



It's my life

In July and August 2014 the Children's Commissioner for Wales held All-Wales Care Leavers Events at Atlantic College, Llantwit Major in south Wales and at Gwersyll yr Urdd, Glan-llyn in north Wales. The events brought nearly 100 young people from across Wales together who were in foster care, residential care or who had left care. The aim was to explore the issues that young people face when they start planning to leave care and live independently and to identify evidence of good practice.

A bit about us...

There is a set of laws, including the Care Standards Act 2000 and Children's Commissioner for Wales Act 2001, which explains the role and responsibilities of the Commissioner.

We want to see Wales as a country where children and young people are respected, valued, listened to and supported to lead safe and happy lives. There's a team of people who worked with Keith – in Swansea and Colwyn Bay - to help him:

support children and young people to find out about children's rights

listen to children and young people to find out what's important to them

advise children, young people and those who care for them if they feel they've got nowhere else to go with their problems

influence government and other organisations who say they're going to make a difference to children's lives, making sure they keep their promises to children and young people

speak up for children and young people nationally on important issues – being the children's champion in Wales.

Background to the event

The event was held for the first time in 2012 in response to a request by young people during discussions which fed into the '[Lost After Care](#)' report. This report detailed the experiences of young people preparing to leave care and the concerns they expressed about a wide range of issues affecting their rights and welfare as they moved towards living independently. The report highlighted significant examples of good practice in relation to the way in which professionals, practitioners and local services worked with young people to assist them in this transition; it also identified a number of shortcomings that made this transition difficult and challenging for young people.

Young people were not always aware of the services that were available to them and therefore did not always use them. They were unclear about the differing roles of the various professionals that they came into contact with, despite the importance that they attached to these relationships, and they felt that the planning for their move to independence was often inadequate and rushed. Young people also felt that they were not sufficiently listened to and consulted in relation to the important decisions that were being made about their life and their transition from care to independence.

The young people we spoke with asked the Commissioner to organise an event which would bring young people in care and leaving care to meet and share information and experiences, and more importantly to enjoy a fun and positive experience.

South Wales

Click the images to watch the videos. We recommend using right-click and 'open in new tab.'



North Wales



February 2015

Activities

In both events the young people took part in morning workshops to share information around key areas of their lives. The activities were facilitated by staff from the Children's Commissioner's Office. Young people were split into five groups and had the opportunity to carousel around all five workshops and gave their views around these five themes:

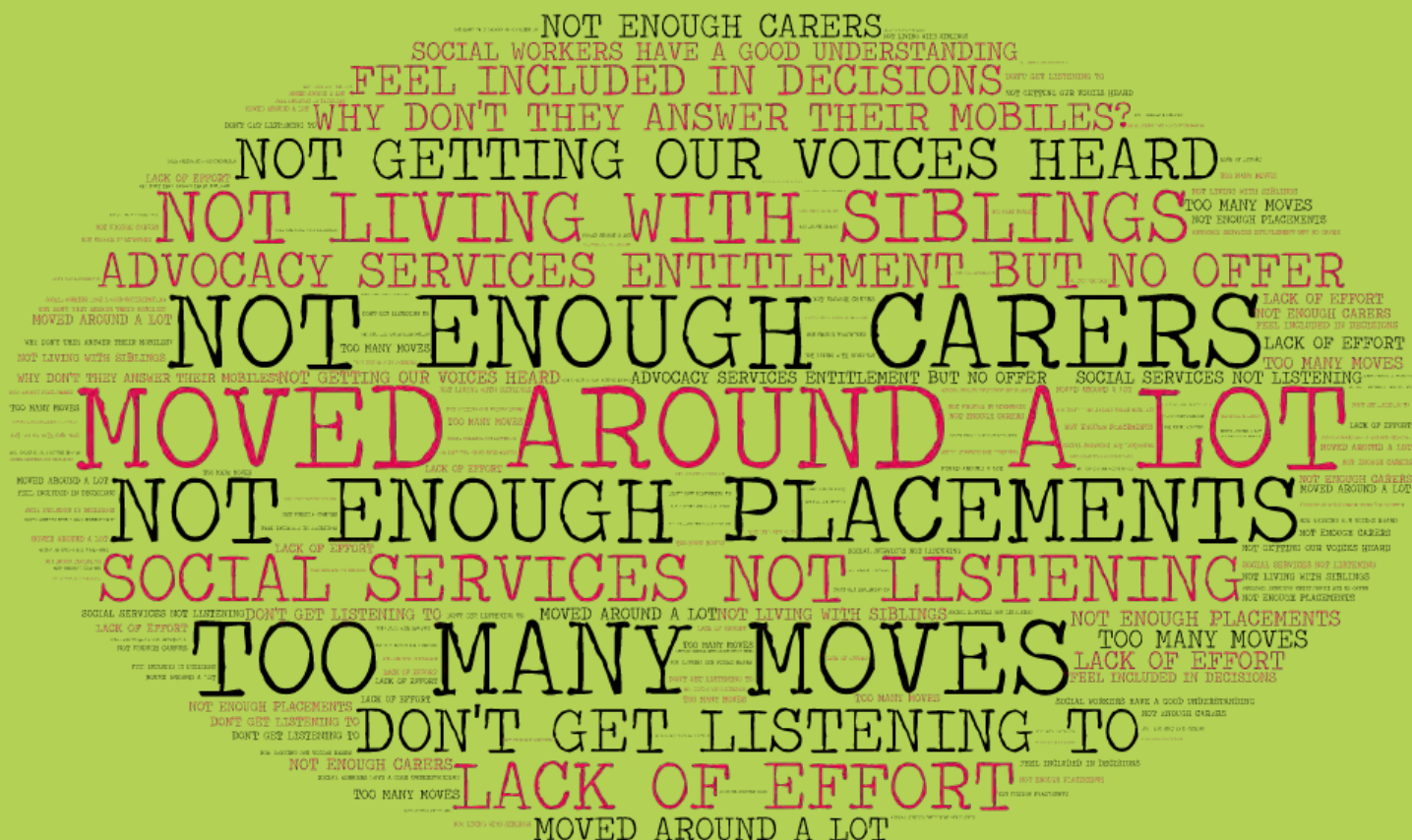
- Social Services
- Housing
- Education
- Living Independently
- My Planner- Rights and Entitlements

All the workshops were designed to be participative and engaging, to ensure young people had the opportunity not only to give their views, but to have fun and to hear what other young people had to say.



The activity

Key messages from young people



February 2015

Do you feel listened to by professionals?

YES - 23

MAYBE/NOT SURE - 18

NO - 12

Personal advisors were helpful,
social workers couldn't always
do what was wanted.

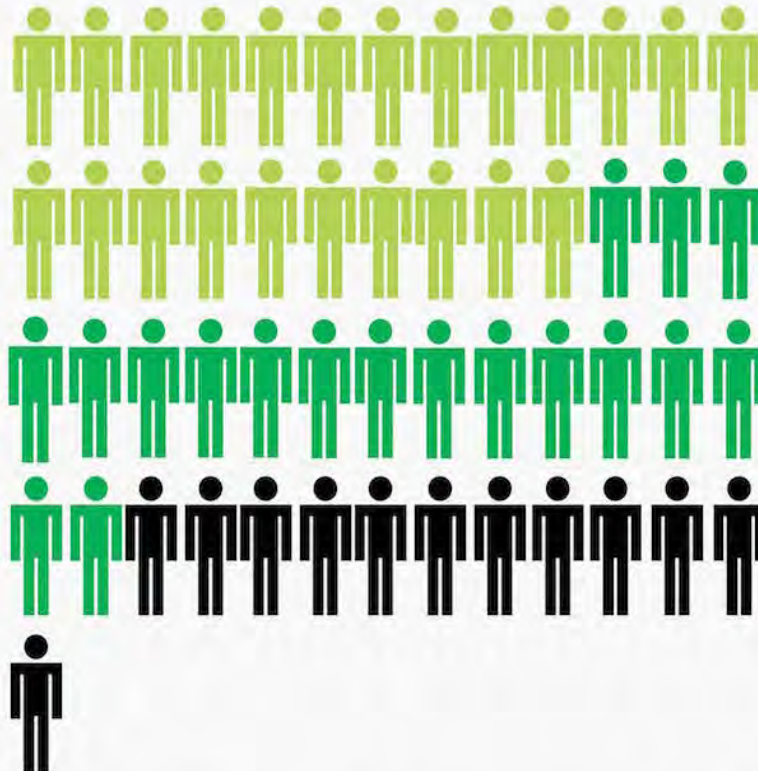
Feel included
in decisions.

Feel listened to and informed.
When something was asked for
it was done.

Listened to in LAC
reviews; social workers
have an understanding
about decisions.

Not involved
in all decisions

Felt let down by
social services
in trying to get
access to see
siblings placed
there.



Difference in
relationships
with PA and
social worker
as I have more
time with PA.

I don't really
feel listened to.

Why don't they answer their
mobiles?

Not explaining
why no is no.

Professionals don't know
what it's like to be a young
person in care, the rule book
is too complicated.

I feel like they just don't
care - it's just a job!

Social workers are often
on sick leave or stressed.

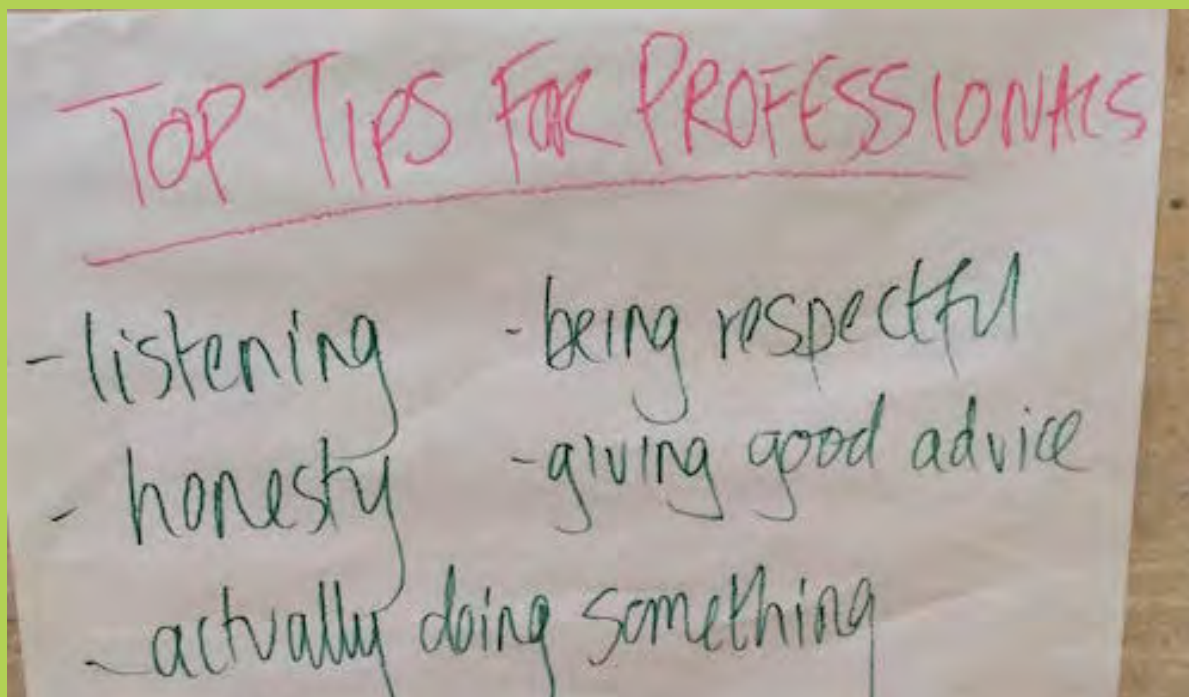
Not prioritised.
Don't get on.

Top tips for professionals/workers – generated by the young people

The activity

Following the last activity, where we asked young people about their relationships with professionals, we collected a list of tips for professionals that young people felt would foster stronger and more effective relationships.

Click the image to watch the video. We recommend using right-click and 'open in new tab.'



Housing: What is it like where you live?

There are a number of accommodation options that should be considered when pathway planning for a young person to leave care. These include:

supported lodgings, where the care leaver lives with other young people, with adult support to learn and develop independent living skills;

foster placement conversions, where the care leaver continues to live in their foster placement but now pays rent;

renting privately, from approved landlords or housing associations;

foyers which provide accommodation that is usually linked to education, training or employment;

training flats / taster flats;

bed and breakfast;

hostel accommodation.

(Options will be dependent upon what is available locally.)

The problem for many local authorities is that there are not sufficient stocks of housing suitable for young people moving on to independent living – at least not of the type.²

The activity

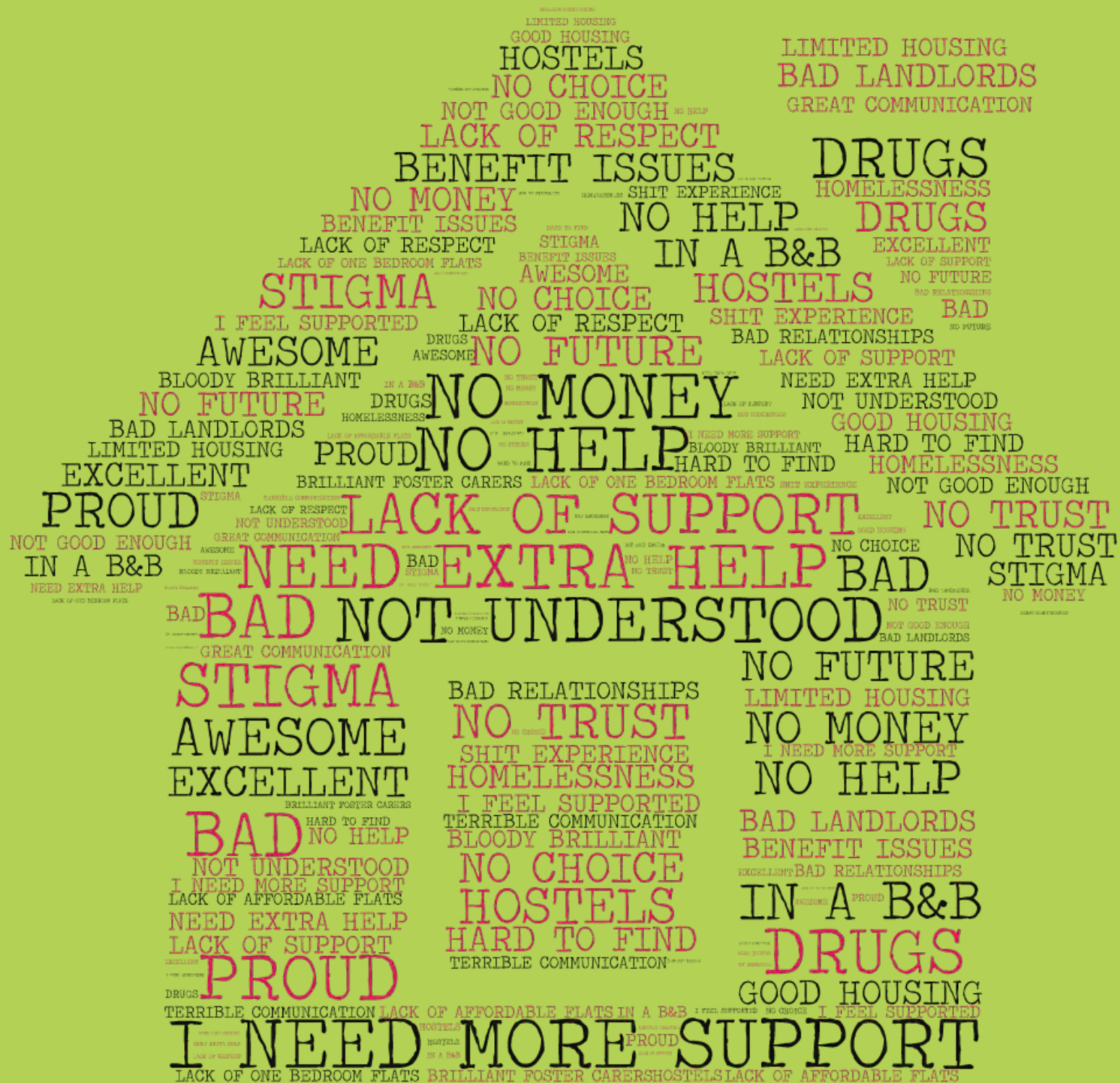
A giant map of Wales was used so that young people could mark the housing issues faced in their local areas, and in turn could see the variety of issues faced by other young people across Wales.

Key messages from young people

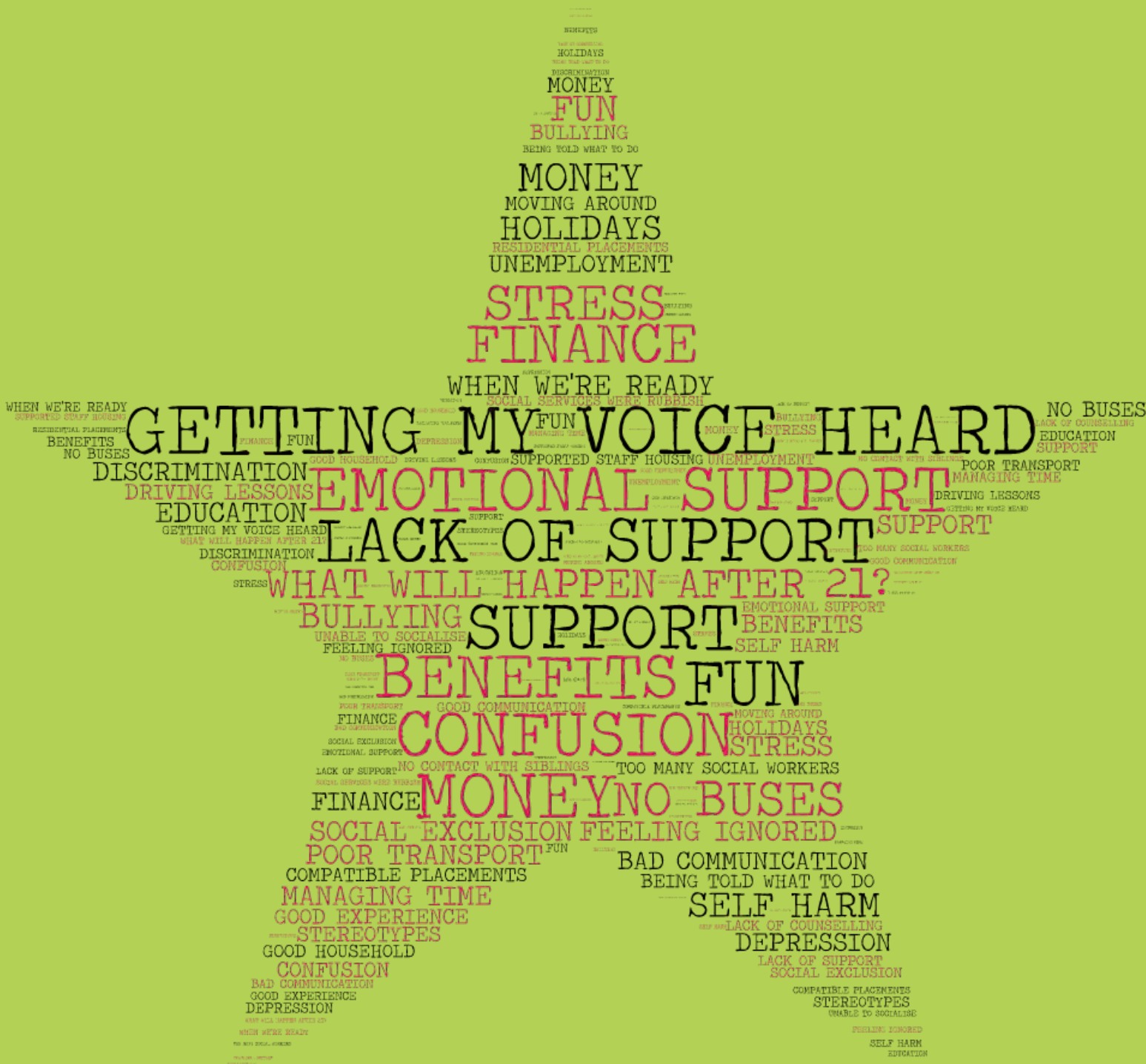
Many of the young people at the events discussed difficulties in being able to access appropriate information for finding housing options and how to manage money and benefits. Others discussed issues with the lack of affordable housing options. Often hostels were one of the only options available to them. Generally the impression given was that young people felt that housing support services do not understand the needs of looked after children and young people or those who are leaving care.



² <http://www.childcom.org.uk/uploads/publications/250.pdf>



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Education

The final years in school and progression onto further education, training or employment is a key factor in the lives of all young people but it is particularly important for looked after young people³. For these young people it is likely that their education will have been affected by their experience of moving from home into care and indeed by the circumstances which led to them entering the care system. Good effective support and understanding in the school setting is vital for this group of children and young people.

The activity

Young People chose a photo that represented their experience of education and explained why they chose it and what it meant to them.

Key Message

Many of the young people expressed their concerns surrounding the lack of activities and spaces available to them to 'just spend time with their friends'. Others discussed concerns surrounding the lack of work opportunities available to them. Transport was identified as a barrier to supporting their access to such opportunities.

Click the image to watch the video. We recommend using right-click and 'open in new tab.'



³ <http://www.childcom.org.uk/uploads/publications/250.pdf>

'Dreams and Aspirations': Living Independently

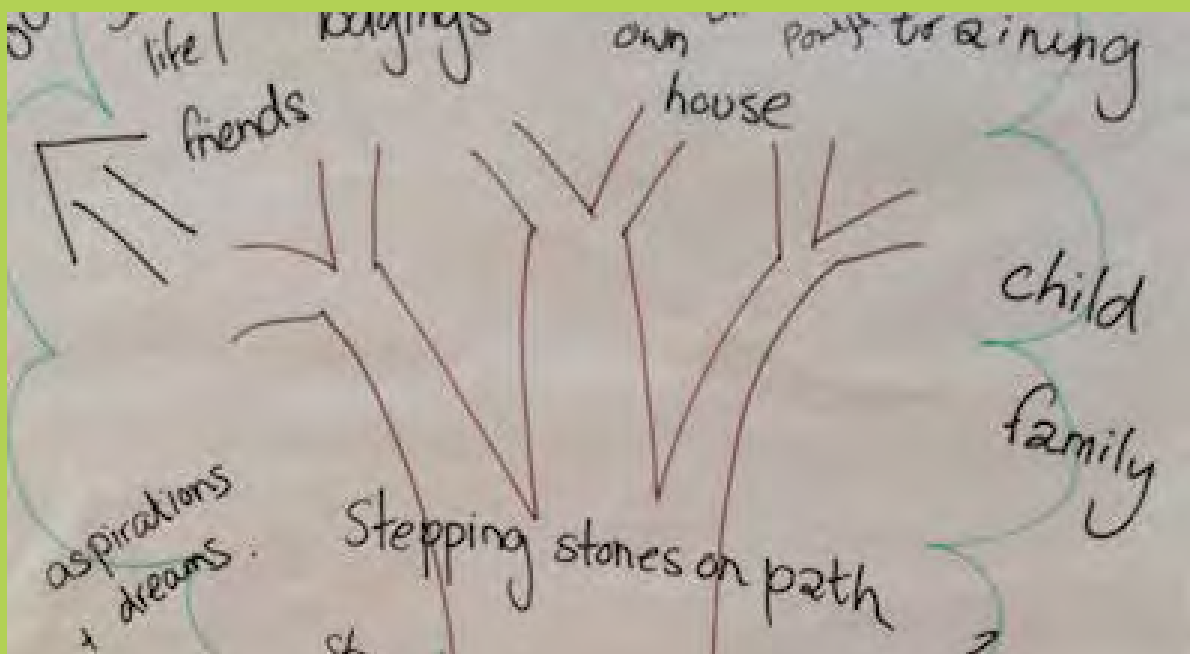
Young people transitioning from care to independence are supported by a strong legislative and policy framework that sets out a range of entitlements that should ensure that young people moving on to independent living are assisted to make this transition successfully⁴. However the experiences of children and young people would suggest that in reality they face significant difficulties in this transition.

The activity

The young people discussed their ideas in an informal group setting with workers and their ideas were visualised on flipchart paper.

Key messages from young people

In terms of leaving care, many of the young people we spoke to felt that more could be done to prepare them for the transition into independent living. Once the support they used to receive was removed they felt isolated and alone – like they had lost their “safety net”. They spoke about not knowing how to manage their own finances and bills, not having people to talk to, and having to deal with landlords that might try taking advantage of their vulnerability. Other young people shared their concerns about the lack of affordable housing stock available to them in their local authority, this has presented problems and challenges when it is time for them to leave care. Many of the young people did not know that the law had changed in relation to the Social Services Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014, which will mean that it could be possible for young people in foster care to live in their foster homes until they're 21.



⁴ <http://www.childcom.org.uk/uploads/publications/250.pdf>



HOLIDAY ON A
CRUISE SHIP



HAVE
PETS

OWN A
FLAT

HAVE
CHILDREN

OWN A
MOBILE PHONE

SUPPORTED
LODGINGS

GO WALKING

OWN A
BUSINESS



OWN A
BUSINESS

GO TO THE
GYM

OUTPUTS

GOOD SOCIAL
LIFE AND
FRIENDS

BE HAPPY

GO FISHING

GOOD INTERNET
ACCESS

NICE
CLOTHES



OWN A SHARED
HOUSE OR FLAT

WELL PAID
JOB

FREEDOM AND
SUPPORT

BE CLOSE TO
FAMILY AND FRIENDS

MONEY

GO TO
UNIVERSITY

My Planner: Rights and Entitlements

In February 2011 we launched '[My Planner](http://www.childcom.org.uk/uploads/publications/240.swf)'⁵ – a resource created by young people for young people preparing to leave care. Not all young people preparing to move to independent living across Wales receive the same support and information about what they are entitled to and what they can expect as they approach the age of 16. To help mark the organisation's tenth anniversary we decided to produce something practical with young people, for young people that would enable them to have a checklist of what support they are entitled to. Copies of My Planner were sent to all local authorities for distribution to all young people in care on their 15th birthday.

We asked the young people at the events for their reflections on My Planner, as we look to update the resource so that it can be current, relevant and more accessible.

The activity

Informal discussions were held between the Children's Commissioner's staff and the young people in a group setting.

Key messages from young people

Many of the young people hadn't heard of the Children's Commissioner until they had attended the event and didn't know what he could do to support them, nor did they know how to contact the office:

"Don't know what the children's commissioner is, don't know how to get in touch."

"Everybody in care should get to meet the Commissioner and know what they can contact him for."

"First time for a number of professionals to see it, there needs to be an annual push from CCfW."



⁵ <http://www.childcom.org.uk/uploads/publications/240.swf>

'A phone app or website should be considered but hard copies are still useful.'

'Social workers do go through it with young people initially, but after that they're unsure if it gets used.'

'Online, email, app, and PDF versions would be good.'

'Young people should get My Planner at 15th birthday.'

'It was helpful but didn't fully explain what being in care legally means and the processes involved in leaving care.'

'Put it on the LAC Review document to be given out and gone through.'

'We should have it from the age of 15 and should go through it one-to-one with a social worker or personal advisor. The IRO should check that we have one.'



'Put it in the Pathway Plan for 16th birthday. We need a consistent supply.'

'Useful. Relevant information and it explains everything well.'



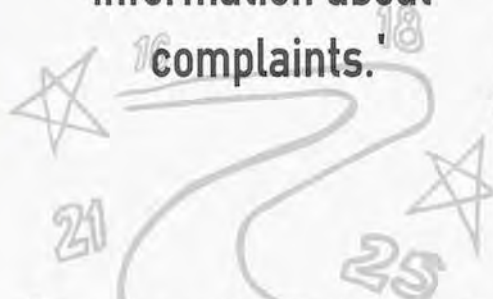
'There should be a moving in package when you first come into foster care with a list of numbers. We want numbers of social workers' bosses and personal advisors' bosses.'

'An app would be better, I didn't use the booklet.'

'MPs should have information about complaints.'

'There should be an online resource for local authorities to upload local info.'

'Hard copy, online, and an app. Local information section should be included.'



'There needs to be a book and an app.'

'Too long. It needs shorter paragraphs. More pictures. More legal information and processes etc.'

'An app is a good idea, most young people have smartphones. It's good to have a book as well.'

What will happen next? By Keith Towler, Children's Commissioner for Wales

Influencing

The views and experiences of the young people captured in this report are invaluable to informing our responses to the imminent consultations on the codes of practice under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act, where we will ensure their voices are heard.

To check on the progress of the service improvements suggestions we have previously made, a follow up review of 'Lost After Care' was undertaken in 2013, which can be accessed [here](#); this report details the progress made by local authorities and other partners to address those service improvements. I have been encouraged by the commitment that is being shown by a range of organisations to improve the opportunities for looked after children to reach their potential. However, it is clear from the children and young people who attended the events' perspective that the issues identified in 'Lost After Care' have not all been resolved.

We are committed to working with Welsh Government, Local Government and the Children's Sector in relation to the findings of CSSIW's recent thematic inspections of looked after children's services, so as to ensure that the issues that children and young people have raised as part of that work programme can be appropriately addressed.

'My Planner'

We will also be updating the 'My Planner' resource based on the young people's feedback, following the significant changes in law and policy applying to looked after children and care leavers across Wales.

There are also improvements that we as an office have to make to improve our accessibility to looked after children and young people entitled to future care services. The most direct way for children and young people to access support from my office is through the [Advice and Support](#) service. The Advice and Support service is a free and confidential source of help and support for children and young people. The service provides advice and support to children, young people, adults and other professionals. My Investigations and Advice Officers are able to mediate between individuals and service providers in order to safeguard and promote children and young people's rights and welfare. Our officers have the ability to look at individual cases, or they can signpost to another organisation that's best placed to help.

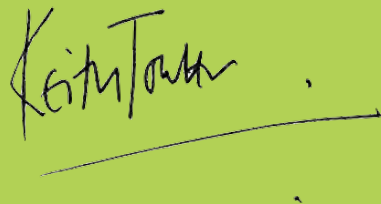
The feedback we have received from the young people at the events has triggered a targeted communications strategy for the advice and support service. Officers will be meeting with local authority social service teams, providing an opportunity to explain the role and function of the advice and support service and the other functions of the Commissioner's office. To date, these meetings have forged better understanding and more willingness for the social service teams to work with us to resolve issues that children and young people have brought to the office.

The events

For my part, I will recommend to the next Children's Commissioner for Wales that they continue to organise an annual forum for looked after children and care leavers from across Wales, in order to hear directly from children and young people about the issues that they want the Commissioner, government and corporate parents to understand.

This office has committed to continue working closely with the All Wales Leaving Care Forum and other relevant groups of professionals to help ensure that the rights of children and young people in the care system are both recognised and met.

We cannot become complacent when it involves services and support for children and young people who are looked after. We owe it to young people moving through to future care services to help secure their rights and entitlements so that they can realise their dreams and aspirations.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Keith Towler', with a horizontal line drawn underneath it.

Keith Towler
Children's Commissioner for Wales
2008-2015