

Written evidence submitted by Emeritus Professor June Thoburn

Residential child care as a 'route to permanence' for some older children who need out-of-home care

This submission to the Select Committee is the part of my submission to the Care Review on the knowledge base for alternative placement options for children who need long term care

Claims for expertise in this area

I am an Emeritus Professor of Social Work at the University of East Anglia, founding director of the UEA Centre for Research on Children and Families, associate of the International Association for Outcome Evaluation and Research on children's services (IaOBER) and an affiliate of the University of Bergen Centre for Research on Discretion and Paternalism. I am also one of six UK researcher members of an international grouping of researchers on residential child care.

Between 1980 and 2021 I have written well into the hundreds of refereed research and practice books and journal articles on aspects of research, policy and practice relevant to children in care and family court processes. I was a member of Department of Health advisory groups on the Children Act 1989 and Adoption Act 2002 (for which I was commissioned by DH to complete a review of the research relevant to adoption). I am frequently asked to provide expert evidence to the family court on complex cases and have been a member of national family law advisory committees and provided training for the Judicial College on aspects of child placement. I was for several years a trustee of a small charity that provided long term care in children's homes. A refereed journal article on based on data from this charity can be provided.¹

I was awarded a Leverhulme Emeritus fellowship to research and report on data on children in out-of-home care in 24 countries/states and am frequently consulted on sources of information on children in care in other jurisdictions.

The 2015 DfE guidance² recognises that for a small number of older entrants to care or for some whose 'permanent' family placement has broken down, a planned stable placement in a children's home, with 'Staying Close' arrangements to provide continuity of caring relationships into adult life is an appropriate 'permanence option'.

Residential care as a permanence option for older young people

Unlike the situation in most European countries (but similar to Australia, Canada and USA) the proportion of children in residential care at any one time in the four UK nations is low. However a larger proportion has a period in residential care at some stage during their time in care, and this is likely to be over 50% for those who enter care as teenagers. This results from a widely held view and policy for many years that sees placement in a children's home, for anything but a brief emergency or assessment or custodial purpose, as a 'last resort'. Consequently, most of the small number who are placed in a children's home with the intention that they will put down roots and make relationships with skilled and committed members of staff (who will be there for them to age 18 and beyond) will have had multiple foster care placements or experienced the breakdown of a planned adoptive or long term foster family placement or unsuccessful return to the family. Although there is

¹ Thoburn, J (2016) Residential Care as a Permanence option for young people needing longer term care. *Children and Youth Services Review* 69, 19-28.

² Department for Education 2015 *Permanence, long-term foster placements and ceasing to look after a child: Statutory guidance for local authorities*. London: DfE.

much that can be learned from research on residential placements in European countries, where this is more often a first choice placement, the differences in context and placement aims have to be taken into account. This applies, for example to the European model of 'social pedagogy'.³ Because most residential care placements have aims other than providing 'a sense of permanence' the research on residential care as a 'permanence' option is small and mainly interview-based although some studies follow up care leavers into adulthood⁴. It supports the conclusion that some young people prefer to be looked after in a children's home, where they can remain till they are ready to leave around the age of 18 and with which they can retain a 'sense of belonging'. Maintaining relationships with staff they are close to and also other residents can make all the difference as they move into adult life. These points where improvement is needed and could have a positive impact on the circumstances and opportunities are drawn from care experienced adults, advocacy groups and researchers (only a few listed here)⁵

- Albeit in limited circumstances, a planned placement in a high quality children's home to match the needs and expressed wishes of a particular young person should be considered at an earlier stage and not used only when the young person has experienced several foster care placements. This may represent financial savings as the care needed is likely to be less specialised/ intensive and long term service needs lower as move into adult life can be better supported.
- The care plan for each young person must respect the importance of high quality care and empathic 'therapeutic' parenting, alongside the availability of specialist therapy, education, and preparation for interdependence and independent living. A special kind of love is experienced and recognised between young people who put down roots in a children's home and the staff members who provide the special parenting and experience of 'inter-dependence' as they move towards greater independence in adulthood.
- 'Risk-averse' regulations and practice guidelines must not get in the way of emotional closeness between staff and young people, and between the young residents. Safeguarding processes and monitoring must come from respectful professional practice, staff selection, training, supervision and team-work.
- A care plan and residential child care practice that seeks to ensure that all young people do not leave the children's home until they are ready to do so (in the main around the age of 18 though there should be provision for some to stay beyond that age or to be able to 'come back home' at times of special stress). When young people move on from their children's home, trusting relationship with care staff they know should be encouraged to continue and be there to be called on for advice, a listening ear, or sharing good moments. Some of the

³ Berridge, D. (2013) Policy transfer, social pedagogy and children's residential care in England. Child and Family Social Work. p. 26-41 16 p.

Ainsworth, F. and Thoburn, J. (2014) 'An exploration of the differential use of residential child care across national boundaries'. *International Journal of Social Welfare*. Vol. 23, 1 pp 16-24.

⁴ Stein, M. and Munro, E. (2008) *Young People's Transitions from Care to Adulthood: International Research and Practice*, London, Jessica Kingsley

⁵ Berridge, D. ., Biehal, N., & Henry, L. (2012). *Living in children's residential homes*. London: DfE (<https://www.education.gov.uk/>)

Berridge, D., Feb 2017 Driving outcomes: learning to drive, resilience and young people living in residential care. *Child and Family Social Work*. 22, 1, p. 77-85 9 p.

learning from the 'Staying Close' pilots is relevant and messages from care experience groups provide practical guides for how this can be achieved.⁶

- Collaborative work between the young person's social worker and key worker to encourage meaningful links with birth family members, which may include a specific service to a family member and or joint work. If family links have been lost, work should be undertaken in partnership with the young person to seek out family links⁷

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⁶ Report of the Care Experienced Conference, Past Present and Future April 2019

www.careexperiencedconference.com

Our Care our Say (Nov 2020) 10 top messages <https://ourcareoursay.wordpress.com/our-care-our-say-is-this-the-time-people-are-going-to-listen/>

Every Child Leaving Care Matters (2017) *Caring Teams: Staying Close* see website

<https://eclcm.org/publications/>

⁷ See most recently Holmes, L. et al (2020) *Lifelong Links Evaluation Report*. London: DfE

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/955953/Lifelong_Links_evaluation_report.pdf