

Children's Voices

Children's experiences of instability in the care system

AUGUST 2019



Contents

- Introduction..... 1
- Changing placement..... 2
- Changing schools..... 5
- Changing social worker 8

Introduction

'Children's Voices: Children's experiences of instability in the care system' is published alongside the Children's Commissioner's third annual Stability Index, which measures stability in the care system by looking at how often children in care move home, school or social worker over a year.

In addition to this data analysis, the Children's Commissioner's Office also carried out interviews with 22 children in England who are in care or care leavers. The interviewees were aged between 9 and 21. These interviews explored two themes - the impact that instability had on these children, in their own words, and their perspectives on the factors that make instability harder or easier to deal with.

The children we spoke with shared a common need for stability in their lives. These are resilient but vulnerable children often living away from their families or without family at all. Frequently moving home, school and changing social worker is an unsettling and at times upsetting experience. All of these children wanted to live in a home where they felt loved and secure, to go to a good school where their needs and experiences were understood and catered for, and to build long-lasting and stable relationships with social workers. As our analysis in the Stability Index shows, it is still too often the case that many children growing up in care do not receive the stability and certainty they deserve.

Changing placement

Moving home can be stressful and destabilising for any child. It can be particularly challenging for children in the care system, many of whom may have already experienced high levels of instability in their lives before going into care.

The children we spoke with repeatedly highlighted the severity and range of mental health and wellbeing implications that moving placement had upon them. Many spoke about feeling sad, angry, disappointed and stressed. Others described how multiple moves left them feeling exhausted or weary.

- > *"I probably cried myself to sleep each night, the first week." (Male, 17)*
- > *"I was worried a lot at the time. Because it was unknown to where we would be going, how it would be like." (Female, 16)*
- > *"My social worker, I ask her so many times, what's going to happen in my future, I'm really scared. I want to know what's going to happen in my future and she's just, she can't be arsed to talk about it." (Female, 15)*
- > *"But the more you move to different places and then the more you just get used to it ... It's just [breathes out], it's just tiring ... I don't know how to explain it, you do literally feel tired, you hear it and it's just like [breathes out] go back to bed." (Female, 15)*
- > *"I think it [moving placements] just had an impact on ... how I act, how I controlled my emotions. If I felt angry now, I'd just hold it in but then I would just lash out." (Female, 16)*
- > *"I was going through a lot of instability at the time... and I was making decisions that I probably wouldn't rationally make normally, like running away from school and things like that. Yeah, they well and truly were [due to the instability], and it I guess it was a coping mechanism." (Male, 17)*

Several children and young people talked about feeling very lonely after a placement move – particularly if they were placed far away from friends and family.

- > *"You're moving into a new place. You are far from your parents and you just, sometimes you could feel really alone." (Female, 17)*

Others spoke about losing touch with friends and no longer feeling close to siblings or other family members. This was particularly an issue when the placement move made it hard to visit or maintain contact. This can have lasting consequences for those relationships.

- > *"It was difficult, because all my friends lived in [town], they still do there, they still live there. All my friends are from where I'm from, so it was hard, I didn't get to see them as much." (Female, 17)*
- > *"Any friends I had here, I lost. I didn't get to keep them, at all, and on my last day of being at that school all my friends were like, oh, let's have a massive sleepover, and stuff, and my new foster parents wouldn't let me." (Female, Care leaver)*

Some children spoke positively about placement moves that occurred with their siblings, or in order to be with their sibling(s). Others spoke about being separated from a sibling and how it had a hugely damaging effect on their wellbeing, as well on the relationships.

- > *"[What helped during the placement change?] That I was with my brother and sister, so I knew that I wasn't alone and that. And my best friend at the time, because she was willing to listen to what I had to say." (Female, 16)*
- > *"Well they just said that he's getting adopted to North England. That's all I'm now allowed to know. ... When she told me that he was gone, I just broke down... It was hard, I would cry every single day at school. I'd get taken out of lessons because I just couldn't cope with it." (Female, 18)*
- > *"[You're] very on edge for a good couple of months if not a few years ... It took me a good year to settle in, to actually feel safe, and that had a really big impact on my life, because it just makes it difficult to make me feel safe with friends, and just makes me nervous whenever I go to meet anyone really, it makes me really nervous still." (Female, 17)*

Many children we spoke to said that professional counselling was one of the most important factors in supporting them through difficult changes, including placement changes.

- > *"A lot of counselling, like, not just the school counsellor, like, actual counselling, behavioural CBT, whatever. I feel that's really important. We weren't offered anything like that, and I just don't think there's enough done for young children when they experience placement moves... They don't do enough to guarantee the emotional wellbeing of that child, and the psychological wellbeing, it can have a big impact on kids because there's all that stability gone. ... It can have a lot of psychological damage on a kid, and you get the kids acting out, you get kids being rebellious, going off and doing drugs, and they turn down paths, and get involved with the wrong people, and I feel like, a lot of the time, that can be prevented. If they just put more measures in place to make sure kids really understand why this is happening, it's not their fault, and I just feel like a lot more should be offered, like counselling definitely." (Female, Care leaver)*
- > *"My behaviour got a bit uncontrollable [when moved placement to another town]. It's because I still wasn't given the help I want, I needed... Like I needed therapeutic help and I didn't get it. And then when I moved to [new town following another placement move], I finally got it ... It [therapy] made me get rid of all my anger ... I haven't kicked off as often as I used to." (Female, 13)*

Some of the children we spoke with said they would have appreciated more one-to-one support in order to make them feel less alone.

- > *"Just someone talk to, or someone just to say yeah I'm here for you. Because I didn't really get that back then." (Female, 18)*
- > *"Be supportive, talk to the child and be there for the child or young person as well... ask the child, sit down with the child on their own and ask them how they feel, how's the placement going. If they're having a bad time at placement, why? What do they think it is, and if there is anything that the teachers could do to help?" (Female, 17)*

Having at least one teacher to turn to for support at school was seen as important during placement moves. It could be helpful if teachers or staff knew about these changes in advance so they could be more understanding and accommodating.

- > *“Some of the teachers ... didn’t really know what I was going through and just assumed that I was crying for no reason or something like that.” (Female, 16)*
- > *“Was it helpful that they [the teachers] knew? Yeah. Because if I needed to talk to them they’d be there and I could talk to them. They helped me, I don’t think they give me any homework. Just so I could settle in. That helped because I was a bit stressed every night and I couldn’t sleep sometimes.” (Female, 12)*

Some children found it comforting to have a cat or a dog while going through a placement change.

- > *“Yeah, having a dog was very helpful. They’re really nice, they’re very cuddly and they’re very soft, very therapeutic. Because a dog can’t talk to you so it won’t get mad at you if you say something to it, if you have something on your mind and you tell it to the dog and it won’t do anything. Because if you’re worried then you can talk, if you don’t want to talk to anyone you can talk to the dog.” (Female, 12)*
- > *“Because I think that pets, straight away, they’re happy to see you, as soon as you walk through the door and they just, I think they know what’s happening and how you feel and they can sense it. So they know when to come up to you and give you hugs.” (Male, 12)*

Changing schools

Children said that the process of changing schools can make them feel scared and lonely, can cause anxiety and depression, and can magnify and exacerbate other feelings that they already having – such as insecurity and uncertainty. Having to meet new people, being asked many questions, and having to explain their situation can also be incredibly stressful.

- > *“And I just, I felt very lost. ... I was very anxious a lot of the time just whether people would like me and things. And like making new friends and trying to find somewhere to fit in. I was quite stressed I think trying to make sure that I was doing everything right with the school. And just very nervous to be honest... It [changing schools] make you feel a lot of ways you can't understand.” (Female, 15)*
- > *“Well at first it was really scary and it gave me memories of when I had to move from [one city to another]. I didn't know anyone, didn't really feel comfortable and just didn't know what was going to happen.” (Male, 12)*

Making friends can be hard for children in care when they first arrive at a new school. Some children said they had to lie when making new friends, so that their friends would not realise that they were in care. This can prevent children from getting close to new friends or being able to turn to them when things are difficult.

- > *“So everyone wants to know about the new kid, where they're from, why they moved and so, it was a case of having to make up elaborate stories like, oh my parents got a new job this end and so I had to move schools. And so it is hard because if you don't choose to tell people why you're in care it's a lot of lying and having to keep up with your lies and it's like you're living a fake life, you can never really be who you are and you can never let your guard down or be vulnerable, and you can't just say, 'oh yeah, sorry, I can't hang out with you after school because I've got to go out for a family meal', when the social worker's really coming around ... it's like living a double life. It's not easy... I reckon I was really depressed.” (Female, care leaver)*

Changing schools can have an impact on schoolwork – particularly at the beginning.

- > *“I think that changing school did have an impact on me, because I was already so behind when I went to my first secondary school, when I got to my second one it was, I was still really, I was even more behind ... So I had a lot of catching up to do, I, if I remember rightly it was about five years' catch up.” (Female, 17)*

Children also mentioned not being able to continue with subjects that they enjoyed, because the new school did not offer it or because that subject was oversubscribed at the new school.

- > *“The geography room was apparently full and the photography they didn't do. They didn't do a specific photography class, so I had to go to an art class, which isn't what I'd liked. So, I ended up having to drop that.” (Male, 16)*

Having as smooth a transition as possible, without missing much school, was felt to be very important.

- > *"I was out of school for three weeks rather than two, because the woman we was given to help me find a new school didn't really do her job properly... I understand that she's busy with loads of other people, but she left me and my mum on a voice message for a whole week, then a second week. We gave her a call and we actually got through to her and said, OK, we said to her, oh what's happening, why haven't you found a school yet, haven't you found a school yet or are you just ignoring us, and she said, well I haven't found a school yet, let me, just give me time. And she left us for another week." (Male, 16)*
- > *"I would have rather got to know all the children that was going to be in my class [before their first day at new school]. Who they are and what they like doing and all of that. You'd still have the same feeling about being scared and all that, but then you get to know people more until you actually properly start and get introduced to the older years and the other people." (Male, 12)*

Children also valued having a designated support teacher from the very start – someone that they could speak to for help.

- > *"I have one [an assigned member of staff as a mentor] now so it's like, it's a lot easier now and obviously I'm very used to this school but I mean I think it would have helped to begin with." (Female, 15)*
- > *"I was given a day after school that I could go to a teacher to catch up ... That had a great impact because it allowed me to catch up on work I'd never done before. ... I was the only student that had, that was going there because I had to go there, so I had her to myself, really, for a couple of hours after school. So, I could pick up from her anything I needed." (Male, 16)*

Some children also felt it was helpful to be able to ask for support at school without having to speak to someone in person first (which could feel intimidating). Online systems for asking for help were mentioned as an alternative.

- > *"My school has like an online system where you can like make appointments with people ... I didn't have to speak to anybody like upfront and ask for it, it was just a thing I could do that took less than a minute and once it was done it was out of the way and I knew that eventually I get to talk to somebody." (Female, 15)*

When a change in schools led to better support – such as more appropriately assessment of and support for the child's additional needs – this was often seen as a positive change for the child. They highlighted big differences between schools in the quality of support being offered.

- > *"So I got no support with any education in my first school. Whereas in my second school my mum and I really pushed for more support. And the Special Educational Needs Coordinator that I had at the time, that I was under, I had loads of support... one to one sessions, and after school, and I had in class support, and extra one to one lessons in the subjects that I was struggling with, I felt like I could catch up and I did catch up." (Female, 17)*

There were several examples where moving to a smaller school or alternative provision or special school, was an easier transition for the child because there was more support available than in a larger mainstream school.

- > *“So there’s four children in the class and two teachers. ... I loved it, I thrived.” (Male, 17)*
- > *“At first I was quite nervous but I got adjusted to it [moving into alternative provision] quite quickly because I knew all the kids were all in the same situation I was in, most of them anyway. ... Knowing that fact that I’m not, I’m not the only one in, they’re all in the same boat as me makes me think, OK I’m not the only one who’s struggling, there are kids out there probably in worse situations than me. So, I do feel quite thankful for that and it eased the stress a bit.” (Male, 14)*

Changing social worker

Having one social worker as a constant over many years was seen as very important to the children we spoke with.

- > *“It makes such a huge difference, because you’ve got to know each other, you’re happy with each other, you’re confident around each other, and you’ve got that relationship, you’ve got that trust between you, and it just makes your care experience so much more enjoyable.” (Female, 17)*

By contrast, having many different social workers can reduce the child’s ability and/or willingness to make the effort to get to know and trust the next social worker. It can feel frustrating, boring, repetitive and exhausting to build that same relationship over and over. In some cases it led to apathy or indifference towards changes of social worker.

- > *“So many things get lost and you have to keep repeating yourself ... And it’s just boring, it’s horrible, I hate it... you’ve got to try and trust them that they’re not just going to up and leave whenever they feel like it. Because all the others just left after three or four visits or a couple of months, and you’re just like, I’ve just got to accept that, as soon as it gets to three months I’m, I’ll be waiting for the next one.” (Female, 17)*
- > *“I don’t know it just feels like it’s always on me to repeat like, OK I’ll build a new relationship with you and then six months later you’ll be gone so what is the point?” (Female, 16)*
- > *“Well I wasn’t too happy that we were changing again because it’s hard to make relationships if they’re literally going to be there for two months and then have someone else... I think I was a bit distant with some [new social workers] because I was like, oh they’re just going to leave, what’s the point of opening up to them? ... I just thought there was no point if they were just going to leave in a matter of months.” (Female, 16)*
- > *“I don’t really mind anymore [changing social workers]. I did at first but it’s like I got over it. I don’t know, just haven’t really been bothered about it because they just come and go. I just feel like social workers just come and go so it doesn’t really matter.” (Female, 16)*

Children said it can feel very painful when a social worker whom they like has to move on. Several children spoke about feeling really upset or distraught because of what that social worker had meant to them. They could remember quite vividly what it felt like to say goodbye to someone that they had gotten very close to.

- > *“It was summer and it was in my back garden and I remember as soon as they [old and new social worker] both left, I just sat in my room for hours crying. Mainly because I was going to miss her, because she was so lovely. She always texts me, like if I had a hard day at school she would text me saying you’re my lovely star, you’re my golden star, keep your chin up. And I don’t really get texts like that anymore. ... And I find it really hard to get close to people, and me and her got really close. I don’t like losing people.” (Female, 18)*

Having many social worker changes can impact on a child’s self-esteem – it was common to talk about feelings of rejection.

- > *"I didn't meet my new social worker for quite a while, and then I met her a couple of times, and then I got another one. And it's just like, well I only saw you three times and you're already leaving, am I that bad? And it just makes you feel like you're worthless, you're not valued, and you've done something wrong all the time. It also makes you feel like you're not important to them, and they don't want to be with you, they don't want to work with you, they're just doing it because they have to. So it just makes a real downer on the young person, it makes them feel like, have very low self-esteem and low confidence in themselves." (Female, 17)*

Children also reported that changing social workers can make life feel more unstable and chaotic.

- > *"It was really odd having to keep meeting new people. It's nice to just to have a stable, knowing the same person. Because it keeps changing and you don't even know who they are and they meet you and they're like, oh, OK. You feel a bit like, what's the word? You feel as if you don't know what's happening. As if the world's happening and you don't know what is going to happen." (Male, 11)*
- > *"It [changing social workers] makes your life quite unstable because everything's like changing all the time and it's like there's not a consistency with the person that you should be able to trust." (Female, 15)*

Children also said that a change of social worker can cause them to have to relive past traumatic events, because they may have to talk about their past again. This can prevent them trying to achieve normality in their life.

- > *"For me, ideally, the best way that things can be is that although I may be a looked after child, my life carries on as normal as it possibly could be, and situations like that where you've got a social worker change brings everything back in to the forefront, and you then have to think about more than you'd perhaps like to. It can affect your everyday life in ways that you would rather they didn't." (Male, 17)*

However, one of the children spoke about how changing social workers can be a chance for a fresh start and an opportunity to change their behaviour for the better.

- > *"It [changing social workers] makes you feel nervous and anxious, and it makes you feel like you just want to run away from it all. But, at the same time, it also makes you feel like you've got someone new to talk to. They don't know about you, so you can talk them, it's a fresh start... Or if you've done, say if your behaviour was bad in the past you can change it all around if you've got a new person to talk to, and they could also help you do that." (Female, 16)*

The children we spoke with understood that many changes of social worker changes are inevitable, as their case is transferred from team to another, or when they turn 18, or because the social worker leaves the job for various reasons. However they still had ideas for how these changes could be managed more effectively. They wanted their social worker to discuss the upcoming change in a meaningful way and to involve them in decisions. They also wanted the transition not to be rushed, so that they have time to adjust to the idea. The children we spoke with also wanted to be told in advance what would change,

who the new social worker was, and what they were like. Receiving this information from someone they already trusted could reassure them that the new social worker would be nice and would support them.

- > *"With my [old] social worker, I knew that he was going to leave ... he gave me some notice. About a month and a half, so quite a lot. So I could ease into it and know what's happening." (Male, 12)*
- > *"I think it [changing social workers] should be gradual, well as gradual as it can be. Like you tell them, then you give them that time to process it, and then say goodbye, and then meet the person, rather than all in one bang." (Female, 18)*
- > *"Try and involve the child in the change before doing it. Talk to the person, tell them about the person that you're going to change them over to." (Female, 17)*
- > *"And if you're leaving then actually tell the young person ... I'm really sorry but there's circumstances that I have to leave. It's not because of you, it's just personal reasons, and something's happened that I've got to make a career change, or I've got to leave, or give a little bit of an explanation why they're leaving, so it doesn't leave the young person like, oh, so again, I'm in the wrong, or that kind of thing. ... A little sentence or something about why they can't stay would just be enough to put that child's mind at ease." (Female, 17)*
- > *"[Knowing the reason why you have to change social workers is important] because then I don't have to wonder like, why they left and was it me or was it the workplace, like what was it?" (Female, 16)*

Having the opportunity to say goodbye to a social worker was felt to be important. This could involve writing a letter, having a specified goodbye conversation over the phone, or meeting up one to one.

- > *"She [old social worker] came to see me, and I wrote her a card and she started crying when I gave her my card, and I was like oh it's intense. Yeah, it was nice." (Female, 18)*
- > *"I think saying goodbye is the main thing for me, just saying, I'm leaving and then why they're leaving." (Female, 16)*
- > *"I'd known her for nearly six years. That's such a long time and then I didn't even get to say like a proper goodbye." (Female, 13)*

In general, the children we spoke with preferred not to meet their new social worker at school; they found it more comfortable at home or in another safe space. Children and young people we spoke with wanted more importance to be placed on locations for meetings where children could be comfortable.

- > *"If it's [meeting a new social worker] in school it's really awkward, it's really not very nice. Because you get pulled out of class and all your peers are like, oh why are leaving school again? ... Whereas if it's at home it's just much more personal, they're at their home, they're settled and they're a lot more comfortable and more likely to open up and talk because they're in their home." (Female, 17)*

Children also said that having the old social worker keep in touch for a while can help with the transition. This made some children feel more reassured – and in some cases helped them build a new relationship with new social worker.

- > *“Me and [old social worker] kept in contact even when [new social worker] became my social worker, she would, I'd still talk to [old social worker] about stuff, and she'd advise me to talk to [new social worker] about more things than I talked to her about. So, she helped me talk to her [new social worker] as well.” (Female, 17)*

Children and young people emphasised the importance of their new social workers having done their homework – e.g. reading their files properly and having an in-depth handover meeting with the previous social worker.

- > *“It's frustrating when perhaps there's a, well, everyone knows there's a file on them somewhere which has all details of their case story and things like that... I get that people are human and they get, make mistakes, but it's, when you know your old social worker knew this one thing about you and it was kind of important, and then the next one doesn't.” (Male, 17)*

Having another professional in their lives who is a constant made it easier to go through a change of social worker. For example, children spoke about a particular teacher, an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) that they could turn to, or a counsellor, which made it easier to cope with a 'revolving door' of social workers.

- > *“She's [IRO] always been really, really supportive and anything that I wanted to change or have altered she'd always back me up if it was within reason. And I just felt like I could always speak to her more than I could my social workers because they were always changing but I've always had my IRO. [It is important to have someone stable in one's life] so you can have trust in someone that you can confide in. Someone's always going to be there instead of having to change and then having to rebuild a relationship with somebody else.” (Female, 16).*

Children's COMMISSIONER

Children's Commissioner for England
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Tel: 020 7783 8330
Email: info.request@childrenscommissioner.gov.uk
Visit: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk
Twitter: @ChildrensComm