector suffers from the same problems as other services provided by the Government and the private sector. How do you measure outcomes?

¹⁰⁵ J Vernon, *op. cit.*

SOCIAL WORKERS

In its report for the DfES, PricewaterhouseCoopers found 'significant challenges associated with the collection of recent and relevant data'.¹⁰⁶ It discovered 'no central resource or knowledge management system for accessing comparable data across different types of services.' Some information is not in the public domain. Some of the services represent newly emerging markets and little data exists from previous research studies. The accountancy and consultancy firm even had difficulty collecting 'robust information' on something as basic as the number, coverage and characteristics of current providers.

In this situation how is it possible to judge which initiative actually helps young people and which deserves Government funding? And when no agreed standard exists, are those charities most successful at attracting Government funds necessarily the best?

A visit to a drop-in centre revealed the pitfalls of the present system. The centre is run by a charity which aims to reach children suffering from abuse and neglect. Many are in care or are Care Leavers. The charity has a charismatic leader, an impressive board of trustees and a glowing reputation. The head of the charity told me that some 450 to 500 young people use the centre. 'Go down any lunchtime,' she insisted. 'At least 50 or 60 people enjoy our nutritious food every day.' I did and found just one sulky teenager over which ten staff hovered solicitously.

I returned on a Friday. This time about 20 young people were having lunch with more coming and going. One 19-year-old girl had brought her baby. She had put herself into care at the age of 12 and started visiting the centre a few years later, 'It was good then,' she explained, 'You had respect for the place. We got paid for jobs and same if we studied. Now that system has collapsed. You get money every week without doing no jobs and no education.'

¹⁰⁶ PwC, *Scoping the Market for Children's Services*, October 2004.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Every Friday the staff handed out cash in envelopes ranging from £50 a week to £200. This is a serious amount to a Care Leaver whose income from Social Services is £44.50 a week. The allowance appeared key to the popularity of the centre. 'You don't see most of the kids coming any other day,' admitted one member of staff. Many young people agreed. As one said, 'I come on Friday lunchtimes to socialise, pick up my allowance then I go.'

The young people resented the fact some got more money than others. They accused the head of the charity of favouritism. 'She's all over you when you are in trouble,' said one, 'then when you are trying to sort yourself out, she cuts away. I told her my deepest secrets. It hurts she don't seem to care no more.'

Two Care Leavers, sent by The Prince's Trust for a week's training, dismissed the centre as 'chaotic'. They complained no one gave them credit for their hard work. 'The bad kids go unpunished,' they sighed. One Care Leaver added, 'Everything gets stolen. I can't go to the loo without carrying all my things with me.'

During their visit, a young man had turned up furious that his money had been cut. He threatened staff, shouted abuse then snatched up a fire extinguisher and threw it into the office where the woman who handed out the cash crouched, terrified. He insisted on telephoning the head of the charity. She immediately overruled the decision taken by staff and restored the young man's allowance. As the Care Leaver had remarked to one staff member, 'This place is run by the kids not by you.'

Young people believed that far from helping them, the centre held them back. One said sadly, 'If you stay, you don't progress. You've got to leave to progress.'

On the way out I saw four or five cars queuing up in the street. Young people jumped from them and ran into the centre. Shortly afterwards they returned, grinning, got back into the car and were driven away.

SOCIAL WORKERS

Later, I met a young actress who had taken a 16-year-old boy she was trying to help to the centre. She said, 'It looked cool. The other kids looked cool.' But two years later the young man was on crack. She blamed the centre. 'It's the last place to go if you want to stay off drugs.' The young man nodded his head emphatically. 'I am not going back there. I am trying to stay out of trouble.' She continued: 'He went for the education. But he didn't learn anything. He just picked up money every week which he spent on his addiction.' I asked if she regretted sending him. 'Yes,' she replied.

Obviously this is only the opinion of a small sample of people and the charity is no doubt doing much good in a neglected area. The head of the charity herself insisted the kids were 'helped sensibly. We don't just give them money.' When I questioned the then director of the centre about the allowances, she said, 'Well, it keeps the kids off the streets.'

The charity has recently received a large grant from the Government. There are plans to replicate it around the country.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LOST

In the hostel for single men in Brixton a huge Rastafarian, dreadlocks almost covering his face, recalled his only job after leaving care at 16.

He had worked for a catering company. He described with nostalgia the pleasure of doing ordinary things: taking the bus to work, joking with his co-workers, even chatting to a girl.

'I held that job for a good few months,' he said. Then one morning he could not get up. It was the start of 25 years of mental illness. 'I could not think straight. It was no one's fault but I never did those things again.'

He smiled wistfully. 'It must be nice...'

LOST

IT IS EASY TO SEE that care is failing in the short term. It is more difficult to translate that failure into the long-term consequences for society and the young people themselves. The state does not track young people once they leave care. The true cost of what happens next remains obscure. The majority simply disappear. Survey after survey of Care Leavers admit a sizeable number have vanished by the follow up. As one stated, 'Those young people who are more difficult to reach are unlikely to be represented in this research.'¹⁰⁷ Where they are in ten years time is anybody's guess.

Nineteenth-century orphans traditionally ended up in the workhouse, prison, the Army, or sleeping rough. Despite the billions spent on the care system, has much changed for the better?

Prison

The failure of our care system is feeding our prison population out of all proportion to the small numbers actually in care. A prison governor complained of over-crowding in his jail. 'We are just racking and stacking.' He was unaware that a third of his inmates and half of all those under 25 had been in care. He had no inkling that a care system that worked would go a long way to solve overcrowding.

I had arranged to interview three of his prisoners who had been in care. When I arrived, the warden was apologetic. Her 'young men,' as she called them, had thrown a wobbly the night before and refused to see me. The thought of recalling their time in care and past abuse made three hardened criminals shake and cry. The warden had to send them to an art class 'to calm them down'. The governor was astonished. Normally, on any other subject, 'We get huge prisoner co-operation.' This was 'the first real no go area I've come across. It's quite striking.'

The prison governor had no idea which of his prisoners came from a care background – let alone had plans to help them.

¹⁰⁷ D Clay and R Dowling, *op. cit.*

HANDLE WITH CARE

The Army

This is in contrast to the Army, the one institution tackling the problem. The Army has traditionally recruited from areas of high unemployment where a 16-year-old with few academic or career prospects can sign up to a six year minimum service contract.

The Armed Forces have turned around the lives of many young people from care and, indeed, proved a lot more 'restorative' than many initiatives and institutions specifically designed to help Care Leavers.¹⁰⁸ Professor Wessely told the House of Commons Defence Committee last year that some members of the Armed Forces 'are quite clearly risky' and come from 'somewhat dubious backgrounds'. Nevertheless the 'vast majority' do well and 'the military actually does very well by them.' He added, 'I know that is not the purpose of the Army, but it is a side effect of the Army; it does address a socially excluded group which very few other people can tackle.'¹⁰⁹

A fifteen-year-old boy from care explained the attraction of the Army. 'They take care of you, ' he explained, 'they do everything for you, health, taxes, everything.' He then admitted he and his mate had set fire to the shelter at the local train station. 'But the Army don't care if you've done drugs or stolen cars,' he said confidently, 'With them, it's a clean slate.'

Not everyone succeeds and this is causing the Army concern. On a corner in the West End, a Scottish man was begging for spare change. Now in his early thirties, he had joined the Army from care at 16. He said, 'I really miss it. I like doing adventurous things.' Unfortunately he was an alcoholic from a family of alcoholics. His own grandmother, when locked away from alcohol in her bedroom, got so desperate, 'she drunk her own perfume.' The Army, he explained, 'is not any good if you like to drink.' When he left, 'they

¹⁰⁸ C Dandeker et al., *Improving The Delivery of Cross Departmental Support And Services for Veterans*, a joint report of the Department of War Studies and The Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, 2003.

¹⁰⁹ House of Commons Defence Committee, *Duty of Care*, 14 March 2005.

LOST

didn't give me anything. You are on your own.' He added ruefully, 'the Army makes people good at being homeless.'

In 2003-04 of the 35,224 applicants to the Army, 11,018 individuals, or 31%, were classed as deferral, failures or withdrawals at the Recruit Selection Centre. In other words a third dropped out.¹¹⁰ Wastage costs the Armed Forces money. As the House of Commons Defence Committee points out: 'Initial training competes with front-line operations and other MoD activities for the limited resources available.'¹¹¹

The Army is worried that the soldiers who leave early, who are bullied, who are more susceptible to psychiatric problems and who end up on the streets later are all the same group. Dishonourable discharge, for example, often has roots 'in pre-military experience such as previous conduct disorder or childhood physical or sexual abuse.'¹¹² Can problems be spotted and helped at an early stage?

The House of Commons Defence Committee states, 'The Armed Forces need to acknowledge that Care Leavers should be regarded as a special group with special needs and should take steps to identify and meet those needs.' The Committee noted that the MoD does not currently have statistics on the number of recruits who have left local authority care. In order to provide those figures, the MoD has commissioned King's College to undertake an anonymous questionnaire of 15,000 recruits to explore 'pre-enlisted vulnerability.' As one of the academics involved remarked, 'This issue has never been looked at before.'

It is a pity the criminal justice system is not equally cost-conscious and is not carrying out a similar exercise. What would the Home Office discover if they investigated the number of Care Leavers in prisons? How much would it change all our lives if they too took steps to 'identify and meet' the needs of this 'special group'?

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² C Dandeker et al., *op. cit.*

HANDLE WITH CARE

The homeless

A sizeable proportion of the homeless are Care Leavers. Every night, Centrepont provides a place to stay for more than 500 young homeless people in London. Of these, more than 70% have slept rough and 21% have been in care.¹¹³ Last year John Bird, founder of the *Big Issue* and a graduate of the care system himself, conducted a survey of *Big Issue* vendors. After adjusting the figures for those vendors who come from Europe, it emerged that 80% of the homeless people who sold the *Big Issue* in 2005 had been in care. 'I was surprised,' he admitted. But as he remarked, 'we spend a great deal of money keeping people poor'.

'I am still getting raped. I still get attacked. They always do it to me'

It is clear from even a brief look at prison, the Army and the homeless that our care system is the major contributor to social exclusion in this country. A childhood of abuse followed by an adolescence spent in care sets up young people for all the disadvantages that define social exclusion: illiteracy, homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, a breakdown of close relationships, prostitution, criminality and poor physical and mental health. Nor does it stop there. A child whose mother has been in care is 2½ times more likely to enter care herself¹¹⁴ so ensuring this 'catastrophic rupture' with society passes on to the next generation.¹¹⁵

A survey of 18 homeless Care Leavers by the Department of Health illustrates the consequences of a failing care system over the long term. The majority of Care Leavers were male and over 21. None were in education, training or employment. Four had been sleeping rough for four years. Ten had spent between four and 11 years intermittently homeless, in custody and sleeping rough.

¹¹³ Societyguardian, *Working with children*, 2006.

¹¹⁴ Hansard, 9 February 2005.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Bob Broad, *op. cit.*

LOST

Several reported abuse in care as well as before. Several had run away from care placements and gone missing. Several had tried to hurt themselves or had attempted suicide. One young man had travelled around Europe as a prostitute. All had a drug problem.¹¹⁶

Nina, small, dark and in her late twenties, described the effect that this failure has on the individual ten years on. She was wearing a black visor pulled low over her eyes, very white eye shadow and a black waistcoat with pin stripe trousers. Her front teeth were missing and her finger nails stained. Nina is a sex worker.

When she was nine, her step-father raped her. 'My Dad held me back from school one morning, stuck my head under water then took me back afterwards to school.' Sometimes he beat her with a belt. 'I knew if he kept me from school, I was going to get hurt.' Despite the hospital reports of her injuries, 'my Mum did not believe me' and refused to leave her husband. 'I was put away in a Children's Home. I felt I was being punished for something I had not done.' When she left care, she received no help. 'No one ever had time for me,' she said.

For her the punishment has never stopped. 'I walk the street, selling my body and I am still getting raped. I still get attacked. They always do it to me. I get slapped, whipped, punched in the face and back handed. What is it about me?' She takes heroin and crack to block it out.

At 16 she had a baby who now lives with his father's mother. 'Drugs and motherhood don't agree,' she explained. 'They makes you selfish.' Her son often complains. 'Mum,' he says, 'Why don't you show me that you love me?' Nina shook her head, 'I have to say, "I don't know if I love you. I don't know what love is so I can't show it to you." No one in my family ever said, "Come over and give me a kiss." You know what I mean? So I can't show it to my son.'

She starts to weep. 'I don't even know what normal is. I would love to be normal. I don't understand what happiness is. I can't

¹¹⁶ J Vernon, *op. cit.*

HANDLE WITH CARE

remember a time in my life when I was happy.’ She shook her head. ‘My life has been ruined and it will never get fixed.’ She went to the lavatory and reappeared, her white eye make up freshly applied. ‘You have to smile,’ she said and went back onto the street.

‘Dying – often at their own hand at a tragically early age’

Mike Durke, a former Swansea social worker and chief executive of the Phoenix Centre in Townhill is more aware than most of the link between a failing care system, social exclusion and the often lethal impact this has on Care Leavers over a long period. He told the *South Wales Evening Post* in October 2004 that he was concerned about the ‘alarming’ numbers of kids leaving care who end up living on the streets, having serious addiction problems, living a life of crime and misery, ‘then dying – often at their own hand at a tragically early age.’¹¹⁷

He quoted a former colleague who knew 12 young people in 12 years who had not lived past their twenties. ‘Five of them were young people I helped to look after in my four years of residential care in Swansea.’ He went on, ‘The main reason they die so young is that they are very poorly equipped to cope with life beyond the care system.’

One such young man was Keith Jackson. He had entered the care system in Swansea as a tiny baby. By the time he was 15 he was regularly absconding from the old Llwynceilyn Children’s Home in Cockett and catching trains to Cardiff to earn a few pounds as a rent boy. He later became chairman of Voices from Care, a Welsh charity which represents people who have gone through the care system.

Mike Durke said, ‘He was a lovely guy. He was a very emotional person – he always needed someone to be close to, someone he could lose himself in. But when there wasn’t anyone, he found himself in some awful situations.’ Keith took heroin and

¹¹⁷ *The South Wales Evening Post*, 7 October 2004.

LOST

deliberately hurt himself. He pulled three or four of his teeth out with pliers. But before he died, 'He had been settled and seemed okay,' said Mr Durke, 'None of us saw it coming.'

The last time Mike met Keith, it was to give him a lift from Cardiff to Swansea. Keith explained he had a client waiting for him in a massage parlour in Wind Street. He was 'well paid,' he said because there were not too many rent boys in the west. Mike Durke went on, 'Keith wasn't nasty or violent. He cared about young people in care and always tried to explain what it was like to be in care and not to have a family of your own. Keith was intelligent and sensitive but he found it very difficult to cope with what life had thrown at him. There but for the grace of God could go anybody's kids.'

Keith Jackson's experience points to a shift early in the care system from the child itself to their behaviour. A psychiatric nurse said, 'Each time a placement breaks down we focus on the behaviour of the child. The child as a victim of adult abuse or indifference is forgotten.'

Few professionals stop to ask why a child of 13 had tried to kill herself, why a nine year old has taken up residence in a ticket booth in Waterloo station or an otherwise intelligent and kindly man in his twenties pulls out his own teeth or another man bursts into such violent rages that the only safe place for him is prison. One said, 'You are treated as an object. You believe that's all you are worth. You feel you are a piece of shit. It's the hardest thing to recover from. You believe passers-by in the street see you as dirty and don't want to mix with you.' By the time they are selling the *Big Issue*, in prison, walking the streets or having their own children taken into care, it is no longer a matter of record. The true extent of the failure of the care system and the cost to society is buried.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

'I think it's being a father that's changed me more than being a Chancellor... I'm more idealistic, I think, about what can be achieved because I can see how when people come together they can make a difference.'

As a father, any time I see a child suffering, any time I see a child neglected, any time I see a child whose talent is being wasted and not fulfilled, I feel that's not just something wrong and a stab at our conscience. It's something that is a waste for our whole society. It's a stain on the soul of our society. So if I were to do anything in the rest of my political career it's to ensure it's always possible that every child in our country has the best possible start in life.

Now perhaps I've come to this from being a father more than before I was a father. But it's the essence of the good society that every child, none left behind, none left out, every child should have the best start in life.'

*Gordon Brown, speaking on BBC Sunday AM,
10 September 2006*

CONCLUSION

CARE OFFERS the Government the chance to make a difference to some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in society. Instead it is compounding failure in a manner catastrophic both to us and to them.

The state cannot replace the unconditional love of a parent. It can, however, provide an alternative to a violent and chaotic home life. At the very least it should keep young people in its care safe and give them what they need and ask for: stability, continuity and education.

No one cares enough to stop them

The American author, William Julius Wilson, examined which institutions helped young people escape inner city deprivation. The three most successful were Catholic schools, the black, Muslim movement and the military. All three provide a disciplined and principled environment in which young people can relax, find themselves and channel their best efforts.¹¹⁸

Unfortunately young people in care rarely encounter a 'disciplined and principled environment'. Instilling discipline and principles into teenagers is hard work and requires commitment. The contrast with the education and pastoral care on offer in the private sector is stark. How many fee-paying parents would put up with a boarding school as lax, uncaring and expensive as many Children's Homes? Yet the state does.

Instead of discipline and principles young people in care get 'rights'. A note to the annual statistics published by the DfES sums up this position. 'It must be borne in mind,' it urges those, 'considering' why a quarter of children in care fail to visit a dentist, 'that children have a right to refuse a health assessment or dental check.'¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ J Tate and G Clark, op. cit.

¹¹⁹ DfES, *Outcome Indicators for Looked after Children: twelve months to 30 September 2005*, 2006.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Toothache is not a right. And the authority that gives children in its care that right is abandoning responsibility. Anyone in charge of a child must be prepared to be unpopular. It is part of caring. No one likes dragging a child to the dentist, putting homework before a favourite television programme or stopping a teenager stay out all night. 'You know when someone cares because they are on your case,' said a criminal and crack addict to me – and he should know. Young people in care know they are allowed to do what they like because no one cares enough to stop them.

The long view

Young people in care are subjected to a system characterised by emergencies and short-term financial pressures. Government must look at the system as a whole and over the long term.

The first step to change is to understand the enormity and significance of the problem. A small number of people is having an impact out of all proportion to their numbers. Millions of pounds are being spent at the wrong time and on the wrong things. Young people must be tracked after they leave care. Mental health teams, prisons and drug rehabilitation programmes, among others, should follow the example of the Army and record which of their clients have a care background. Only then can we understand the true cost of a failing care system. Only then can we see the prudence of spending early to transform lives rather than later, merely to contain them.

The Government also needs to take a long-term approach. At the moment many excellent initiatives suffer for not being part of an overall plan. Before ending up in prison, Jason was sent to Africa where he proved 'brilliant' at working with handicapped African children. But no one followed up the success of this imaginative project. A potential social worker is now a criminal and drug addict.

CONCLUSION

Some recommendations

The crisis in the care system calls for urgent and fundamental change. Behind the statistics in this report lie examples of great tragedy, heartbreak and neglect which should not be countenanced in a civilised society.

Take care of these young people and we will go a long way to ensuring social exclusion and child poverty take care of themselves.

- The primary objective of reform must be to provide secure, stable, long-term and loving care for difficult children. This must be provided for as long as it takes for them to be able to move successfully into society.
- The perverse financial incentives which prevent local authorities from providing that type of care must be acknowledged and removed.
- The problem is not the amount of money available but the way in which it is spent and the point in a child's life when it is spent. We are already spending £40,000 a year on each child in care. In addition, there is the unknown but high cost of failure. The criminal justice system, the victims of crime, the NHS, CAMHS, Social Services and every one of us have to pay the price of failure for many years into the future. It is nonsensical to save money on, for example, foster care only to spend a fortune later on the failed Care Leaver.
- Local authorities should have the following simple, measurable and achievable yardstick: what percentage of their Care Leavers is a taxpayer by the age of 30? Or for women with children who are not working, how many have children with a good school attendance record? How the local authority reaches the target should be left to their judgement.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- In order for local authorities to reach that target, they need information on which therapies, initiatives and charities actually work. Ideas such as sending young people in care to boarding schools (which might be able to provide the structure and discipline so desperately needed) should be explored. But as with every other aspect of the system, innovation must go hand in hand with close analysis of what works in the long term. We urgently require what John Bird called, 'a scientific objective mapping' of interventions and outcomes'.
- The criminal justice system and other relevant bodies must undertake a similar exercise to the MOD. What percentage of prisoners has been in care and what services do they need. This should become a standard set of data for a variety of institutions and services to record.

APPENDIX

CHILDREN OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

CERTAIN FACTORS make the cost of local authority child care open-ended and impossible to predict. Take, for example, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. A questionnaire sent out to all 150 directors of Social Services in England in December 2004 by the Local Government association discovered that they are caring for the estimated 30,100 young asylum seekers of whom 10,900 are unaccompanied. The overwhelming majority are looked after by London authorities. At a meeting of ten foster parents in south London that I attended, all but one were fostering unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (who now have their own acronym, UASC).

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have mainly fled their country due to war or persecution. The ones that reach the UK are fortunate enough to have friends or family able to pay a people trafficker. Those that lack money and connections remain behind in refugee camps. The investment in these young people means the majority are male (70%), and are, as the heads of various Social Services confirmed, 'very motivated' and 'see it as an opportunity and do very well.' They are more likely to remain in education. 50% are in some form of education at the age of 19.

There is no limit to how many may enter this country and claim help from Social Services. 25% of looked after children in Brent and Fulham are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. In Westminster the figure has recently doubled. In the London

HANDLE WITH CARE

Borough of Croydon it is almost half. Out of 680 looked after children, 330 are UASC.¹²⁰

The effect on Newham has been dramatic. Out of 675 looked after children, 231 are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. This placed such a burden on services that, in November 2004, Newham declared a moratorium due to ‘insufficient financial resources in place to support the large number of UASCs according to Barnardo’s Policy, Research and Influencing Unit. The report continues, ‘This has limited the work of the Aftercare Team and prevented them from recruiting additional workers.’¹²¹

The head of Social Services for one London borough said, ‘There has been a 29% increase in my work-load in the last six months alone – due to unaccompanied asylum seeking children. Our costs have shot up but we do not get any additional funding from Government.’ In order just to maintain services, she required five additional staff but only got two. She explained that the high proportion of UASCs meant: ‘We have moved away from providing what a Leaving Care service should be. Instead we are dealing with problems particular to UASCs – their legal status, visits to the Home Office and so on.’ Another social service manager from a university town described her services, especially the educational opportunities, as ‘a honey pot’ for UASCs. She went on, ‘The Government refuses to give us any indication how many will come and at what rate. The numbers increase indefinitely at the expense of our own Care Leavers who need a lot of support and are not getting it.’

¹²⁰ D Clay and R Dowling, op. cit.

¹²¹ Ibid.

PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS FROM THE CYPS

FROM LATCHKEY TO LEADERSHIP

Kathy Gyngell and Ray Lewis

Too many children in our country today are being failed by their schools, by their parents and by the environment in which they are being brought up, particularly in the inner city. Yet an extraordinary voluntary organisation has succeeded in changing the behaviour – and just as importantly, the aspirations – of some of the most deprived children in our country today. The Eastside Young Leaders' Academy recruits only black boys who are about to be excluded from school in Newham. It provides structure and rules, intervenes early in the boys' lives and creates a commitment to learning.

“More than 100 community groups and local authorities have been in touch, asking to export the academy idea around the country. That will soon become a real possibility, because the Centre for Policy Studies is shortly to publish a guide to replicating the academy” – The Sunday Times

NO MAN'S LAND: how Britain's inner city young are being failed

Shaun Bailey

Shaun Bailey lives and works in a run-down inner city estate in London, trying to save the neglected, the rootless, the crack-addicted from a life of despair and death. He tells of how the problems he faces are getting deeper every year; and of how failure and a poverty of aspiration have become engrained into the soul of the community.

Bailey argues that it is time for the liberal consensus to be questioned. The ethical void that is at the root of so many young people's problems must be challenged. Easy access to, and liberal attitudes towards, drugs, alcohol, pop culture, teenage sex, greed, single parenthood and the celebration of violence are causing deep damage – and it is now time to think again.

“Shaun Bailey comes from one of Britain's most deprived inner city estates. Here he describes a deepening spiral of broken families, drugs and violent crime. But it is his solution that may surprise you: strong moral codes, school discipline, a return to family values and a crackdown on all drugs” – The Daily Mail

PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS FROM THE CYPS

CHARITY: the spectre of state dependency and over-regulation

Richard Smith and Philip Whittington

The state is now the most important paymaster for large charities. And as the role of the state grows, so does that of the public diminish. Large charities now rely on professional fundraising to sustain their income from the general public. In the last five years, they have increased their spending on fundraising and publicity costs by 76% – while their voluntary income has risen by only 9%. As the charitable sector becomes more dependent on the state, and distanced from its voluntary donor base, the vitality and voluntary nature of the sector is increasingly undermined.

“Important research by Richard Smith and Philip Whittington published in a pamphlet by the Centre for Policy Studies... reveals that something slightly worrying is happening to the charity industry” – John Humphrys, Daily Telegraph



A SUBSCRIPTION TO THE CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

The Centre for Young Policy Studies is a subsidiary of the Centre for Policy Studies. The CPS is the champion of the small state. It believes people should be enabled and encouraged to live free and responsible lives.

The CPS runs an Associate Membership Scheme which is available at £100.00 per year (or £90.00 if paid by bankers' order). Associates receive all publications (including CYPS publications) and, whenever possible, reduced fees for conferences held by the Centre.

For more details, please write or telephone to:

The Secretary

Centre for Policy Studies

57 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL

Tel: 020 7222 4488

Fax: 020 7222 4388

e-mail: mail@cps.org.uk

Website: www.cps.org.uk



THE CENTRE FOR YOUNG POLICY STUDIES

The Centre for Young Policy Studies has been set up as a subsidiary of the Centre for Policy Studies. It studies the problems facing the young (children and young adults), particularly the underprivileged young; and it aims to put forward methods of alleviating these problems.

The CPS has carried out much work in recent years in highlighting the importance to children – and to society as a whole – of family stability. Yet the fact remains that millions of young people will grow up outside a stable two parent family. Alternative support structures – predominantly voluntary – are urgently needed for these young people. Otherwise we will continue to waste their talent, destroy lives and impose great burdens on our police, prisons and social services.

Sixty years of welfare have not solved the problems of poverty in this country. It is time to look afresh at what can be done. To this end, the CYPS will publish papers, hold seminars and seek to influence the debate on the young, the future of our nation, in any way it can.

Please contact us if you would like to contribute to this debate.

John Nash
Chairman
The Centre for Young Policy Studies
57 Tufton Street
London SW1P 3QL

**THANKING THE YOUNG PEOPLE
INTERVIEWED IN THIS REPORT**

It would not have been possible to write this pamphlet without the help of the young people interviewed by Harriet Sergeant.

The CYPS intends to buy each of them an appropriate gift in recognition of their contributions. If you would like to make a donation towards this, please send a cheque made payable to: The Care Leavers' Fund, c/o The Centre for Policy Studies, 57 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL with a covering note mentioning this pamphlet.