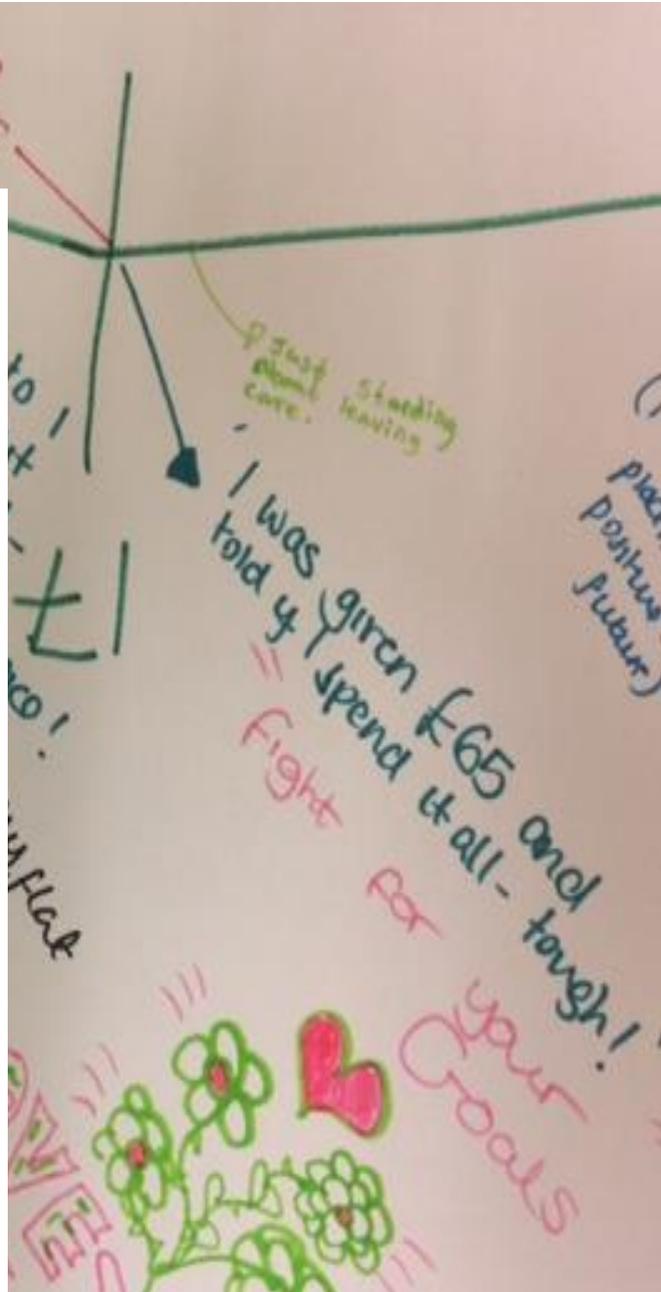


Young People's views on leaving Residential Care 2018

APRIL 2018

Voices From Care and Children in Wales



Children in Wales
Plant yng Nghymru

When I'm Ready- Residential Report

Introduction

Voices From Care and Children in Wales were commissioned by Welsh Government to consult with care experience young people on their views and experiences of the transitional support when moving from residential care into independent living. The voices and views of these young people will feed into the Ministerial Advisory Group's Task and Finish group for improving outcomes for Looked after Children in residential care and will influence the shape of future planning.

Voices From Care Cymru and Children in Wales worked together to deliver:

- Three workshops exploring young people's experiences; preparing to leave residential care; options available to them; outcomes and aspirations.
- Three interviews to develop case studies on specific examples, looking at the strengths, weaknesses and learning from each case.
- Video of work produced and voice recordings from workshops

We started each session by introducing the 'When I'm Ready' scheme for foster care and the reason we were consulting with care experienced young people. The young people's initial responses were:

"It's only fair we have it too"

"I've started calling the carers aunty and uncle"

"It would be nice to be a kid for a while longer"

"Why aren't we treated the same?"

"In a family you have the same people – why can't we have the same thing?"

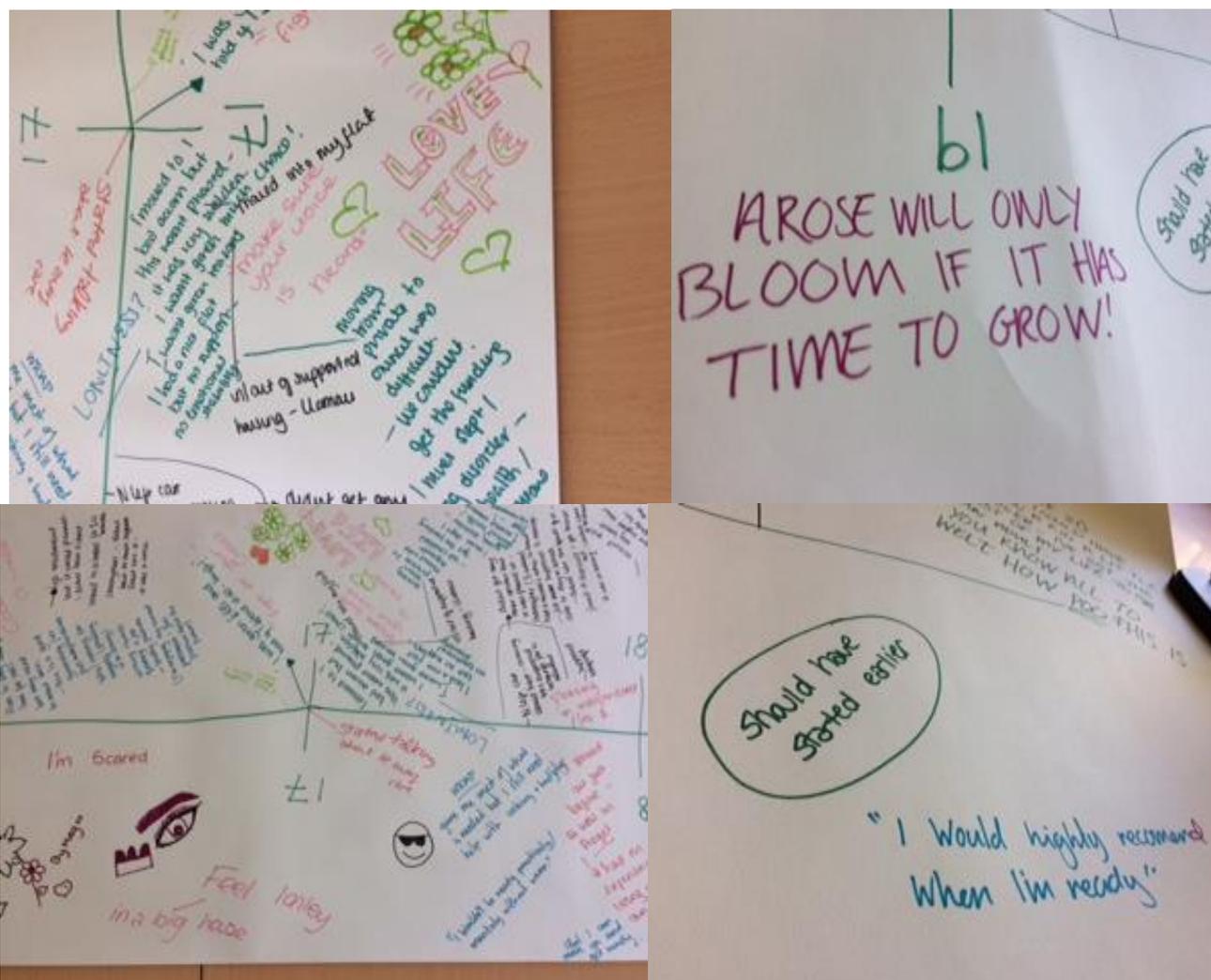
"Having that option would have improved my life in every way possible"

1) Timeline

We asked young people to mark on a time line, when they started talking about preparing to leave care and what were the steps taken? How did it feel? Who started the discussion with you? What have you been doing to prepare? What do you feel is most important?

"I really enjoyed being in residential care. The only thing I didn't like was being restrained by staff if you kicked off. If you fought back, they called the police. I used to get done for assault all the time"

"Residential care was right for me, I only ever had respite in foster care. I liked to have carers not foster carers, I don't like to be claimed."



1.1 Preparing to leave:

Most young people discussed how, as they got older, they had a phased approach towards independence. This was often linked to behaviour, with rewards of payment, free time and time out by themselves. By age 15, most were aware of being given more independence.

All young people talked about developing cooking and budgeting skills, having to shop and cook food for the house was common. Age ranges varied here, some had been doing it since 12/13 others started developing this towards 15/16. This is the same age as the discussion around moving on began, for many it was the lead up to their 17th birthday that plans started.

One young person talked about starting to work on independent travel, looking up timetables and taking the train by themselves, *"I wasn't scared"*.

Most young people said that their key workers started the discussion about moving on from residential care and it was raised at their review meeting. It was a mixed picture in terms of being given options:

"I want to go straight into independence but my local authority says I have to go into supported housing first. The problem is they'll lie, they'll say it's only for 3 months but it will be much longer. I'd like a training flat to try but that's not an option."

"We worked out the plan together, deciding on the right option for me"

"I asked for more independence and they suggested semi-independence. I'm happy with it"

"I want to go home to my mother's when I leave. But I'm not allowed as she already has a full house and no room for me."

One young person spoke about a girl that had left her residential care home and moved into a flat of her own. Having only been gone a week, the girl had a fight with her boyfriend. *"She was scared and just wanted to come back for the night. She said she would go home in the morning and face everything, she just wanted to stay on the sofa for the night. They said no."* The young person talked about how there was no flexibility, no going back and that was scary.

1.2 Options:

We heard about different types of option when leaving care;

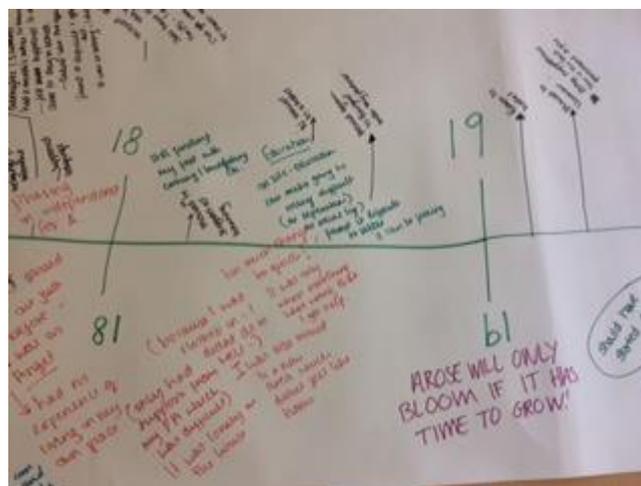


1.3 Phased transitions:

During our workshops we heard examples of positive transitions.

One young person was given the opportunity to move into supported lodgings when leaving residential care. The move was staggered with the young person sleeping at the new accommodation during the night but keeping their daily routine by returning to the residential care home during the day and engaging fully with the residential staff. *“it was planned, it was near my family”*

However, this accommodation broke down for the young person after 4 months. They felt *“it was too quiet”* with only 2 of them in the house, especially after moving from a busy residential home.



2) Stability and Continuity

We discussed with the young people what 'Stability' and 'Continuity' meant to them:

2.1 The general feeling was at 18 there are too many changes all at once which can make young people vulnerable.

"It affected my mental stability"

"Staff changes really affect this"

"I have moved 12 times since I've left residential care. I'm now in Llamau and working towards independence. I don't like all the restrictions and rules though."

"Once they find a place for you, you get 30 days' notice then you have to go. That's scary"

"I'm really scared of having nightmares and being on my own"

2.2 What stability means to the young people:

"A plan, following my routine after leaving"

"Feeling comfortable"

"Not knowing what is happening can cause instability"

"Young people may want to leave, but then they can't always go back"

"Friends, local connections, support and phasing independence can all help"

"Not being pushed from pillar to post"

"Things staying the same"



3) Voice and Control

We discussed with the young people what 'Voice' and 'Control' meant to them.

"One option is not a choice"

"Having a chance to have more of a say, Your Say! Fight for it, I didn't I just went along"

"It's my life! Don't just tell me"

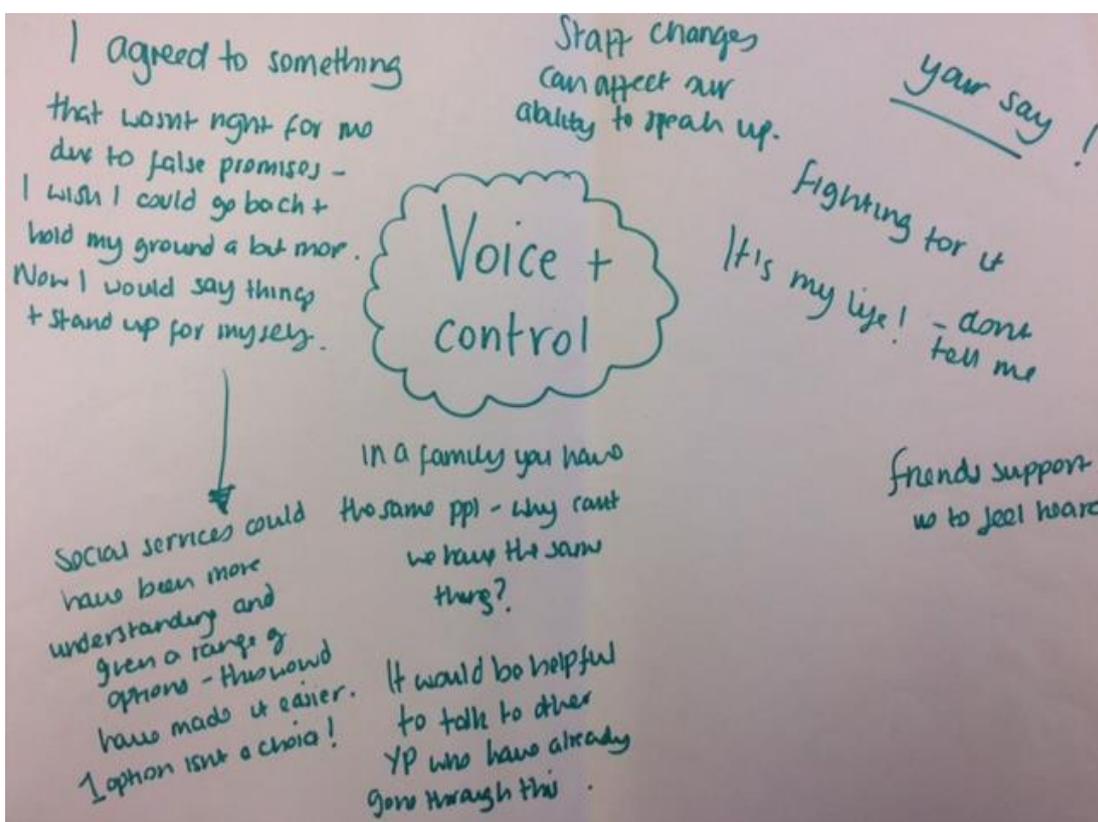
"I didn't feel able to say no"

"I agreed to something that wasn't right for me due to false promises – I wish I could go back and hold my ground a bit more. Now I would say things and stand up for myself"

"Staff changes can affect our ability to speak up"

"No nagging people telling me what to do"

"I feel more in control when I'm listened too"



4) Improve life chances

We discussed with the young people what 'improved life chances' means to them.

4.1 More chances:

"Everyone makes mistakes"

"Once you make the choice there's no going back, what if I change my mind"

4.2 Homelessness:

"I didn't feel safe so I stayed on friends sofa, I felt like I was homeless"

One young person was removed from residential care at 16. She understands why but regrets the quick jump to being by herself, with no plan or preparation. Social services supported her to find a hostel, but things quickly went downhill as she developed a drug dependency. She was homeless and living in a tent with her boyfriend at one point and spent time moving between hostels. It was only on discovering she was pregnant at 18 that the young person, along with her boyfriend, were offered a flat.

4.3 Education:

"It's hard to manage staying in education when you're worrying about losing your tenancy"

"I highly recommend When I'm Ready for staying in education; it means I can focus on studying"

"The onsite education really helped me, but it was really hard to move into a college setting after only ever socialising with a small number of other young people. Making friends was really tough."

4.4 Not getting involved in crime:

"If I can just keep myself out of trouble I know I can make it"

"Young people in care are more likely to get in trouble"

"To not becoming a prostitute."

This comment was in regards to the messages that current statistics portray care experienced young people.

4.5 Family / Community:

“To have connections and people to talk to”

“I still have my first foster carer on Facebook. We video chatted recently”

“I’ve been able to stay in college and near my friends since I’ve left.”

“I’d been living away in residential care for so long and had strained relationships with my family. I was really lonely when I first moved back”

4.6 Emotional health and wellbeing:

Across the board, we heard about challenges with emotional health and wellbeing when transitioning into independence. In a couple of cases, we heard there were significant mental health needs not considered prior to leaving.

“I was lonely, going from a busy residential home to being by myself”

“It’s too quiet”

“I’m working on doing things in my own time. I’m so used to the strict residential timetable”

“I needed more support, my mental health suffered and I ended up in hospital before anyone helped”

“I’ve gone from carers around all the time to only seeing someone every now and then”

“I was promised a live in support worker, but it never came. I just couldn’t cope by myself, my mental health suffered.”

5) Aspirations

We finished each session by asking the young people about their goals and where they saw themselves in five years' time. Every young person acknowledged that they were on their own journey and leaving care was just one part of this. Most young people agreed that the right support was vital when they were making those first steps to independence. For some young people, the right support at the right time was crucial for keeping them engaged with services and feeling a sense of 'trust' with the professionals that supported them.

I want to be a....



Case Study 1

Alexander enjoyed living in his rural residential care home. There were many rules, but he felt they were quite lenient and if you respected them, they respected you. There were 12 boys in total at the home, split into two units, one for younger boys and one for those that were preparing to move on. There were many opportunities to learn independent living skills such as budgeting and cooking. There were also plenty of activities. Although he was placed out of county, his social worker regularly came to visit which he appreciated.

After finishing his GCSE's at the Onsite School, he started in college at 17. He found the transition very difficult, as he was used to being with the same small group of students so making friend was a challenge. He found the teachers at college supportive, and they were understanding about his situation and encouraged him to do his best.

From age 17, planning for leaving care started. He had a new social worker that said, they would not be able to support him out of county so he'd need to move back. He was very apprehensive about this as he had just started college, was involved in local youth groups and had not been back for some time. He was not offered any other options, but was not confident enough to speak up, so he went along with it. It was promised he would be enrolled in college and supported to get involved in local groups when he moved.

As a way of transitioning, it was arrange for him to have two overnight visit to stay with his mother in the lead up to leaving which he says was very strained. Any friends he had from primary school he had lost touch with.

He was moved just before Christmas into a 3 bedroom house. Immediately he felt lonely and isolated and couldn't manage to look after himself and the house. He was not support to enrol in college and with nothing to do, he disengaged from his social worker and his mental health seriously suffered. It was only after being hospitalised 6 months after moving did anything change and supported housing was found for him.

Reflecting on his experience, Alexander thinks coming back was the right option but it has taken time to build up a support network, which wasn't considered at the time. Moving into a 3 bedroom house was very daunting. A flat or a studio would have been much more manageable. Furthermore, the option of supported housing or a training flat would have been more suitable. From being surrounded by other young people and carers to seeing a social worker every 2 weeks, Alexander feels "it is a bigger leap to independence for young people from residential care."

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Opportunity to develop family support network by moving back to original county.• An opportunity to visits for two nights before moving back.• Supported housing eventually found.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• New social worker before moving• Straight into independence in a 3 bedroom house.• Emotional wellbeing, lonely, disengaged from support.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding on of community when returning.
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Learning: As acknowledged by Alexander moving back was the best option and some consideration to re-establishing connections was made. However, it can take much longer to create meaningful relationships and develop a support network in a new community.

Having to start a relationship with a new social worker during a difficult time of transition left Alexander disengaged and untrusting.

Feelings of loneliness had severe effects on his mental health and left him in hospital. A slower transition to independence possibly in supported housing or a training flat might have helped. Access to more emotional support, someone to talk to and activities to engage in might also have helped.

Case Study 2

Amber had been in out of county residential care for 5 years. Six weeks ago, a few months before her 18th birthday, she took her first step into independence. Amber felt she was very involved with planning her move into independence and happy with what was decided. Together Amber and her key worker chose a supported flat to build up her confidence before transitioning to full independence. She visited the new flat for weeks leading up to moving in, getting familiar with the staff and even staying the night.

Her new flat is only 30 minutes from the residential home. This means she can stay at the same college and still see all of her friends maintaining the support network she already has. She pay’s some of her own bills and cooks for herself, but is supported by staff where she needs it, as a way to build up her skills.

Amber is still settling in but so far she feels happy with how things are going. For the next few months she will have staff available at night if she need anything, but as soon as she turns 18 this will stop. While she is apprehensive about being completely alone at night she is working with her support worker to build her confidence and will be completing independent living courses. Amber now has to learn to manage her feelings and navigate her relationships by herself, this including strained family dynamics, whereas before there was always someone around to talk to or intervene if needed.

Her current focus is working out her own schedule, *“I was always told when to do things before, when to cook, when to do my washing and when to go to bed. Now I can do it whenever I want and it’s overwhelming”*.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options discussed and agreed together. Remaining close to her current college and network. Phased transitions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some support options only for a couple of months until she’s 18 - even at this age, with support being given prior to independence, this YP has said she still struggle to manage on her own – as she talked about ‘feeling really safe’ in residential care, with different people around her at all times.

Learning: Young person fully involved in the decisions, slow transition and on-site support with access to courses on independent living skills. This has created a positive leaving care experience for Amber. A key element for Amber was being able to stay near her college, for her social and educational connections.

The amount of support received will drop at 18, with no overnight support. It remains to be seen if the young person will feel ready at this point.

CASE STUDY 3

Zoe left care on her 16th birthday in 2007. She had a positive experience of residential care but said she was always quite independent and was adamant she wanted to leave care as soon as she could. She desperately wanted her own house or flat - but there was a long wait on the council housing list. Her options given were:

- To be put on the council waiting list and remain in residential care until allocated
- Local hostels
- To leave care with no accommodation allocated (could potentially go home to her family or stay with friends)
- To move into supported lodgings

Zoe took the option of supported lodgings as she didn't like the idea of moving to a hostel. Zoe worked with her residential key worker from 15 to prepare to leave care. She completed an independent living programme which consisted of building a comprehensive workbook with completed activities including cooking, cleaning and washing clothes, managing money, travel and shopping. Zoe said she really loved doing this and felt ready to leave but on reflection acknowledges that she was quite sensible and 'had a very old head on young shoulders'. She feels that young people living in residential care 'shouldn't be spoon fed' too much as once you are living independently you need to be doing everything for yourself.

Zoe said she thinks When I'm Ready should be offered to young people in residential care - despite wanting to leave care herself at 16. Zoe said this opportunity could be the difference between 'make or break' for some young people. Zoe went on to achieve a Youth and Community degree with honours and is currently a Youth Service Manager at a Charity. She is currently waiting to see if she has been awarded funding to undertake a Masters course from September 2018.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear options and choices given • YP was listened to - voice and control • Positive outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whilst feeling ready, not able to access the option she wanted. • This YP acknowledged her pathway may not have worked well for other young people who were potentially 'more vulnerable' as she was only just 16 when she left care.

Learning: A range of options and flexibility. Every young person is individual, in Zoe's case, she felt ready but acknowledges that many young people do not. When listened to and given individual options, young people can succeed and achieve positive outcomes.

Recommendations

1. Further consultation

The scope of this project is limited. While there are common themes, every experience was vastly different and often very complicated. All the young people had varying experiences, needs and abilities that would have to be considered when making decision on their futures.

2. Increased focus on emotional wellbeing and support

While we heard a lot about practical independence being taught and supported, young people did not feel as prepared for the emotional independence. Being out of county and not having enough family or friend support was highlighted as an area of concern in terms of emotional wellbeing. For example being by themselves, problem solving alone and managing relationships.

When the young people feel listened to and have some control on what is happening to them they are more likely to engage with the support that is there for them. Where possible, maintaining wider family contact could also help provide the young people with a network of support for successful independence when they leave.

3. Power of Peer support.

"It would be helpful to talk to other YP who have already gone through this"

"I don't trust any professionals"

During our workshops, we noticed how the young people supported each other. A couple who are still in residential care become very anxious talking about having to leave *"it's scary"*. The care leavers were quick to give them advice and encouragement, telling them what worked for them and what didn't. This spontaneous advice from lived experience and reflective empathy was greatly welcomed by the young people. Coupled with young people stating that they don't trust professionals, that people lie and that *"we all have problems with trust"*, peer support could bridge the gap.

4. Flexible, slower, staggered options

The positive stories we heard were all from those with a slow and staggered transition. Flexibility is key as the idea of *"no going back, not even just for a night if you're having a bad day"* left young people feeling scared and anxious. *"The quick change is scary!"*

All of the young people had different needs and abilities that will affect their progression to independence.