



Children in care findings from The Big Ask

October 2021

Additional findings from The Big Ask on children in care

Introduction

In April 2021, the Children’s Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, launched The Big Ask: a national consultation exercise with children in England to ask them about their lives and their priorities, aspirations and worries for the future. The survey was shared with a wide range of organisations working with or supporting children in care, including children’s homes, fostering organisations and Children in Care Councils. A brief overview of findings from the data for children in care was included within The Big Answer, published last month.¹

This report provides additional detail and analysis specifically focussed on children in care.² In The Big Ask we received 5,936 responses from children in care (aged 6-17), including more than 3,800 children in foster care and nearly 2,000 children in residential care. Table 1, below, provides more information on the characteristics of this sample of children. The majority of them were aged 6 to 15 (86%), or living with foster parents (64%); the gender split was skewed slightly towards boys.

Table 1: Key characteristics of children in care who responded to The Big Ask

Characteristic	Count	Percentage (%)
<i>Type of care</i>		
Foster care	3,824	64%
Residential children’s home	1,756	30%
Secure children’s home	214	4%
Independent or semi-independent accommodation supported by the local council	142	2%
<i>Age group</i>		
6 to 8	1,458	25%
9 to 11	1,691	28%
12 to 15	1,969	33%
16 to 17	584	10%
I don't want to say	234	4%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	2,609	44%
I don't want to say	228	4%
Male	2,828	48%
Other (self-identified)	271	5%
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
African	145	2.4%
Any other Asian background	54	0.9%
Any other Black/African/Caribbean background	72	1.2%

¹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-answer/>

² For the purposes of the survey, children in care were defined as those living with foster parents, in a children’s home, in a secure children’s home, or in independent or semi-independent accommodation supported by the local council.

Any other White background	252	4.2%
Arab	74	1.2%
Bangladeshi	67	1.1%
Caribbean	39	0.7%
Chinese	74	1.2%
English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	3,526	59.4%
Gypsy or Irish Traveller	135	2.3%
Indian	103	1.7%
Irish	263	4.4%
Pakistani	145	2.4%
White and Asian	110	1.9%
White and Black African	123	2.1%
White and Black Caribbean	168	2.8%
Other	198	3.3%
I don't want to say	388	6.5%
Total	5,936	100.0%

As well as structured questions that gave children a list of options to choose from, The Big Ask survey also included a free-text question that invited children to say what they think in their own words. The surveys for children aged 9 or above asked:

'What do you think stops children/young people in England achieving the things they want to achieve when they grow up?'

The survey for 6-8 year olds asked:

'If you could change anything to make your life better when you grow up, what would it be?'

Overall, there were 2,262 responses to the free-text questions from children in care.

Alongside the child surveys, the Children's Commissioner's Office also ran a survey for adults, which included the following question: *'Briefly, what do you think stops children and young people in England achieving the things that they want to achieve when they grow up?'* The survey also asked respondents if they were a care leaver. We received 130 responses to the adult survey's free-text question from care leavers.

Sections 1 and 2 of this report give further findings from the analysis of the quantitative data on children in care, while Section 3 contains qualitative analysis of the responses from children in care and care leavers to the free-text questions.

1. Quantitative analysis (9-17 year olds)

The quantitative questions asked children about their current levels of happiness with various aspects of their life, what they find important to having a good life when they grow up and what they worry about not having in the future. For comparison, the analysis below compares the responses of children in care to those of 9-17 year old children not in care.

1.1. How happy are children in care (9-17) with their lives at the moment?

Most children in care aged 9-17 (63%) said they were happy with life overall (Figure 1), and just over half (52.5%) said they were happy with every single aspect of their life that the survey asked about (Table 2). However, there were a significant minority of children in care who were unhappy with certain aspects of their life. 23% were unhappy with their mental health, 20% were unhappy with the choice of things to do in their local area and 19% were unhappy with their life at school and college (Figure 1). These show that children in care are slightly more unhappy with their mental health and with life at school and college compared to the percentages for all 9-17 year olds nationally (20%, 19% and 16% respectively).

Figure 1: How happy children in care (aged 9-17) are with each aspect of their life

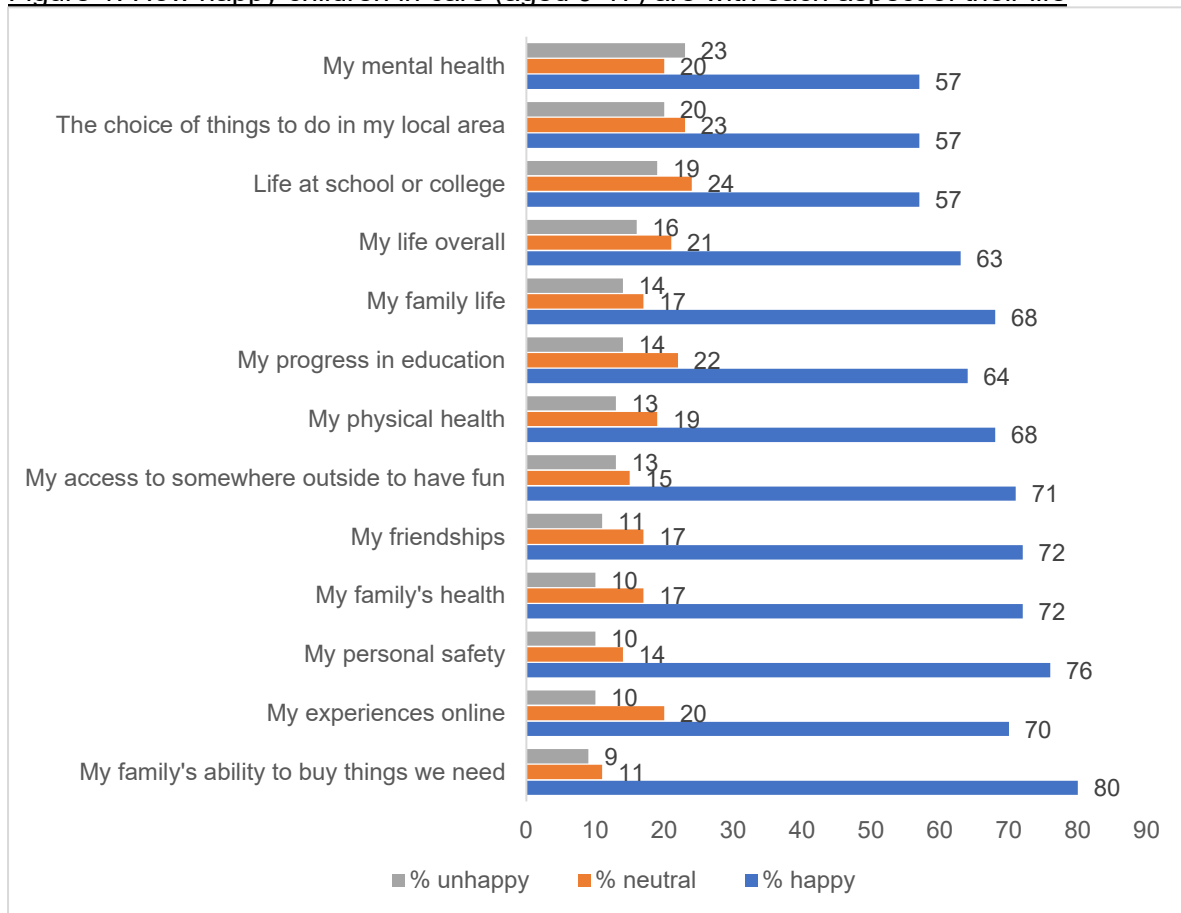


Table 2: Percentage of children in care aged 9 to 17 by the number of aspects of life that they are unhappy with

Number of aspects of life children are unhappy with	%
All	2.1
12+	2.7
11+	3.1
10+	3.7
9+	4.5
8+	5.4
7+	6.8
6+	9.8
5+	12.6
4+	17
3+	23.1
2+	32.6
1+	47.5
0	52.5

Children in care were generally more likely than other children to say they were unhappy with most aspects of their life. The most notable differences were that children in care were more likely to be unhappy with:

- Their life overall (16% of children in care vs 9% of other children)
- Their family life (14% of children in care vs 6% of other children)
- Their friendships (11% of children in care vs 5% of other children)
- Their personal safety (10% of children in care vs 4% of other children)

1.1.1. Differences by age

Older children in care (age 16-17) were generally more unhappy than younger children in care. For example, they were more than twice as likely to be unhappy with their mental health and nearly twice as likely to be unhappy with the choice of things to do in their local area.

Children in care aged 12-15 were as likely as children in care aged 16-17 to be unhappy with their family life (16% for both age groups) and family health (11% for both age groups).

1.1.2. Differences by type of care provision

This section focuses on the difference between children in residential care (including secure children's homes) and children in foster care.

The majority of those living in children's homes (59%) were happy with life overall (Figure 2) and almost half (48%) report being happy with all every aspect of their life that the survey asked about (Table 3). However, children in residential care were generally less happy than those in foster care, of whom 66% were happy with life overall and 57% were happy with every aspect of life that the survey asked about.

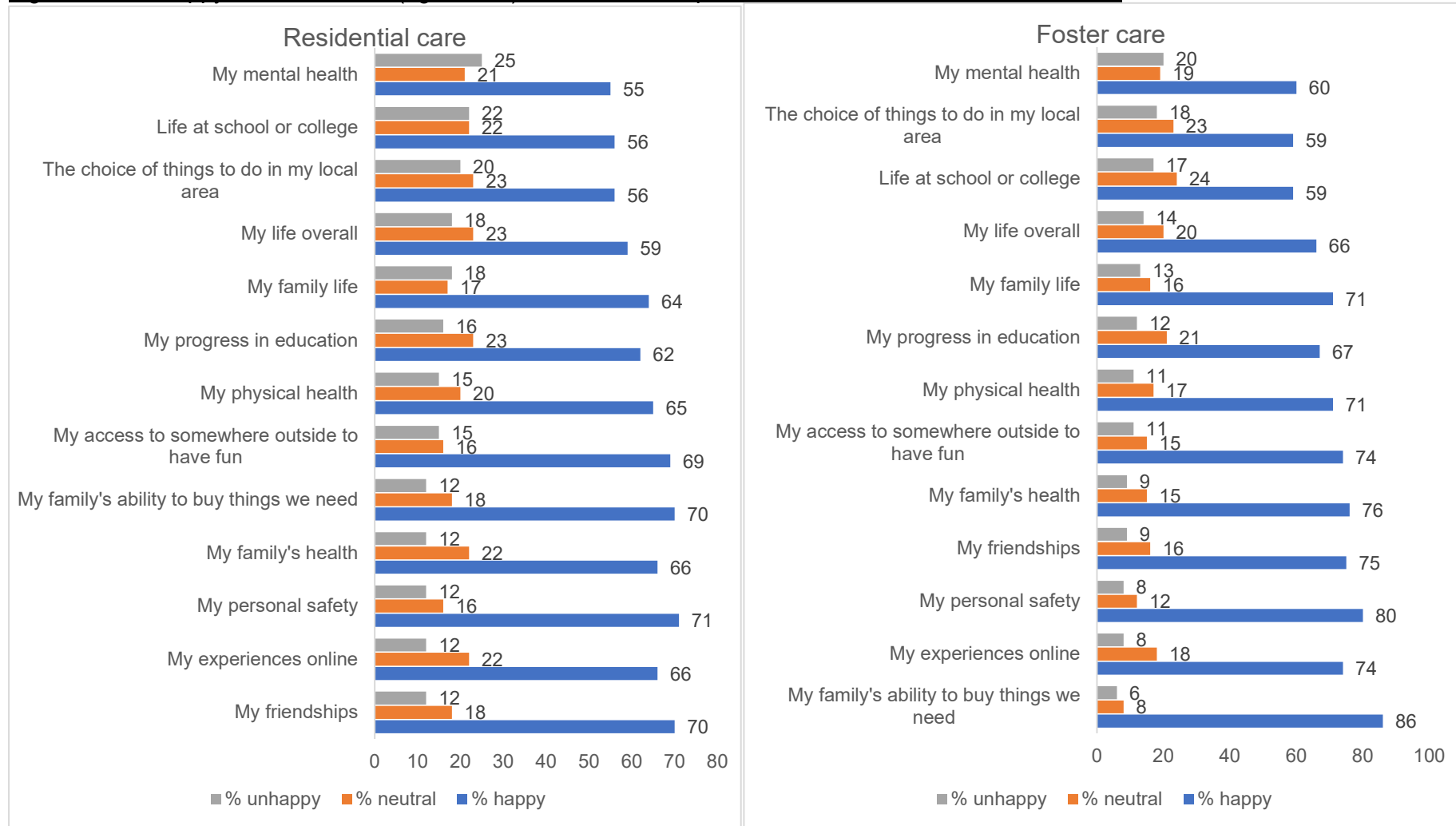
Table 3: Percentage of children in residential care by number of unhappy items selected.

Number of aspects of their life children are unhappy with	% (residential)	% (foster care)
All	2.7	1.6
12+	3.7	2
11+	4.2	2.3
10+	4.7	3
9+	5.6	3.6
8+	6.3	4.7
7+	8	5.9
6+	10.7	8.4
5+	13.6	10.9
4+	18.8	14.8
3+	25.6	20
2+	37.1	28.2
1+	52.1	43.1
0	47.9	56.9

Figure 2 also shows that children in residential care were particularly more likely to be unhappy than children in foster care about:

- Their family life (18% vs 13% unhappy)
- Their mental health (25% vs 20% unhappy)
- Life at school or college (22% vs 17% unhappy)
- Their family's ability to buy the things they need (12% vs 6% unhappy)

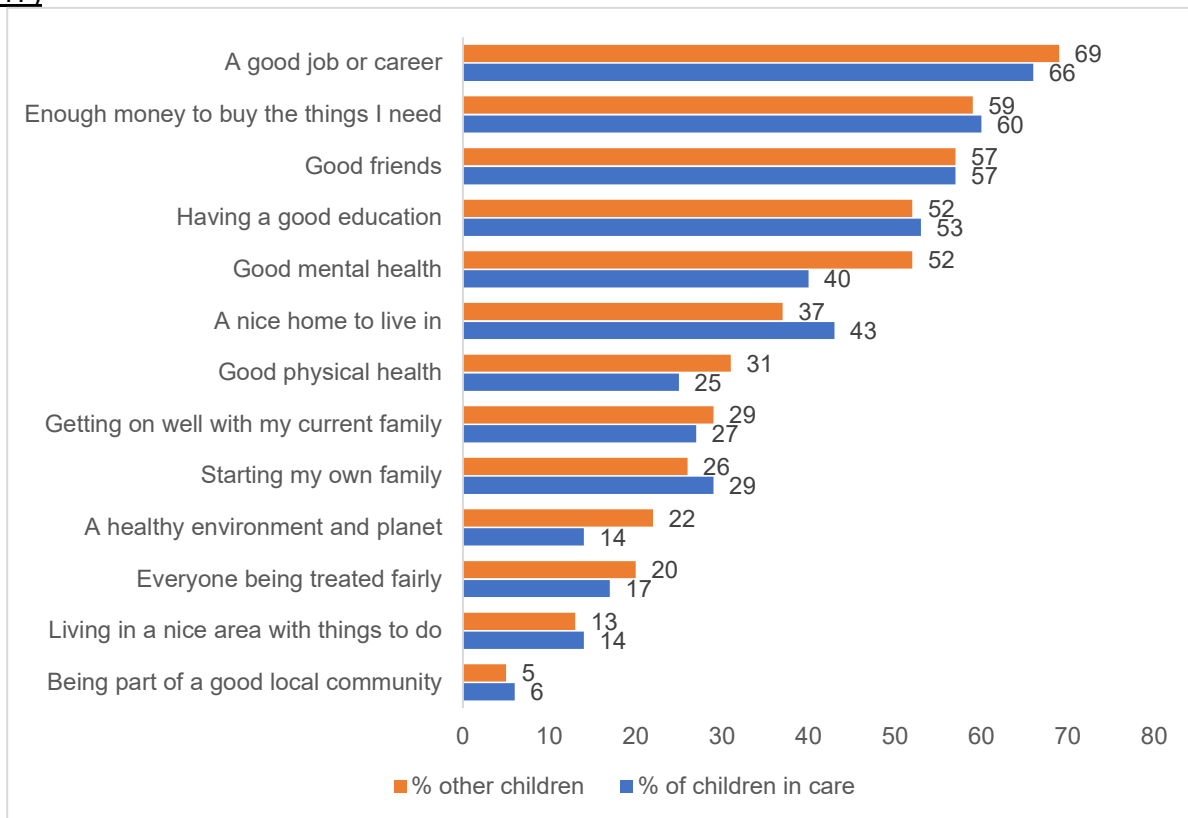
Figure 2: How happy children in care (aged 9-17) are with each aspect of their life, by type of care provision



1.2. What do children in care (9-17) say is most important for them to have a good life in future?

The most common aspects selected by children in care as important to their future lives were: having a good job or career (66%), having enough money to buy the things they need (60%), good friends (57%) and having a good education (53%). These were the same items chosen by other 9-17 year olds not in care at very similar rates (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Main future priorities and aspirations among children in care and other children (aged 9-17)



Compared to other 9-17 year olds, children in care were more likely to say that the following were important future priorities:

- Having a nice home to live in (43% of children in care vs. 37% of other children)
- Starting their own family (29% of children in care vs. 26% of other children)

Conversely, children in care were notably *less* likely than other 9-17 year olds to say that the following were important future priorities:

- Having good mental health (40% of children in care vs. 52% of other children)
- Having good physical health (25% of children in care vs. 31% of other children)
- Having a healthy environment and planet (14% of children in care vs. 22% of other children)

1.2.1. Differences by age

Consistent with findings above, children in care of all ages commonly identified material concerns as a future priority. Those aged 16-17 placed even greater emphasis on these items, such as having a good job or career (68%) and enough money to buy the things they need (62%). These are the as the top two future priorities for 16-17 year olds not in care.

While having a good job or career was also the top priority for children in care aged 9-11, they were more likely to choose having a good education as a future priority compared to older children in care (58% of 9-11 year olds, vs 54% of 12-15 year olds and 49% of 16-17 year olds).

1.2.2. Differences by type of care provision

Figure 4: Main future priorities and aspirations among children in care (aged 9-17), by type of care provision

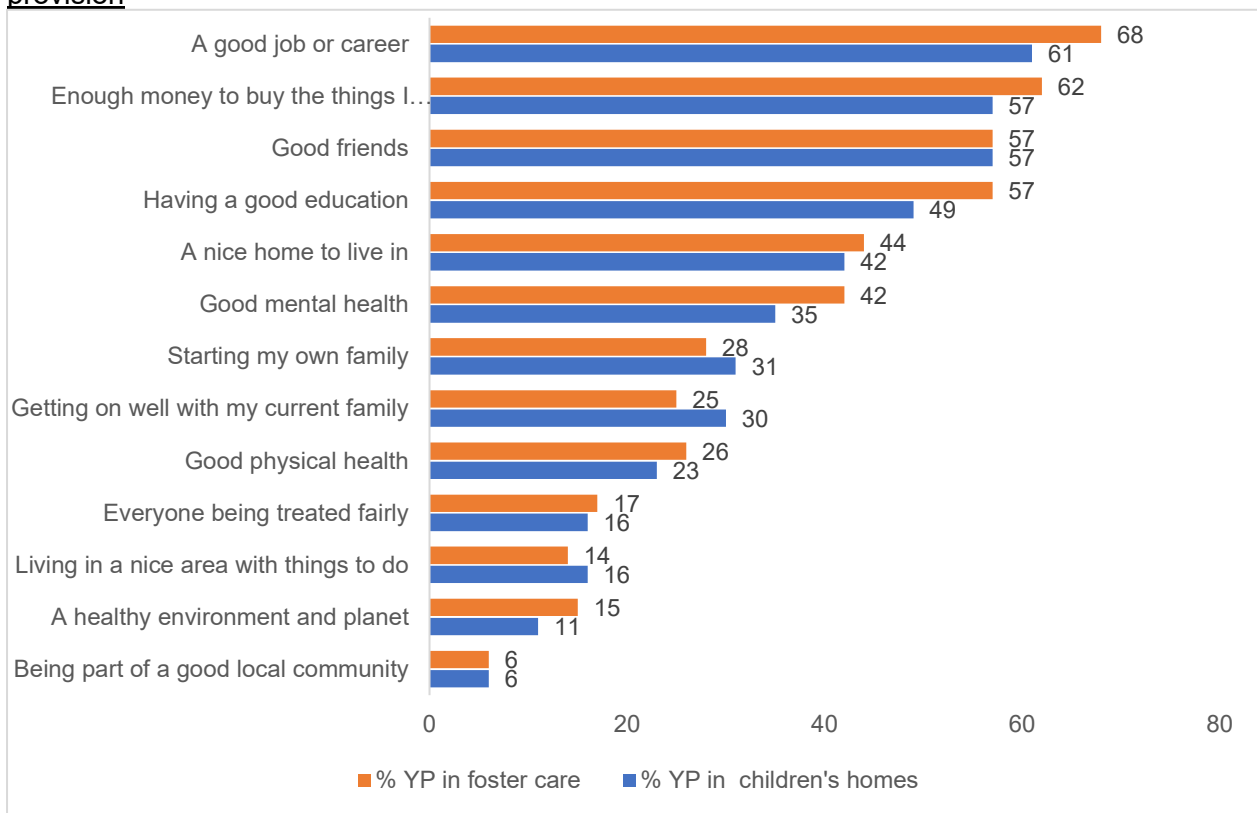


Figure 4 shows that children in foster care were more likely than those in residential care to choose the following as their main future priorities:

- A good job or career (68% in foster care vs. 61% in residential care)
- A good education (57% in foster care vs. 49% in residential care)
- Good mental health (42% in foster care vs. 35% in residential care)
- A healthy environment and planet (15% in foster care vs. 11% in residential care)

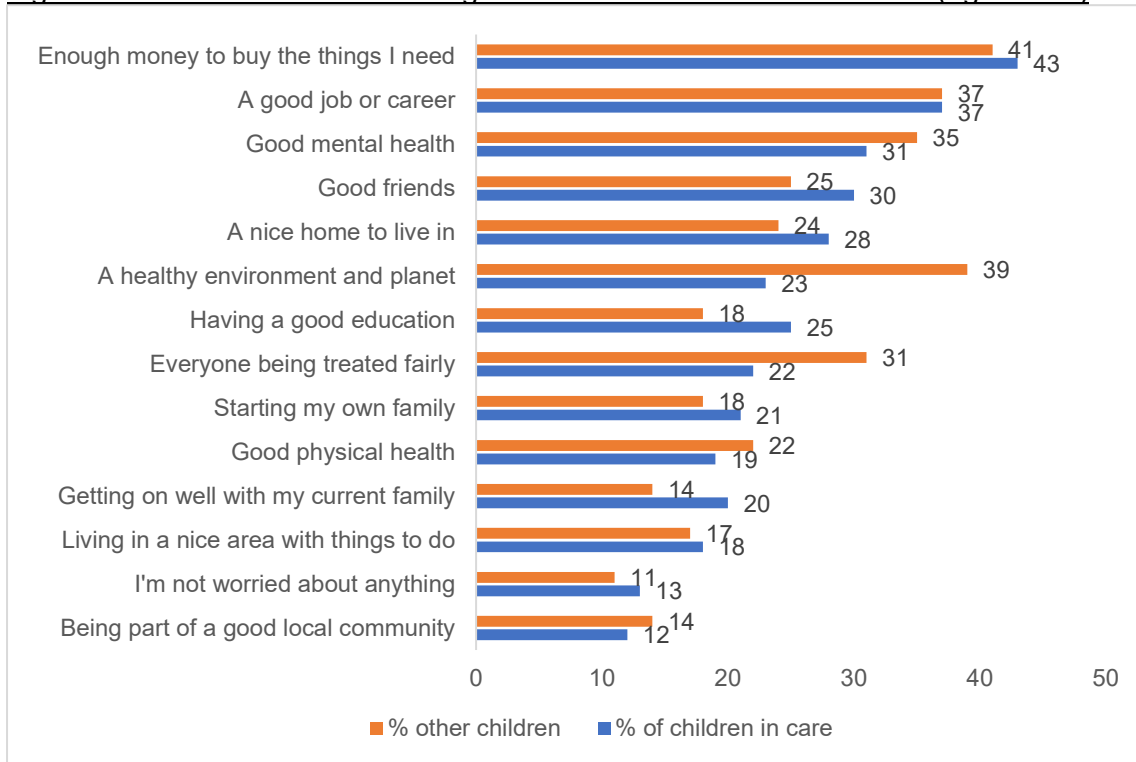
Conversely, they were slightly less likely to choose the following as their main future priorities:

- Getting on well with their current family (25% in foster care vs. 30% in residential care)
- Starting a family of their own (28% in foster care vs. 31% in residential care)
- Living in a nice area with things to do (14% in foster care vs. 16% in residential care)

1.3. What do children in care (9-17) say they are most worried that they will not have in future?

The main future worries for children in care are more likely to be about personal relationships and material circumstances and less likely to be about the wider world, compared to children who are not in care. Figure 5 shows that the top three future worries for children in care were: whether they will have enough money to buy the things they need (43%), whether they will have a good job or career (37%), and whether they will have good mental health (31%).

Figure 5: Main future worries among children in care and other children (aged 9-17)



Worries about having enough money or having a good job were very common both for children in care and for other children. However, children not in care were considerably more likely to worry about the state of the environment: this was their second most common response, chosen by 39% – compared to only 23% of children in care. Children in care were also less likely to say that fairness in society was one of their main future worries (22% vs 31%).

Compared to other 9-17 year olds, children in care were *more* likely to worry about:

- whether they would have a good education (25% vs. 18%)
- whether they would get on well with their current family (20% vs. 14%)
- whether they would have good friends (30% vs. 25%)
- whether they would have a nice home to live in (28% vs. 24%)

1.3.1. Differences by age

Consistent with the findings above, children in care of all ages generally worry about material concerns more than children outside the care system. Having enough money to buy the things they need and a good job or career feature in the top three worries for all age groups.

However, older children in care were 50% more likely than children in care aged 9-11 to say that they were worried about whether they would have good mental health in future. Conversely,

younger children in care were more likely to say they were worried about whether they would have good friends in future (43% of 9-11s, compared to 29% of 12-15s and 33% of 16-17s).

1.3.2. Differences by type of care provision

Figure 6: Main future worries among children in care (aged 9-17), by type of care provision

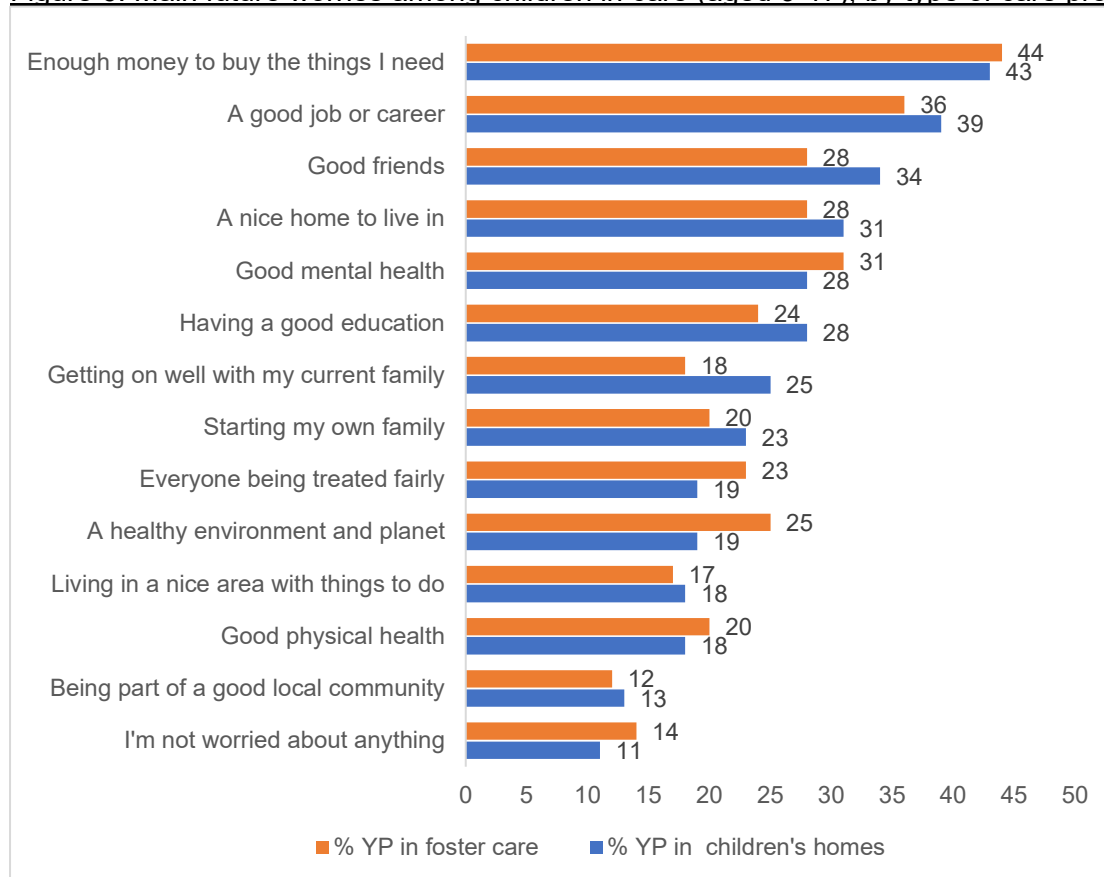


Figure 6, above, shows that children in foster care were slightly more likely than children in residential care to worry about:

- The state of the environment in future (25% vs. 19%)
- Whether people in society would be treated fairly (23% vs. 19%)
- Whether they would have good mental health in future (31% vs. 28%)

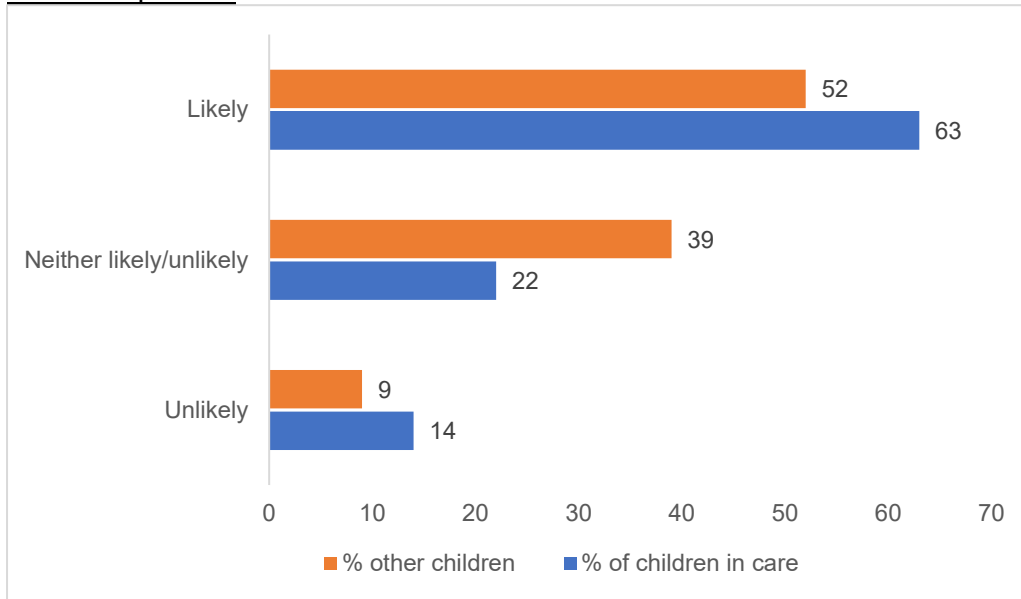
Conversely, children in foster care were slightly less likely than those in residential care to worry about whether they would:

- Get on well with their current family in future (18% vs. 25%)
- Start a family of their own in future (20% vs. 23%)
- Have good friends in future (28% vs. 34%)
- Have a good education in future (24% vs. 28%)

1.4. Do children in care (9-17) think that they will have a better life than their parents?

Most children in care aged 9-17 (63%) think that they will probably have a better life than their parents, compared to 52% of other 9 to 17 year olds. However, children in care were also more likely to be pessimistic about this: 14% thought it was unlikely that their quality of life would surpass that of their parents, compared to 9% of other 9-17 year olds (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Whether children in care and other children (aged 9-17) think they will have a better life than their parents



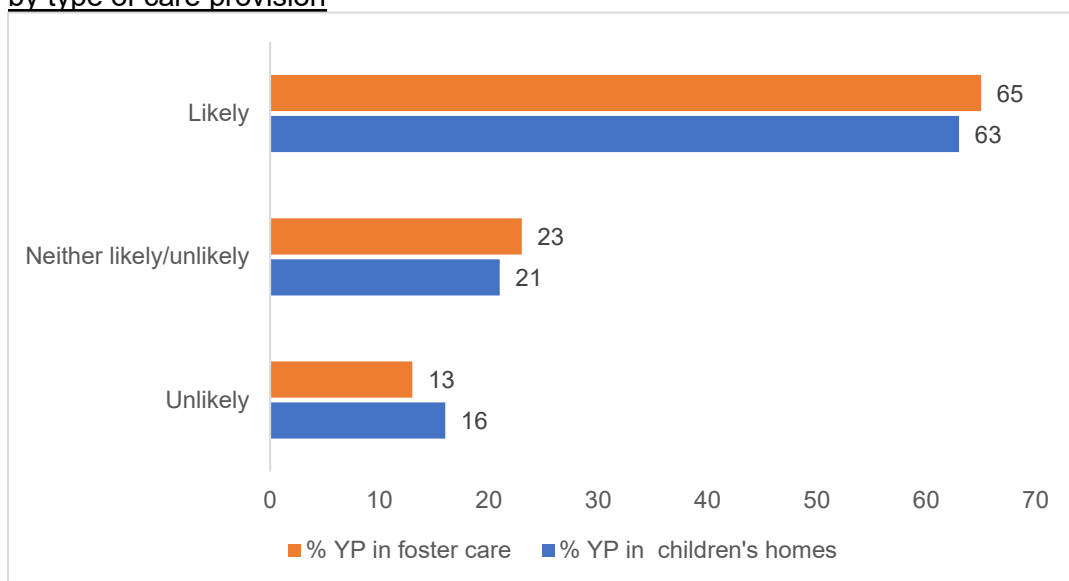
1.4.1. Differences by age

As with above findings, children in care of all ages are more likely to think they will probably have a better life than their parents when compared to the non-care population. However, there was very little difference by age within children in care.

1.4.2. Differences by type of care provision

Figure 8, below, shows that while there is little difference between children in foster and residential care, it does appear that children in residential care were slightly less optimistic in their response to this question. 63% of children in residential care thought it was likely that they would have a better life than their parents (compared to 65% in foster care); whereas 16% thought it was unlikely (compared to 13% in foster care).

Figure 8: Whether children in care (aged 9-17) think they will have a better life than their parents, by type of care provision



2. Quantitative analysis (6-8 year olds)

The quantitative questions asked to children aged 6-8 were similar in nature to the questions above, but were simplified and contained fewer response options. Therefore the findings for 6-8 have to be presented separately.

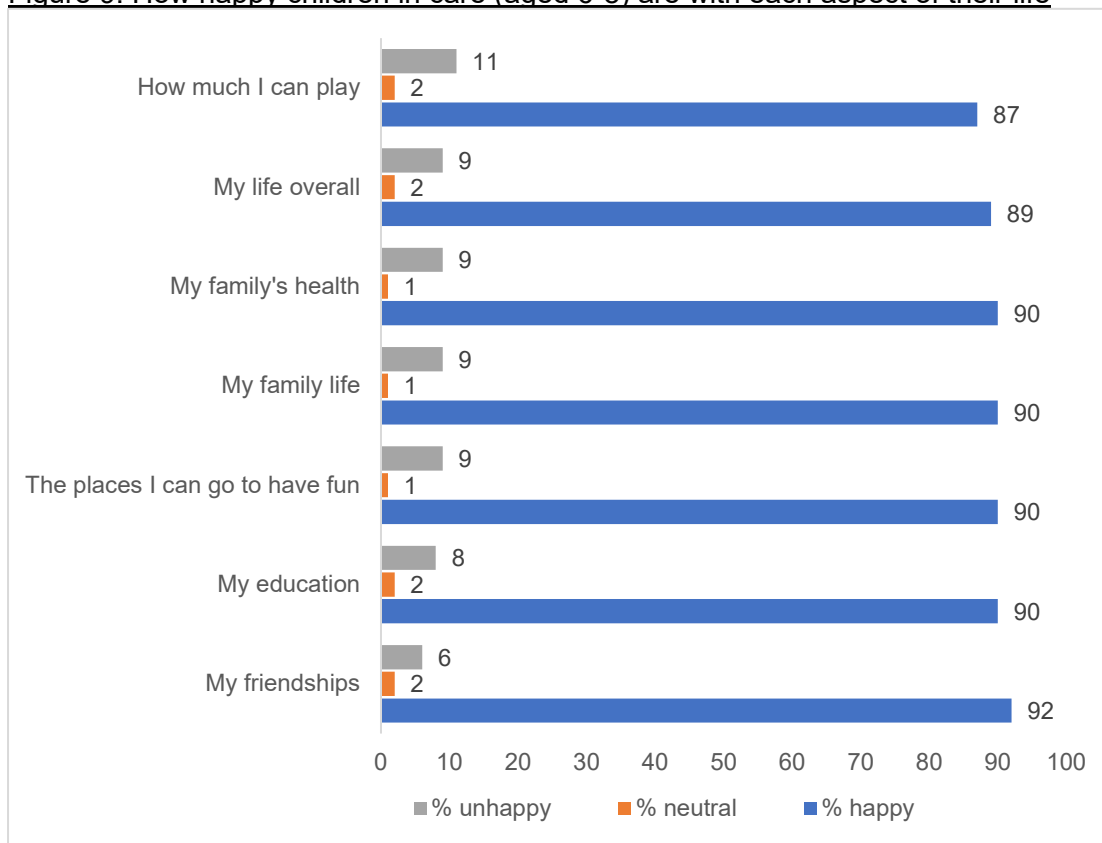
2.1. How happy are children in care (6-8) with their lives at the moment?

The overwhelming majority of children in care aged 6-8 (89%) were happy with life overall (Figure 9), 70% were happy with every aspect of their life that the survey asked about (Table 4).

Table 4: Percentage of children in care aged 9 to 17 by the number of aspects of life that they are unhappy with

Number of aspects	% of children
All	1.6
6+	1.9
5+	2.5
4+	3.1
3+	5.6
2+	12
1+	30.3
0	69.7

Figure 9: How happy children in care (aged 6-8) are with each aspect of their life



Compared to other 6-8 year olds (not in care), those in care were more likely to say that they were unhappy than other children with every aspect of their life. The most notable differences were in whether they were unhappy with:

- How much they can play (11% of children in care vs 6% of other 6-8 year olds)
- Their family life (9% of children in care vs 3% of other 6-8 year olds)
- Their life overall (9% of children in care vs 4% of other 6-8 year olds).

2.2. What do children in care (aged 6-8) say is most important for them to have a good life in future?

Figure 10, below, shows that the top three future priorities for children in care aged 6-8 were having good friends (70%), getting on well with their current family (53%), and having a good job or career (52%).

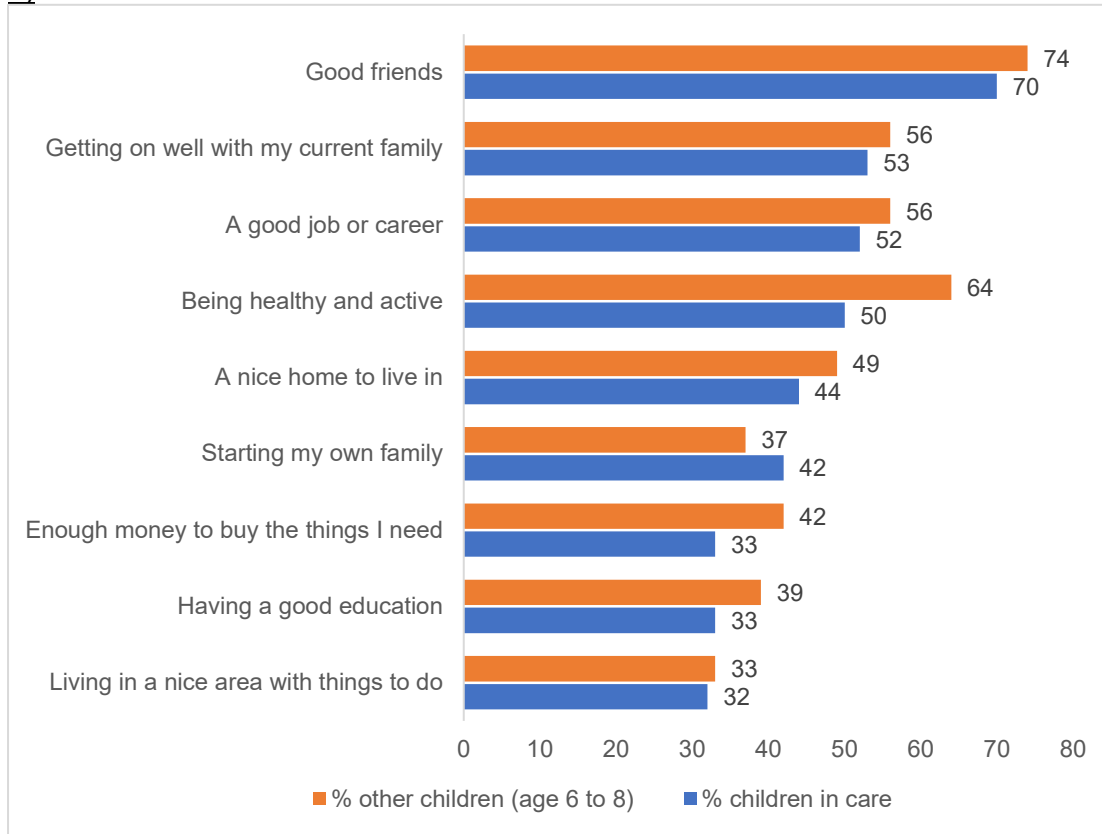
The importance of having good friends or a good job or career was similar for children in care and for other children aged 6-8. However, children in care were notably less likely to choose the following as their main future priorities:

- Being healthy (52% vs. 64% of other 6-8 year olds)
- Having enough money to (33% vs. 42% of other 6-8 year olds)
- Having a good education (33% vs. 39% of other 6-8 year olds)

Another notable difference in the responses between children in care and other 6-8 year olds was having enough money to buy the things they need: 33% of children in care said this was one of their main future priorities, compared with 42% of other children.

Conversely, children in care were slightly more likely than other children to say that starting their own family was a future priority (42% vs. 37%).

Figure 10: Main future priorities and aspirations among children in care and other children (aged 6-8)



3. Qualitative analysis

This section explores the themes that children in care (aged 6-17) raised in response to the free-text questions, discussing what they would change in order to make their life better or what they considered to be the barriers holding them back. The findings are presented by the main topics that were mentioned in the responses. These are:

- Future aspirations
- The importance of family relationships
- Support while in care
- Support for care leavers

3.1. Future aspirations

Children in care expressed a range of aspirations for the future and were no less ambitious than children living with their birth families. Many identified specific careers that they would like to pursue when they grow up:

'A singer a doctor or a actor' – Girl, 8, children's home

'A teacher' – Girl, 6, children's home

'A vet' – Boy, 8, children's home

'A artist' – Girl, 6, foster care

'Be a police officer' – Boy, 7, children's home

'Be a footballer' – Boy, 7, children's home

'Be a pop star' – Girl, 13, foster

Other children spoke about wanting a good education and a happy, independent home life in the future:

'A good education and being able to get a job' – Girl, 17, children's home

'A good education and the ability to earn money' – Boy, 16, children's home

'A good life and follow their dreams and achieve their goals in life and have a good education' – Girl, 13, secure children's home

'A nice family and nice friends and pets' – Girl, 7, foster care

'Be happy start a new family get a nice home' – Girl, 9, foster care

3.2. The importance of family relationships

18% of children in care mentioned this topic, in a wide range of context. Some spoke about how problems at home or in their upbringing can hinder children's lives.

'Bad family life' – Girl, 14, foster care

'Being in an unstable home' – Girl, 15, foster care

'I believe that bad habits that have been taught to me by my parents' – Girl, 16, children's home

However children did also talk about positive family environments and the impact that these had. Younger children in care talked about wanting to stay with their foster families in the longer term, while older children in care reflected on the opportunities they had benefited from as a result of having a foster family.

'Always live with my foster mummy and daddy forever until I'm old' – Girl, 6, foster care

'Stay with my foster sister' – Girl, 7, foster care

'I know I will have a better chance for myself, because my foster carers work hard to help me and promote my relationship with my birth parents. Because of that I feel like I have more love than a normal child. It makes me feel stronger like I can have the confidence to be a police officer and I can achieve the qualifications I need.' – Girl, 14, foster care

'Now I have a flat from [...] care management in [...] I am happy and I can be me' – 17 year old, living

in independent or supported accommodation

However, not all children in care shared positive experiences. As one 13 year old boy said: *'Being in care makes me feel depressed it's so, so hard'*. Other children talked about being treated differently due to their care status or not having access to the same kind of opportunities as children who are not in care.

'If you are in care you don't get treated the same. Even living in a family things are not the same as I have to ask permission from my social worker before I can do things.' – Boy, 11, foster care

'Being put in a category because of my birth parents. As I am in the foster care system I am thought of as if I have nothing' – Girl, 16, foster care

'The stereotypes that are put on young people (especially in foster care) as the majority are seen as 'naughty' or 'incapable' - that is my opinion. Also, a low self esteem stops them as they don't believe in themselves so they just give up trying' – Girl, 17, foster care

'As a looked after child, I feel that the system sets us up to fail. To attend a top tier university which has been my dream since I was little I would have to forfeit my placement which has become my forever family and I don't think that's fair as no child should be made to choose between an education and dream career or their family. Children who were lucky enough to get to stay with their biological families don't have to make this choice.' – Girl, 15, foster care

'Being in care system we don't have best start out in life and get moved about and that affect us further in life.' – Man, 20, care leaver

Finally, some younger children in care (aged 6-8) talked about wanting to go back to living with their birth parents.

'To live with my mum and dad and see them more.' – Girl, 7, foster care

'Live with my mum and dad because i am in foster care.' – Girl, 8, foster care

3.3. Support while in care

Children in care raised the need for proper support and stability to help them achieve their goals. As one 15-year-old girl living in foster care said: *'young people should be able to achieve what they want when they grow up they need love, stability and time with a loving family.'*

Children in care can have complex needs and they talked about how it could be hard for them and their carers to find the right support.

'Getting the right support and therapy to help with my childhood trauma and severe PTSD as there is not many people who can do this with children and it takes a very long time to get funding or for my foster parents to be listened to by professionals.' – Boy, 10, foster care

'I have ASD but there is no support to help me or my family.' – Boy, 11, foster care

'Not having the right support from family, carers and social care.' – Girl, 15, foster care

Alongside The Big Ask survey, the Children's Commissioner's Office carried out focus groups and interviews with vulnerable children. When we spoke to children in care, they told us about what it feels like to work with professionals. A common theme that emerged from these conversations was a lack of attention, control or understanding:

'They [social services] look at trying to build a family plan for a child in need, but if a child is estranged from her other family members that's not possible. We kept hitting dead ends as I was trying to explain to them that I didn't have any other family [...] I had to move into this supported accommodation but there was no discussion or talks about what other avenues were possible [...] I had to sign myself into care, and me doing that on my own was a lot, especially without a stable social worker to help me along the way.' – Girl, 16, supported accommodation

'[I see my social worker] once every 10 years. And he's always late. I always get ready and then I'm waiting for him but he never comes, he's always like 2 hours late [...] To be honest I think he has other kids to see as well [...] I reckon they should only have like only one or two, I don't think they should have a lot [...] He'd get here on time, he'd actually spend more time with me. He'd actually listen to me sometimes.' – Boy, 12, children's home

One 17 year old girl told us: *'I've been in the system so long that getting let down has become normal.'*

3.4. Support for care leavers

Getting the right support when leaving care was important for older children and young adults. Unfortunately, many of the responses on this subject indicated that this rarely happened. The prospect of having to leave home and leave their foster family at 18 was a particular concern:

'No support when leaving care.' – Boy, 16, foster care

'Not many options for housing, support to take times out before going to college you have to grow up fast in care.' – Boy, 17, children's home

'Really social workers do not listen [...] should not have to move when you are 18 if you are settled so wrong.' – Boy, 17, foster care

'Being a care leaver. We have to grow up before our time e.g move into a flat but still be controlled as if we are 12.' – Woman, 19, care leaver

'I wanted to have a special guardianship order as a way to cement my relationship with my forever family, my foster carers agreed, but the reality was, that I would lose much of my leaving care rights and have even less opportunity to succeed in life. Nowadays, birth children stay with their families until late 20s and even into their thirties; as children in care we do not get this opportunity' – Girl, 15, foster care

'We need more ring fenced training/employment targeted at care leavers. Whether this be with big organisations like TfL, NHS, Local Authorities. There needs to be more for young people to be involved with.' – Man, 23, care leaver

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