
Customer voice (wave 9): aspirations of children in care

Executive Summary

April 2010

Research objectives

- To explore young people in care's aspirations for the future and the support they receive to realise these aspirations
- To understand foster carers' thoughts about supporting their foster children's aspirations

Research methodology

Stage 1: Depth discussions with (14) young people

Stage 2: Focus groups with (22) Foster carers, Children's Home staff

Stage 3: Reconvened depth discussions with young people

Recruitment criteria

All children lived in a Foster family, all children were aged 10 and above

A mix of gender and ethnicity

All adults were Foster Carers or work in a Children's Residential Setting

Research was carried out across England, with children being looked after by a wide range of local authorities. Research took place in March 2009.

Key findings

Research revealed that most Children in Care have aspirations that are similar to other young people consulted on this topic (Aspirations 1 and 2: Published 2009). These were having a loving family, a good job/career with financial security and a nice home.

However most of the young people in this sample expressed a high level of fatalism and they did not feel in control of their lives. Most did not express confidence in achieving their aspirations. In particular not achieving aspirations appeared to be linked, by several young people, to bad luck or fate in their personal lives.

Added to this, over half this sample identified that making decisions was hard for them. Reasons for this were difficult to establish but could be because of difficulties of dealing with the past, not wanting responsibility and fearing the consequences of making 'wrong' decisions. The majority felt they were frequently told what to do by the professionals involved in their lives and that they were not given the chance to have their say in matters to do with their lives. They would like support in decision making, planning and coping with their emotions.

There were several examples of young people in this sample who had a clear idea about their future career. Similarly to the other young people spoken to about aspirations these tended to be formed from age 11 onwards (Year 7). Those who were unclear tended to be younger. However, almost all in this sample identified a career rather than a job as desirable, although most admitted they were not sure how to go and seek out their career, what qualifications they may need and who to go to for advice. There were some who felt they had a good relationship with their Connexions advisors through school and imagined they would be helpful in supporting career development.

Any thoughts and feelings young people in care expressed about their futures were set among the broader reality of leaving care, which they felt was highly stressful. There was some concern expressed by Foster Carers that some young people feel pressured into staying in education in order to stay in care. Some talked about wanting the opportunity to start working but to remain in care. Many felt it would be supportive if 'Leaving Care' arrangements were made to suit individual needs rather than set to an age cut-off. This was thought to ensure young people would be appropriately mature and ready and would experience 'Leaving Care' as a gradual process. Establishing support networks would help young people to be super independent when older.

Schools

Many of the young people consulted in this research reported themselves as having behavioural problems at school because of feeling angry and unhappy. They found their behaviour and emotions were often a barrier to learning. A consistent approach in messages about behaviour from schools and home was deemed essential to help young people feel supported and develop as confident individuals.

Most young people and Foster Carers in this sample recognised that schools have been trying to support young people's learning and develop their aspirations for the future. All have recognised the value and importance of regular support from Learning Mentors, especially when the relationship has been tailored to the individual's needs.

Most in this sample felt they were most receptive to help from schools about anything including their futures at 15/16, which is slightly older than other young people consulted, possibly due to increased maturity and the resolution of some post care decisions. Some admitted that even though they may reject help, schools 'hanging on in there' sends them a positive message and helps them to feel a sense of belonging.

A few people in this sample believed that because they are in Care they benefit from more chances at education than their peers, whatever their behaviour. Some believed they are likely to get a place at college with funding support. Interestingly a few believed that this special treatment could impact negatively on their motivation to work hard at school, especially in subjects they did not enjoy and teachers they did not like. This means that the learning potential of those with little drive and challenging behaviour may not be fulfilled. Treating the young people kindly was deemed essential but relaxing the rules was considered unnecessary and possibly counter-productive.

GCSEs and educational attainment appeared as a real goal for some in this sample, including those aged 16 who had not yet taken them. All understood the value of having GCSEs for their future prospects and most saw attaining them as a real achievement, particularly in the context of most of their families. Most admitted that grades were less important than having GCSEs per se. Those who had already selected options received support from Foster Carers, teachers and mentors. Birth family tended not to be involved.

Learning mentors were seen as essential part of a young person's experience at school. Their input seemed to work best when it was in tune with the child's needs, respecting their privacy and giving them emotional support. Most in this sample felt that Learning Mentor support would be even more beneficial if it began in Primary school and the mentor could support the young person's transition to secondary school.

Extra-curricular activities

Across the sample there was a sense that a range of extra-curricular activities are available for Children in Care. Some activities were the same as those other children and young people took part in, but there was a sense that more money and materials could be accessed by Children in Care and that Children in Care went on more 'special' treat trips. Although they found the regular activities difficult in terms of socialising they believed in the long term, being more valuable than the special treat trips, as they help to build confidence and could allow young people to develop networks of support.

Foster carers' support with aspirations

Foster carers believed that they had an important job in exposing Children in Care to positive role models and extending their interests, skills and developing realistic aspirations for the future. Many Children in Care looked up to their Foster carers and regarded them as role models.

Most Foster carers in this sample claimed to make the effort to support the young people in their care, plan for their future but becoming self sufficient and ready to leave care. They try to do this by building confidence and morale, supporting with basic skills development, encouraging participation in education and extra- curricular activities and providing much needed emotional and behavioural support. Many foster carers however, expressed that they neither felt equipped with the relevant skills to support with emotional issues, nor with the easy, quick access to relevant professionals who could help. When they did have the support they found this helpful.

Family input

Several of the Foster Carers across the sample felt that contact with the birth family affected how Children in Care felt about their futures. Whilst it was felt to be important that they continue, where possible, to have some sort of relationship, this can sometimes be detrimental and intrusive. Sometimes the contact young people have with their birth family can erode developing confidence. Also the time of contact may mean that young people are unable to participate in the confidence boosting activities available to them. To help children in care gain stability and build confidence, so that they can move forward towards a constructive future, contact with the birth family needs to be evaluated regularly.

The Children in Care workforce

Other adults (Social Workers, Connexions, YOT, Mentors, Teachers) are seen by Children in Care as helping to shape their lives and set them up for their futures. Unlike other children who are not in care, Children in Care operate in a professional, adult world and their experiences in this world seem to influence how they feel about and perceive their futures. Positive experiences help them to feel hopeful, that people are on their side, which can help them to have faith in themselves. Negative experiences seemed to compound residual anger and frustration and are more likely to jade their view of themselves and the world into which they will grow up. It is important therefore that all the adults who work with Children in Care know they are role models and not simply 'workers' and can have a positive or adverse effect on their future aspirations. It is crucial therefore that they are compassionate, connect with young people and their needs and help to bring out their positive traits and skills. They also need to give a consistent message to young people.

Recommendations

Young people

- Provide confidence boosting activities and support for basic decision making and receiving feedback on decisions to help pave the way for more serious decision making about the future
- Help them to set goals and understand the benefits of planning as they grow up, so that the Pathway Plan is easier to manage
- Social skills and socialisation encouraging support in clubs and extra activities, with people they can relate to, developing support networks
- Contact with birth family to be child driven and evaluated regularly so young people can function and develop strong sense of self
- Leaving care arrangements to suit individual needs

- Mitigate challenges of leaving care so they can look forward to their future
- Set up support networks to supplant family networks

School

- Want to be treated the same as their peers as much possible
- Keep 1 to 1 support as necessary and begin in primary to help emotional development
- Good rapport with mentor essential - needs to be child driven
- If relevant - teaching brought to their level not age
- Life skills and confidence building activities through PSHE, practical learning and skills development
- Review special rules to help young people see value of school and learning
- Most receptive in input aged 15/16

Foster carers and residential social workers

- Need to be made aware of the need to promote the young person's skills in planning and decision making
- Training may be useful to help Foster Carers make links between confidence, decision making and aspirations so they can help young people look to their future
- Foster carers to have access to emotional and behavioural resources – someone accessible, approachable and knowledgeable
- Messages they give to be consistent with other support services in terms of behaviour and reward, so that the Care policies don't over rule home values and boundaries
- People who foster need to realise they are role models. When recruiting, it's important that people are willing to take on this level of responsibility
- Support them to support kids to be hyper independent with basic skills and building networks

State

- Positive regular adult intervention as adults they liaise with are all role models
- CAMHS and other emotional and behavioural support to help 'dismiss demons' and get on with life as confident and independent people
- Consistent approach and messages around behaviour and support for emotional needs from all Statutory bodies
- 'Children in Care card': School interventions can backfire on long term goals – policy could be amended so Children in Care have support but do not feel different
- Leaving Care – develop formal networks for support
- Leaving Care – to be flexible and executed on an individual child basis
- Make sure the Pathway Plan is not viewed as tokenistic by giving it real meaning to young people – involving them and individualising where possible.

Additional Information

This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.