

## **“It is different living in the system than working in the system”**

### **St Christopher’s Fellowship and the Care Review**

#### **About St Christopher’s**

St Christopher’s Fellowship is a charity looking after children and young people in care, on the edge of care and leaving care. We provide children’s homes, semi-independent accommodation, fostering and outreach services (including educational support, therapeutic support and community-based preventative work) across England and the Isle of Man.

#### **About this submission**

At St Christopher’s we believe that adults can learn so much from children and young people in care. Our commitment to participation and co-production means we put their views at the heart of all our work. This young person summarises why this is so important:

“People need to understand it is different living in the system than working in the system.”

**Age 16**

That is why this submission is built around the views of children and young people. We firmly believe that their lived experience of care gives them a level of expertise that we cannot match, and that their feedback should be central to any changes to the care system.

Names have been changed to protect children and young people’s identities.

#### **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to the young people, foster carers and employees of St Christopher’s who contributed to this report.

For more information please contact [communicationsteam@stchris.org.uk](mailto:communicationsteam@stchris.org.uk).

### **Stability**

Stability is vital for children and young people in care. After already experiencing the upheaval of being removed from their family, any further changes can compound feelings of rejection and break young people's trust in other adults.

We need to acknowledge that coming into care can be frightening for children and young people, even if it is for their own safety. Children in care can still love their parents despite any challenges in their home life, so it is important to ensure young people are as supported as possible with this transition.

“The process on how we get taken into care needs to change. It's like dropping a bomb on somebody. You might come home one day and there's someone at your door. You'll just get told to take a few clothes and that you're going into care.

The outstanding thing we need to change is what we are allowed to take with us [when taken into care]. I know the process and it depends if you're going into emergency care or long-term care but a lot of us didn't get to take the things that are important to us and we didn't get them back.”

**Age 14**

Children spoke about how coming into care or moving to a new placement can be a scary experience.

“It was scary [when we first arrived] because I didn't know who my carer was and her personality. But she goes to church so when she arrived I thought she would be nice. Sometimes we have ups and downs but we get back together. I get on well with my carer because she is nice.”

**Age 8**

They talked about the inequality of a foster family or a care home knowing lots of personal information about them, but they do not know anything about the people who will be looking after them before they move in.

“Foster carers are strangers to you – we have to be in the house already in the placement to get to know them. So before moving in, I need to know about them and who they are, at least some information on who they were and things they like. A portfolio about them would be good or taster days, like when you go to a new school. About three taster days to see how it is. Like first day you spend the day with them, stay over on the third day. If you like it then you can say you want to move in and if you don't then you have choice.”

**Age 15**

The same young person as above shared how it felt when they were not consulted on changes to their placement and were not given all the information.

“I got told where I was gonna go and got moved straight away. It was unprofessional as they only told me I was going there for a week, which wasn't true. I moved in that same day and didn't know the carer or home, then the social worker just left. I had zero say, was taken from one place and left on hold for a week, then put somewhere else. You have to adapt to all these different people you're living with.”

**Age 15**

This shows how lack of planning can result in young people feeling left out of decisions on their lives. If a young person is moving placement they should be informed, consulted with and kept updated about where they are going and what they can expect.

Another example of instability that came up time and time again was frequent changes of social workers.

“Social workers have a habit of disappearing. You might have one and they change and change. It's like, how are you meant to get stability?”

**Age 14**

While some young people did talk positively about their social workers and having the chance to spend time with them, there was still an overwhelming sense that social workers change too often.

“I had a social worker but we never heard from her, now I have a new one and it's getting confusing.”

**Age 12**

This leaves young people not knowing where to turn if they are having a tough time or want to speak to someone and it means information can get lost, ending up in young people not receiving the right support.

### **Our asks**

- Care planning by local authorities needs to improve so that young people know when they are moving, why they are moving and where they are going.
- Young people need opportunities to visit their new home prior to moving so that they can be involved in decision-making about their lives and have their voices listened to about what they want.
- Young people need to receive information about their new home and who will be living or working there before moving, for all placement types.
- The social care workforce is undervalued by society and stretched. Raising standards within the sector and publicly celebrating the work of the sector could help to reduce staff turnover and encourage more people to join, which will in turn provide better stability for children and young people.

## **Safeguarding**

Young people, foster carers and professionals highlighted the care system's important role in keeping children and young people safe from harm.

“[I like] having somewhere warm and safe to live and I have a bed. I don't always agree with the system.”

**Age 16**

While we understand the review's focus on supporting families and children, there needs to be acknowledgement that sometimes care is the right option to keep them safe.

However, structures within the care system can prevent young people from exploring their understanding of risk compared to what peers living in the family home would, as there are more restrictions placed on their lives and choices. It is important young people are supported to recognise and assess risks in their own environments. When young people live in secure or rural placements, this does not always solve safeguarding concerns as they are only removed temporarily. They end up back in the same situation when they move back to their home area as their risk-competence has not been developed.

## **Our asks**

- We encourage a risk-competent approach, whereby professionals build young people's own ability to assess and understand risk in their daily lives. For example, using 'Signs of Safety' is done in conjunction with the young person so both they and the professional work together to keep the young person safe.

### **Mental health**

Especially after the pandemic, children and young people are more aware of the importance of positive mental health.

“You should get help for mental health because if you don't it will get bigger and bigger and one day you just explode.”

**Age 14**

Young people talked about the need to offer counselling services to every child in care.

Mental health support only works when the young person has a relationship with the practitioner and feels able to trust them.

“Some people don't like talking as it makes them more agitated, I'd rather sit there and deal with it myself. Sometimes I go home and think about how I should've handled a situation. I don't want to be helped, I've been on my own so I want to deal with it on my own. I'm not accustomed to it.

I wouldn't say 'I need help'. I talk to [my fostering support worker] because you are like me but I wouldn't take to anyone else. Sometimes people are anxious to seek help. You won't go to anyone if you've got trust issues as then the only person you trust is yourself.”

**Age 15**

### **Our asks**

- Every child and young person in care should be offered counselling. If they do not take up the offer initially, it should be re-offered regularly so that young people always know it is available to them.
- Therapeutic support should be integrated into all services and homes for children in care. This would help normalise therapy and remove stigma that can prevent some people from accessing this support.

## Relationships

Young people frequently said how important it was for them to have someone to talk to.

“I wouldn’t change the family I live with, I wouldn’t change it. I have a really good relationship with them and they listen to me quite a bit.”

**Age 14**

We know from our work that young people need at least one trusted adult that they can rely on during challenging times. As we have shown above, this is not always a young person’s social worker as they change too frequently – instead it could be another caregiver or professional in their life.

“More trust and more help to people who have more needs and who don’t get to have social workers who are respectful.”

**Age 16**

St Christopher’s practice centres around social pedagogic models that recognise the importance of building relationships. We do this through common third activities, where an adult and young person have a genuine shared interest that they can enjoy doing and learning about together. This could be anything from playing basketball, listening to a type of music or doing something brand new like paintballing.

“If you had one social worker the whole time you can build a good relationship with them. Maybe you could meet a couple of social workers when you first come into care and decide which one you like. If on first impressions you don’t think you’ll get on with them then you won’t try to build the relationship with them to start with so it would help if you could pick.”

**Age 18**

When the adult and young person take part in an activity together, they are both equals as they are both trying and learning something new. This takes away any hierarchy that would otherwise exist and allows trust to build.

## Our asks

- Reduce caseloads for social workers so there are more opportunities to spend time with young people doing recreational activities and building a relationship.

### **Leaving care**

Lack of support for care leavers consistently came up in conversations with young people, foster carers and professionals. Experiences of care vary wildly depending on your local authority, geographical location and placement type.

Staying Put offers extended support to young people so that they can focus on their education and not on moving to independence. This makes a huge difference to young people, such as enabling them to go to university while still being able to return to their foster family during the holidays.

“I feel like they [social services] should provide more support when it comes to care leavers. You can't just push someone out of care to be independent. I feel like everyone should have the option of their leaving care age being extended to 25. Everyone's case is different and some people can be on Staying Put or go to an independent home with support. Like I know my carer will still be supportive but with other foster carers I don't know what their situation is. If they don't have that support from their foster carers then their personal advisor needs to be available.”

**Age 21**

However, some young people are unable to Stay Put with their foster carer due to funding.

“From what I know not many people end up with the Staying Put programme due to funding. When we looked into it, it was all money money money and you don't feel like a person, it's like they're telling you you're not worth couple of hundred pounds a week.”

**Age 18**

When a young person is placed outside of their local authority whilst in care, there is sometimes an expectation that they must move back to their local authority once they leave care. They can be restricted to only being eligible for housing in their local authority, even if they have set up a life elsewhere. This causes disruption and uncertainty at a time when they are already having to manage the shift to living independently.

Support worker sharing a young person's view: “His personal advisor has left their role and he is unsure who he is supposed to contact for assistance. He cited a time when he was without his allowance for a period of time and did not know who at the local authority he could speak with. He described the current commute he has for college, which he is long and difficult. He went on to explain that he will move colleges for the next academic year.”

**Age 18**

When support is in place, it can be generic for all young people rather than tailored to their specific needs.

“There should be more financial support and teaching people how to budget. In terms of preparing me for moving out, I had to go to sessions about finances for 4-6 weeks but I didn't get anything else, just some booklets. Nobody's going to remember something they did over a few weeks in a year's time, when they actually need it.”

**Age 21**

As this young person highlights, a short training course does not always adequately prepare young people for real-world challenges.

What would be more helpful is having someone there to turn to for advice and help, which St Christopher's provides through our Staying Close pilot. The project offers young people the chance to co-produce a plan that outlines how they want to stay in touch with the people they care about.

Support worker sharing a young person's view: “He spoke about St Christopher's Staying Close policy, explaining that even though he has moved out, he has had assistance from staff members at his former semi-independent home. He said that he regularly speaks to staff members on the phone for a chat. He also cited a time when he had a hospital appointment and a staff member met with him to accompany him.”

**Age 18**

A Staying Close plan is offered to all young people moving on from St Christopher's children's homes and semi-independent homes in the UK, regardless of the reason for them moving on. It means that young people have someone to turn to in times of need but also when they want to celebrate good things happening in their lives. This work is part of our commitment to lifelong learning and thriving, where we are exploring ways we can help young people maintain relationships long after they have left our homes.

### **Our asks**

- More funding should be available to ensure Staying Put is an option for young people leaving foster care.
- We would ask the Department for Education to continue with a programme of investment in Staying Close as it is a valuable support service for young people.
- We want Staying Close models to be adopted by local authorities and providers.



### **Unregulated accommodation**

We understand the government is currently reviewing unregulated accommodation and have contributed separately to calls for evidence on this topic.

We are a provider of semi-independent accommodation. These homes are staffed 24/7 and employees receive the same introductory training as they would if they worked in a children's home. Although not registered or inspected by a regulator, we commission our own independent inspections every year to ensure our homes are good quality and offering a high standard of support to young people.

One young person was shocked to know about qualifications needed for staff working in semi-independent homes. He felt 'care' should be provided, no matter what type of home or service you live in when you are in care.

"Some workers just come in for making money not helping people, even in care homes where they are supposed to care. There needs to be proper people who have experience and more qualifications [in unregulated settings]. What people who support children and young people do is so important and needs to be more skilled."

**Age 17**

This aligns with St Christopher's view that distinguishing between children's homes and unregulated settings based on provision of 'care' is not the appropriate way to differentiate between them. This language is not appropriate to use, especially considering young people in semi-independent homes are still part of the 'care system'. The service types could instead be distinguished by the level of care and support they are offering, which would create space for both types of help to be available for all young people.

### **Our asks**

- We want the language to be changed so that 'care' is not the word used to define the difference between what is offered by children's homes and semi-independent homes.
- We welcome some form of regulation and standards for semi-independent homes.

### **Young people seeking asylum**

St Christopher's is experienced at caring for unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum in the UK.

Unaccompanied minors often have different support needs compared to UK nationals. Helping them to settle into the UK and supporting them through the asylum process is vital for their wellbeing.

“Social services follow the system and what you get is what is allowed. Sometimes workers care, but sometimes not. They care if you get education and health. If you don't follow the system you don't get help. This is their country, they have rules what they say you need to follow.

People should have more help getting a job for when they are not in education. People from social services should help you get a job. It would help if there was someone around every week to give advice and talk to people in an accessible way.”

**Age 17**

Young people seeking asylum deserve the same opportunities as other young people in the care system, but at the same time the system must acknowledge the individual strengths of young people in order to develop care plans that meet their needs.

Support worker sharing a young person's view: “He says he is appreciative of the support he has received since being at St Christopher's. He described how difficult he found it when he arrived in the UK due to his inability to speak English. He cited the Homework Club offered by [his semi-independent home] as being important in his learning and English and in building his confidence around the language. He also spoke about how much he was helped by his former social worker, who he said was very important in helping him find his feet.”

**Age 19**

Levels of risk-competence and independence can be higher in asylum seeking young people, as they have often lived autonomously prior to arriving in the UK. Some have told us that they found it more challenging to live in a family setting (e.g. a foster family) because of this, and that they did not need “another parent”. Semi-independent homes can be a better option as they provide stability while still enabling independence.

When young people seeking asylum come into the care system they can often be offered a place in a home as a temporary measure until they are either moved back to their host borough or moved to another local authority through the National Transfer Scheme. When a young person comes to the UK, their first placement can quickly become a key base for them and a significant part of their life story. Being moved away not just from that home but also from the location can be very traumatic and result in them feeling isolated and neglected.

Young people's experiences of the Home Office process for seeking asylum often compounds their trauma. They are unable to heal from their past experiences when under constant threat of deportation. We would welcome changes to the asylum seeking system so

that it has a more trauma-informed approach – for example, reduced response times would reduce young people's level of distress.

### **Our asks**

- Working in a risk-competent way (as outlined on page 4) would enable a strengths-based approach where young people seeking asylum can be treated as individuals.
- We would welcome changes to the asylum seeking system so that it has a more trauma-informed approach – for example, reduced response times would reduce young people's level of distress.
- We support the recommendations in the [Black Care Experience report](#), as this does in part relate to young people seeking asylum.
- Thought should be considered to reducing the time it takes for young people who are seeking asylum to establish a 'local connection' as this is quicker than currently acknowledged.

**Children in care are still children**

Many young people spoke positively about getting to do activities in care. Young people listed some of the good things about their care experience:

“Visits, contact, horse therapy and art therapy.”

**Age 14**

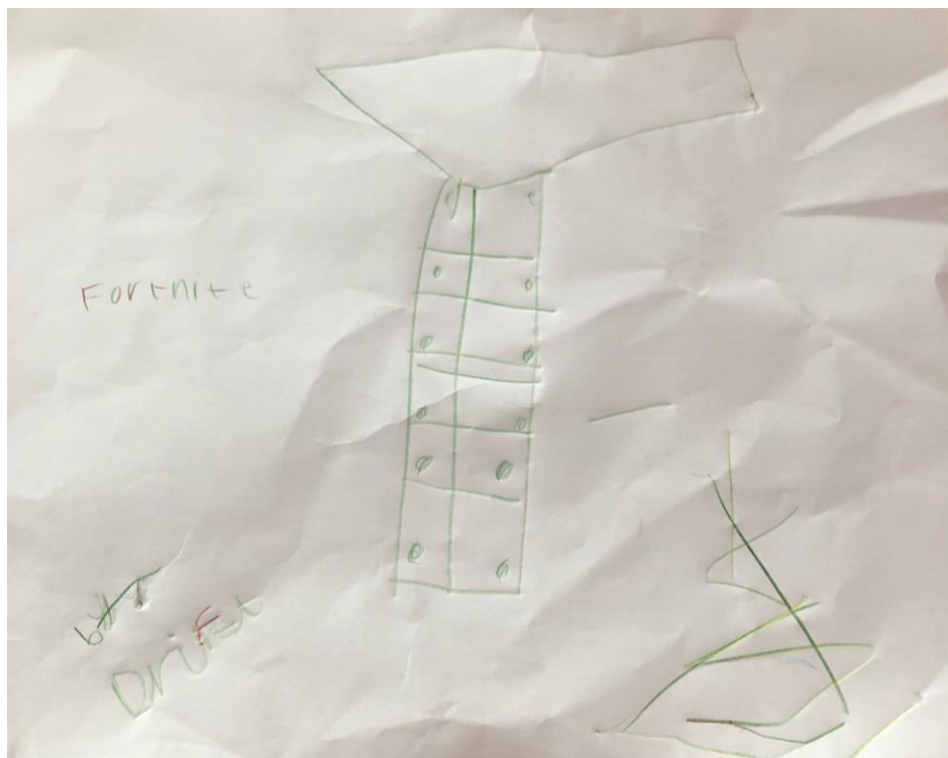
This shows how important it is for children in care to have access to the same opportunities as all other young people. Activities remove stigma as they can experience something the same as any other child. They allow children to try new things, grow their self-confidence and make happy childhood memories.

One thing we want the Review to remember is that children and young people in care are still children. They have the same hopes, dreams, challenges and passions that we all had when we were young.

“More family contact, go out more, go out on your own, fizzy drinks and change of social worker.”

**Age 14**

Foster carer sharing a young person’s view: “My foster son has ADHD and Autism so he told me what he would change about living in foster care. He said he wanted to be allowed to play and watch older games, like Fortnite (drawn by the young person below).”



**Age 9**