

10

The care system – consumer’s views

The final section of the questionnaire was headed ‘In your own words’, and invited respondents to describe the best and worst things about being looked after in care, also giving them an opportunity to highlight three things about the care system that they would change if they were in charge.

“Every young girl or boy should be allowed their own room. I share a room with a 13 year-old and we have different bed-times.”

Not surprisingly, a vast range of responses were elicited to these questions. Some were extremely specific and personal, some addressed wide-ranging policy issues, others cropped up again and again, virtually word for word. In order to make sense of such large quantities of varied data, it was inevitably necessary to lose some of the fine detail and reference to personal situations. However, at the same time every attempt has been made to ensure both that the main themes have been captured and the most frequently recurring specific items retained.

The best thing about being looked after in care

List 10.1 shows the most frequently occurring responses to the question ‘What is the best thing about being *looked after* in care?’ for the whole sample together. ‘Having someone who cares’ was by far the most common answer, given by 21 per cent of all respondents (433 individuals). The other most frequently occurring items on the list concentrate on emotional and social benefits of being *looked after*, although 8 per cent of the sample suggested that there was ‘nothing’ good about being in care.

List 10.1

Best thing about being in care – all respondents

Specific items mentioned by more than 5 per cent of sample

1	Having someone who cares	433	21%
2	Sense of security	176	8%
3	Someone to talk to	173	8%
4	Nothing	169	8%
5	Help with problems	149	7%
6	Meeting more people	129	6%
7	Independence	128	6%
	Base	2,073	

"I don't like this idea of everything I do getting written down. It makes me feel like a science project."

The responses broken down by type of placement (**Lists 10.2 to 10.4**) show that while 'having someone who cares' is the most frequently occurring item for each type of placement, it is far more likely to be mentioned by children in foster care (28 per cent) than elsewhere. It is also worth noting that 'nothing' is the second most frequently occurring item for children and young people in both children's homes and all other types of placement, commanding 11 per cent and 12 per cent of responses respectively, whilst it is of relatively minor significance as a response for those in foster care (just 5 per cent).

List 10.2 Best thing about being in care – children in foster care

Specific items mentioned by more than 5 per cent of sample

1	Having someone who cares	307	28%
2	Sense of security	118	11%
3	Someone to talk to	90	8%
4	Being like one of the family	79	7%
5	Help with problems	77	7%
6=	Independence	62	6%
6=	Meeting more people	62	6%
8	Nothing	60	5%
Base		1,112	

"We all get treated like 5 year olds and everybody in here hates it."

List 10.3 Best thing about being in care – children in residential homes

Specific items mentioned by more than 5 per cent of sample

1	Having someone who cares	81	12%
2	Nothing	74	11%
3	Someone to talk to	65	10%
4	Help with problems	48	7%
5=	Independence	45	7%
5=	Meeting more people	45	7%
7=	Sense of security	40	6%
7=	Visiting different places	40	6%
9	Lots of activities	37	6%
10	Not being ill-treated	33	5%
Base		649	

The focus so far in this chapter has been on the most frequently occurring responses. However, this approach to the analysis does not account for the responses of all respondents, in particular those who referred to a very specific aspect of life in care. It is

The care system – consumer's views

List 10.4

Best thing about being in care – children and young people in other placements (including secure units)

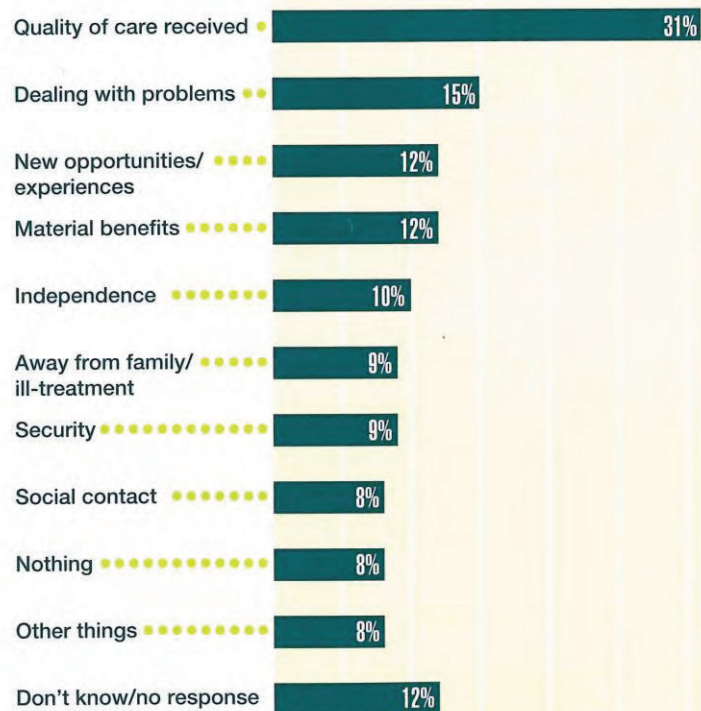
Specific items mentioned by more than 5 per cent of sample

1	Having someone who cares	49	16%
2	Nothing	37	12%
3	Help with problems	26	8%
4	Meeting more people	24	8%
5	Someone to talk to	22	7%
6	Independence	19	6%
7	Sense of security	16	5%
Base		309	

"When a sensible young person asks to sleep over at a friend's house, there shouldn't be so many procedures to follow. It can be really frustrating."

important not to overlook such responses. Therefore, in **Figure 10.1**, all responses to the question have been grouped together under broad themes.

Figure 10.1 Best thing about being in care (themes)



Base = 2,073 Some respondents gave more than one response

Examples of the types of comments comprising themes in Figure 10.1

Quality of care received

Having someone who cares; being spoiled; treated like one of the family; being looked after; the staff; treated with respect

Dealing with problems

Help with problems; someone to talk to; better relationship with my family; not in trouble with the police

New opportunities/experiences

Visiting different places; lots of activities; better chance of education; more opportunities; holidays

Material benefits

Having pocket money; the food; more money; better clothes/clothing allowance; new things; having a roof over my head

Independence

Own room; independence; space and time to think; privacy; having a say

Away from family/ill-treatment

Not being ill-treated; away from family; less arguments

Security

Sense of security; knowing the boundaries

Social contact

Meet more people; living with people the same age; not being isolated; allowed to see friends

"I'm very happy with my present placement, even though I have filled the 'worst things' box – I'm just a teenager and I love to complain!"

A positive comment relating to the quality of care received was by far the most common type of response. *12 per cent* of the sample either left the question blank or wrote 'don't know'. Taken together with those who responded 'nothing', this suggests that around one in five children in care are unable, or unwilling, to report anything positive about their experience of being *looked after*.

The care system – consumer's views

The worst thing about being looked after in care

There was a substantial body of agreement about the worst aspects of being *looked after*. **List 10.5** shows the three most frequently recurring specific answers given to the question 'What is the worst thing about being *looked after* in care?'. Separation from family was the most common response, mentioned by *20 per cent* of the sample, whilst *11 per cent* referred to rules and restrictions affecting their lives. *15 per cent* responded 'nothing', suggesting that for this fairly substantial minority, being *looked after* is a considerable improvement on their previous life. These three items account for almost half of all responses to the question. Other responses were very diverse, each being mentioned by fewer than *5 per cent* of respondents in each case.

List 10.5 Worst thing about being in care – all respondents

Specific items mentioned by more than 5 per cent of sample

1	Being away from family	400	20%
2	Nothing	300	15%
3	Rules and restrictions	220	11%
	Base	2,073	

These same three items (as in List 10.5) dominate the replies from respondents in every type of placement, simply occurring in slightly different proportions. For children in foster care, no other aspect of life in care is mentioned by more than *5 per cent* of respondents. However, *6 per cent* of those respondents not in foster care referred to bullying as being the worst thing about being looked after.

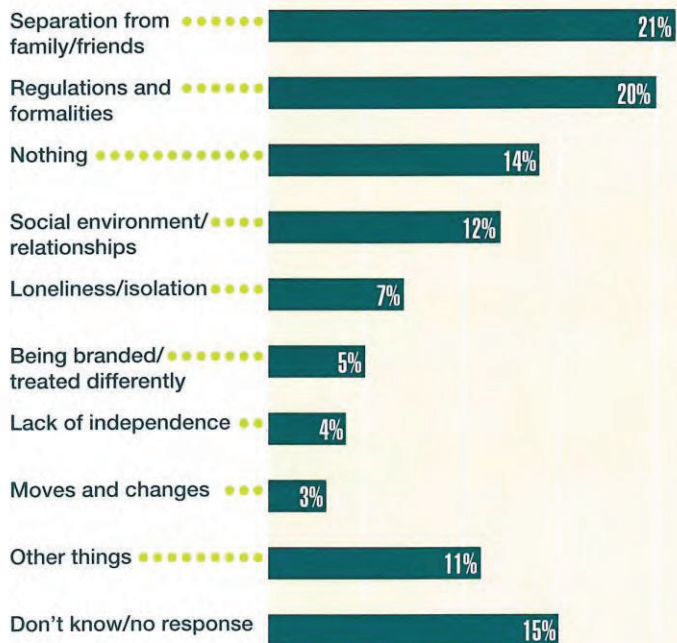
Figure 10.2 gathers together the totality of responses under broad themes, in order to include and represent the views of all respondents.

There are some differences in response according to type of placement. For example, those in children's homes or other placements (including secure units) were more than twice as likely as those in foster homes to highlight aspects of the social environment as being the worst thing about being in care (*16 per cent* compared

"My foster parents have treated me differently to their own children, which I don't think is fair."

"There should be more money available for school outings and family holidays."

Figure 10.2 Worst things about being in care (themes)



Base = 2,073 Some respondents gave more than one response

with 7 per cent). By contrast young people in foster care were almost twice as likely to write 'nothing' in answer to the question, 19 per cent doing so, compared with 10 per cent of all other looked after children and young people.

Examples of the types of comments comprising themes in Figure 10.2

Separation from family/friends

Being away from one's family; being away from friends

Regulations and formalities

Rules and restrictions; reviews; social workers; not sleeping at friends; police checks on friends; bedtime; can't stay out in the evenings; meetings; chores

Social environment/relationships

Bullying; being shouted at; attitude of staff; other children/residents; being picked on; fights/arguments; abuse; racism; mixing with wrong people; don't like foster parents; being treated like a child

The care system – consumer's views

Examples of the types of comments comprising themes in Figure 10.2 continued

Loneliness/isolation

Being lonely; not being loved; feeling insecure; not being understood; not listened to; being left out; living with strangers

Being branded/treated differently

Being branded; treated differently at school

Lack of independence

No privacy; no say; not knowing what is happening

Moves and changes

Moving frequently; the thought of moving; meeting new people

"Give everyone the same amount of Christmas money."

Things to change about the care system

Respondents were invited to write down three things that they would change if they were in charge of the care system. No order of priority was suggested, so all responses have been given equal weight in analysis. Again, as with the best and worst things about being in care, the range of responses provided was extremely broad. However, a number of specific items were repeatedly mentioned. The most prevalent of these are listed in **List 10.6**.

List 10.6 What would you change about the care system? – all respondents

Specific items mentioned by more than 5 per cent of sample

1	More pocket money/allowance	518	25%
2	Bedtimes	271	13%
3	More freedom to be out	245	12%
4	More say in arrangements	170	8%
5	See family more often	148	7%
6	Nothing	132	6%
7	More visits from social worker	129	6%
8	Better social workers	107	5%
	Base	2,073	

The most frequently occurring individual item on these wish-lists was 'more pocket money', listed by one in four of all respondents. 'Bedtimes' and 'freedom to be out' were each listed by one in

List 10.7 What would you change about the care system?
– children in foster care

Specific items mentioned by more than 5 per cent of sample

1	More pocket money/allowance	196	18%
2	More say in arrangements	106	10%
3	See family more often	104	9%
4	Nothing	95	9%
5	More freedom to be out	94	8%
6	More visits from social worker	91	8%
7	Better social workers	75	7%
8	Sleeping out	63	6%
	Base	1,112	

"No support is given. It's like, 'She's in a foster home – forget her'."

List 10.8 What would you change about the care system?
– children in residential homes

Specific items mentioned by more than 5 per cent of sample

1	More pocket money/allowance	270	42%
2	Bedtimes	190	29%
3	More freedom to be out	117	18%
4	More activities/outings	57	9%
5	Better accommodation	44	7%
6	More say in arrangements	33	5%
	Base	649	

List 10.9 What would you change about the care system? – children and young people in other placements (including secure units)

Specific items mentioned by more than 5 per cent of sample

1	More pocket money/allowance	62	20%
2	Bedtimes	39	13%
3	More freedom to be out	33	11%
4	More say in arrangements	29	9%
5=	Better social workers	20	6%
5=	More visits from social worker	20	6%
7=	More understanding	16	5%
7=	Permit smoking	16	5%
	Base	309	

The care system – consumer's views

"Young people in care should have their own room and the facilities they need to keep them occupied on things other than vandalism."

eight of the sample. These are long-standing grievances for children in care, also featuring prominently in *Not Just a Name*, and clearly continue to be strongly felt. Looking at the wish-lists for children and young people in different types of placement (**Lists 10.7 to 10.9**), it is apparent that these three issues are of enormous concern to children and young people, particularly to those living in children's homes. Children and young people in foster care or other types of placement reveal more diversity in their wishes.

Gathering individual wish-list items together into broad themes was much more difficult than for the best and worst things in care, responses ranging, as they did, from a very specific detail of an individual's experience to broad generalities relating to the running of social service departments. (**Figure 10.3**)

Figure 10.3 What would you change about the care system? (themes)



Base = 2,073 Some respondents gave more than one response

"I think social services need to spend more money on important things e.g. keeping children in care after they are 16."

Examples of the types of comments comprising themes in Figure 10.3

Allowances

More pocket money; more clothing allowance; transport allowance

Care system – practicalities

More/less visits from social worker; less waiting for decisions; more support for carers; choose own accommodation; meet carers before moving in; better checks on foster parents; less moving; less staff changes

More freedom/independence

More freedom to be out; more privacy; more say

Particular rules/restrictions

Bedtimes; sleeping out; permit smoking; no restraints

Care system – policy issues

Better social workers; less budget cuts; more foster homes; no reviews; better staff; no police checks on friends; less children in care; social services; try not to split families; ban children's homes; change public view of care

Quality of life

Better food; more activities/outings; better accommodation; more holidays

Emotional/support issues

Make sure people are happy; more support for care-leavers; support groups; counselling/advice service

Contact with family/friends

See family more often; having to see family; let friends stay; more time with friends

Quality of social environment

More discipline; less bullying; treat everyone equally; more family atmosphere

The care system – consumer's views

"Social services should seriously think about the life of young people after care. Most of them are left alone and social services should not forget that those young people don't have anything or anyone..."

Figure 10.3 gives some idea of the types of changes *looked after* children and young people would like to see in the way in which the care system affects their lives. Some themes cover the immediate and personal, such as allowances and the impact of particular rules and restrictions. Others have more general application, such as those which touch upon aspects of policy and implementation of the entire care system.

10

Key points

- 'Having someone who cares' was the most frequent response to the question, 'What is the best thing about being in care?'
- One in five respondents did not report anything positive about being in care.
- Being separated from their family was the most common response to the question, 'What is the worst thing about being in care?'
- 15 per cent of the sample responded 'Nothing' when asked the worst thing about being in care.
- Large numbers of respondents (particularly those in children's homes) expressed grievances about pocket money, bedtimes and freedom to be out.

