

Anglia Ruskin University
Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care

Staying Put?
**An exploration of the decisions
made by young people leaving
foster care**

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Anglia Ruskin University for the degree of Professional Doctorate in
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This piece of work is dedicated to my gran, Alice Ada Pritchard, my greatest and most precious cheerleader. She would have been thrilled about me doing this.

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, MEDICINE AND SOCIAL CARE

PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE

STAYING PUT? AN EXPLORATION OF THE DECISIONS MADE BY YOUNG PEOPLE
LEAVING FOSTER CARE

SALLY PRITCHARD

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This study focuses on the experience of decision-making by young people leaving care, specifically whether or not they remain with their foster carers under a *Staying Put* arrangement. The *Staying Put* duty was introduced to delay the premature transition from foster care, identified as a contributory factor to poorer life chances for young people leaving care (Department for Education, 2016). This qualitative study used a Foucauldian lens to explore the operation of power in two aspects of the care experience: the act of decision-making and transitioning out of foster care. Semi-structured interviews were carried out across two local authorities with ten young people to examine: how much influence does the young person feel they have in making the decision to stay put or not, which factors inform and influence this decision, and what are the young people's thoughts and feelings about making this decision? Constructivist thematic analysis was employed to analyse the accounts of the young people.

Whilst young people had varied experiences, three main themes were identified. First, how young people's agency was situated depending on the type of decision and opportunity for participation, highlighting how social work practice shapes young people's decision-making about *Staying Put*. The second theme reflected the misaligned relationships, information and support that impacted on the young person's decision-making about *Staying Put*. Third, the study identified the impact of transforming familial relationships in foster care through the operation of *Staying Put*. Throughout, emphasis was placed on the way power operates in social work interactions using Foucault's concepts of power, discourse and subject to explore decision-making in the application of the *Staying Put* duty.

Recommendations include greater openness, empathy, and involvement by professionals to help young people navigate their decision-making and the importance of being supported by knowledgeable adults who explain future possibilities. The need to have discussions about leaving care earlier and in a more supportive way. Preparation for independence needs to be more comprehensive and social workers and foster carers should address *Staying Put* earlier, ensuring young people are provided with an explanation if they are not able to stay. In addition, a talking point is raised about the premise of *Staying Put* as a way to support young people. This study contributes to existing knowledge about young people's decision-making, *Staying Put* and leaving care.

Keywords: Staying Put, leaving care, decision-making, young people, Foucault

Table of Contents

Preface.....	vii
Glossary	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Overview	1
Background	2
Personal Context and Rationale	13
Thesis Structure	14
Part One: <i>Staying Put in Context</i>	16
Chapter 2: Policy Context	17
Chapter Introduction	17
From 1948 to 2014.....	18
<i>Staying Put</i> and Foster Care	24
Chapter Summary	25
Chapter 3: Practice Context.....	26
Chapter Introduction	26
The Influence of Neoliberalism	26
Austerity	29
Pressures in Practice	30
Chapter Summary	36
Chapter 4: Literature Review Context	37
Chapter Introduction	37
Decision-Making	39
Children and Young People's Experience of Participation	45
Leaving Care	49
Chapter Summary	59
Chapter 5: Theoretical Context	61
Chapter Introduction	61
Social Work and Power.....	61
Foucault – An Introduction	66
What Does it Mean to be a Child?	76
Article 12 and the Language of Participation	79
Chapter Summary	83
Part Two: <i>Research Design</i>.....	84
Chapter 6: Research Methodology	85
Chapter Introduction	85
Research Questions	85
The Researcher's Position.....	86
Methodology.....	88
Young People as Advisors.....	90
Participant Selection	94
Data Construction	96
Quality	99
Ethical Considerations	103
Data Analysis	107
Chapter Summary	111
Part Three: <i>Constructed Themes</i>	112
Chapter 7: Situated Agency	115
'I have my own mind'	116
'It's for paperwork not for real'	125

‘There’s no turning back’	132
Chapter 8: Problematic Misalignment	138
‘It’s like they don’t get what it’s like for us’	138
‘Making decisions with my eyes shut and my hand over my mouth’	146
‘It’s like a countdown, a ticking clock’	158
Chapter 9: The Proceduralisation of Moving On.....	165
‘What is the limit to that love’	165
‘It’s weird to have a contract with a family’	172
‘Just putting the washing machine on, is not enough’	176
Part Four: Interpretation and Next Steps	183
Chapter 10: Discussion	184
Chapter Introduction	184
Decisions in the Margin.....	184
Curated information	194
The inadvertent consequences of <i>Staying Put</i>	196
Leaving Care.....	199
Chapter Summary.....	202
Chapter 11: Reflections and Limitations.....	203
Chapter Introduction	203
Research Limitations	208
Chapter 12: Conclusion.....	210
Chapter Introduction	210
Summary.....	210
Learning from this Study	211
Contribution to Knowledge.....	213
Messages for Practice	216
Suggestions for Further Research	221
Chapter Summary.....	222
References	224
Appendices	272

List of Figures

Figure 1: Resilience Diamond (Stein, 2005)	5
Figure 2: Options for young people leaving care (Munro et al., 2012)	7
Figure 3: Definitions of care leaving (DfE, 2015, p. 22)	9
Figure 4: Everyday Spaces Participation Model (Lundy, 2007, cited in Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015))	80
Figure 5: Gatekeeping decision makers.....	93
Figure 6: Detail of gatekeeping process.....	94
Figure 7: Section of mind map showing themes	111
Figure 8: Theme 1 - Situated Agency.....	115
Figure 9: Theme 2 - Problematic Misalignment	138
Figure 10: Theme 3 - The Proceduralisation of Moving On	165
Figure 11: Reflective Conversation Plan	218

List of Tables

Table 1: Number and % of young people in Staying Put arrangements (DfE, 2017; DfE, 2020)	10
Table 2: Numbers of looked after children and young people in England and Wales (DfE, 2020)	32
Table 3: Social worker workforce data (DfE, 2021)	34
Table 4: Inclusion/exclusion criteria	39
Table 5: Participant selection criteria	95
Table 6: Quality Measure: Credibility	100
Table 7: Quality Measure: Transferability.....	101
Table 8: Quality Measure: Dependability	102
Table 9: Quality Measure: Confirmability	103
Table 10: Stage 3 – Excerpt of Coding – complete	109
Table 11: Participant basic information	113

List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Information – Advisory Group

Appendix 2: Consent Form – Advisory Group

Appendix 3: Topic Guide

Appendix 4: Topic Guide – Young People

Appendix 5: Ethics Panel Approval Dates

Appendix 6: Written Information for the Local Authority

Appendix 7: Art Materials

Appendix 8: Participant Information Sheet

Appendix 9: Participant Consent Form

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Preface

This preface addresses two omissions from the body of my thesis — the global pandemic and Review of Children's Social Care.

This study was conducted between 2016 and 2020. At the point of submission, we were 20 months into a global pandemic which had led to dramatic changes in the way people interacted and how social work was delivered. As all the interviews were carried out between November 2019 and February 2020, the young people had not yet been affected by Covid-19. The only impact on this study was the curtailment of involvement with the young people's advisory group, as they understandably stopped supporting external projects to focus on individual support. For these reasons there is limited reference to the pandemic throughout the thesis, despite the significance of these world events, the strain on social work services and the consequences for young people leaving care during this time.

The second omission is reference to the Review of Children's Social Care. Although anticipated for some time the review was officially launched in January 2021 and due to conclude after submission of this thesis. At the time of writing initial findings had been issued but the impact of the review or significance for this study is uncertain, therefore it is not discussed in the thesis.

Glossary

Throughout the thesis relevant terminology is written in full, and sometimes terms commonly used in practice are included and used interchangeably with terms identified in legislation. To help the reader I have listed the terms below and how they are used in this study, including the professionals involved with the young person as they reach legal adulthood. Key terms are noted in *italics* throughout the thesis.

Extended care	Generic term for schemes enabling young people to remain in existing placements at age 18. England currently has two schemes – <i>Staying Put</i> for young people in foster care and <i>Staying Close</i> for young people in residential care.
Foster carer	Also referred to as carer. A person/people who are assessed, approved, and registered by a local authority or independent fostering agency to provide a familial placement for a young person in care. They are tasked with care, guidance and support for the young person on a day-to-day basis.
Independent Fostering Agency (IFA)	An agency outside of a local authority, run by a charity or business to assess, approve, and support foster carers.
Independent Reviewing Officer	Also referred to as review manager. Person that chairs the statutory review meeting. They work for the local authority and are independent from the social worker/personal advisor.
Leaving care	Also associated with the term care leaver. Refers to the move from a care placement between the age of 16-25. Depending on how long the young person has been looked after/in care determines the level of support they receive.
Looked after	Also referred to as in care. Legal definition of a child who is cared for by a local authority either with agreement by the child's parent(s) or where a court order has been issued.
Participant	The young people who took part in my study. Term used to recognise their choice in taking part in the research, but also in appreciation that they were active in the research relationship (Simmons, 2009).

Pathway Plan	Name of the plan for young people as they approach their 18 th birthday. The plan should be made with the young person and include details about housing, education, support, finances, health, practical skills and contingency measures.
Personal advisor (PA)	A worker who is allocated to the young person as or before they leave care. Their role is to ensure that the young person's pathway plan is carried out/updated and to advise and support the young person about all aspects of their life after they have turned 18. They should provide support until the young person is 25.
Service user	Generic term used to describe people who use social work services.
Social worker	A qualified, registered professional with a protected title. Job is to assess, support, advise, assist, and represent the young person during their care experience. They are responsible for the completion of the pathway plan with the young person even if there is a separate personal advisor.
Statutory review meeting	Also referred to as review meeting or child in care review. A meeting chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer (review manager) including young people, social worker, foster carer, parent, other involved professionals to review the young person's care/pathway plan. They occur one month after a placement move, then three months after the move. Thereafter they are held on a six-monthly basis. Meeting can take place in the placement or school. Young person can choose whether to attend.
Young person	Term used in this study to mean someone who is in care or leaving care over the age of 15. Defined by the United Nations (1981, p. 15) as being aged between 15-24 years. In my study the term also refers to the study participants.

Abbreviations of government departments responsible for children's social work services.

DfE	Department for Education (2010-current)
DfCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007-2010)
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (2001-2007)

Should I stay or should
I go?



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Chapter 1: Introduction

“If I was living with my birth family ... or I was another person turning 18, you wouldn't be kicked out ... you would just stay there until you were comfortable to leave, I always thought that was what the Staying Put scenario was.”

- Hannah

Overview

The experience of young people leaving care has been described as ‘instant adulthood’ (Stein, 2006, p. 274), ‘accelerated and compressed’ (Stein 2016, p. v) and like falling off a ‘cliff edge’ (Cameron, et al., 2018, p. 8). Measures to improve this transition have included schemes for young people in residential and foster care to extend their time in placement.

My study focused on the experiences of young people deciding whether or not to remain with their foster carers under England's *Staying Put* duty. *Staying Put* refers to the arrangement for young people in foster care, that enables them to continue living with their carers until they are 21 years old (s. 98, Children and Families Act, 2014). This thesis explores three core questions about decisions made about *Staying Put*:

- How much influence does the young person feel they have in making the decision to stay put or not?
- Which factors inform and influence this decision?
- What are the young people's thoughts and feelings about making this decision?

These three questions were considered in the context of contemporary literature about the role young people take in making decisions about their lives in care and the growing body of work about the leaving care experience. Rather than focus on outcome measures common to other leaving care research, I wanted to explore how the *Staying Put* policy was applied by talking with young people who had already made their decision. I was also interested in the way power operates and is exercised within decision-making processes and used a Foucauldian lens to explore the young person's decision about *Staying Put*. My decision to bring together the issue of *Staying Put* and decision-making reflected the positioning of the young person as an active decision maker in practice guidance, where ‘joint decisions’ are part of the process (The Fostering Network, 2017, p. 5).

Although this study is about a transition in the young person's life, the context and background are situated within a children's services perspective. This is because the decision-making occurs before the young person's 18th birthday, and they are supported at that time by workers whose practice is grounded in legislation, research and policy pertaining to children. No participants interviewed for this study were considered by their workers to have impaired capacity, hence the absence of a wider discussion about the *Mental Capacity Act* in relation to decision-making. Furthermore, *Staying Put* is not offered by the participating local authorities to young people with learning disabilities, or where their needs impair their capacity. The choice to locate this study within a specific part of social work is not to ignore the overlap of services, but to reflect the environment young people inhabit at the time they are leaving care. The remaining sections in this chapter introduce the background context, my relationship with the *Staying Put* duty and a map of the overall thesis.

Background

Being in Care

To qualify for *Staying Put*, young people need to have been *looked after* by the state for a period of 13 weeks after their 14th birthday (Department for Education (DfE), 2015). Being *looked after* is the legal definition for being cared for by a local authority (Brammer, 2020). Children and young people enter the care system for several reasons including being abused or neglected, homelessness, needing family support or as an unaccompanied person seeking asylum. Regardless of whether a child is in care under a voluntary arrangement with a parent's consent (s. 20, Children Act 1989) or resulting from a court order (s. 31, s. 38, s. 44, Children Act, 1989), becoming *looked after* by the state means that local authorities assume a parental role in a child's life. This role is referred to as *corporate parenting*, whereby local authorities are required to be collectively responsible for the outcomes of children and young people in their care, as if they were their own children (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2003a; Children and Social Work Act, 2017; DfE, 2018). As the designated state organisation, the local authority has legal duties to safeguard and promote the well-being of those they look after (Carr and Goosey, 2021). Therefore, where a child or young person is not able to live with a friend or family member, the local authority has a duty to find an alternative place for them to live.

Among the range of possible options, foster care is a family-based placement with couples or single people who are registered and regulated under the *Fostering Services (England)*

Regulations 2011. Of the 80,080 children and young people in care during 2019–2020, 57 per cent of children and young people lived with a foster carer outside of their family network (DfE, 2020). Living in a foster care placement is often promoted by researchers and government departments as a preferable option for children who cannot live with family members, as it provides a normalising environment for a child (Sebba et al., 2015) and replicates familial relationships with opportunities for permanency (Schofield, Beek and Ward, 2012). The concept of permanence in long term foster care became legally defined in 2015. This change was due to the growing evidence base that foster care can be successful in the support of children into adulthood (Baginsky, Gorin and Sands, 2017). Longevity has been a longstanding goal for placement policy, as the impact of multiple moves is recognised as being traumatic and detrimental to children and young people who cannot return home (Wilson et al., 2004; Ward, Munro, and Dearden, 2006; Biehal, 2014). The Department for Education state that for a child's placement to be confirmed as long-term the following conditions need to have been met:

- that foster care is the 'plan for permanence' and is recorded in the child's care plan [regulation 5(a)];
- that the foster carer has agreed to act as the child's foster carer until the child ceases to be *looked after*, and that the responsible authority has confirmed the arrangement with the foster carer(s), the birth parents and the child (2015b, p. 72).

The change to include long-term fostering as a permanent option reinforced the family orientated discourse of foster care as a viable alternative to adoption (Schofield, et al., 2011), and provided a stable alternative option to adoption for young people who enter the care system beyond the usual age for adoption planning (Biehal, 2014). Placement stability is commonly regarded in terms of longevity and minimal placement moves (Munro and Hardy, 2006) promoting the possibility of bond between carer and child. Within the sphere of placement practice, attachment to a carer is seen as the foundation of child development (Munro and Hardy, 2006). The theory of attachment, built on the work of Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth et al. (1978), considers the early bonds made between caregiver and child, as the blueprint for their growth and development. Where these bonds are disrupted by abusive or neglectful parenting, or inconsistency through changes of carer, the child's internal working model can maladjust and impair their ability to form relationships in the future (Howe, 2005).

Feelings of permanency and belonging can enable children and young people to cope with challenging situations and provide a base from which they can thrive. Stability has been

identified as significant in enabling children and young people in care to remain in education and become employed (Schofield and Beek, 2005 and 2005b; Schofield et al., 2007; Sinclair et al., 2007; Biehal et al., 2010; Selwyn et al., 2010; Biehal, 2014; Norgate et al., 2012), and help them establish social networks including with family members (Wade, 2008; Schofield and Ward, 2011; Ward, 2011). Instability through changes in placement for children who have experienced abuse or neglect in the family, can compound previous experiences and reinforce negative internal narratives and existing attachment patterns, impacting their ability to develop secure relationships (Leathers, 2002). In 2019, 10.4 per cent of children and young people in care moved more than twice within the year and 2.7 per cent moved three times (Clarke, 2020). These figures illustrate that stability is not guaranteed once children and young people become *looked after* in placements that may be identified as permanent.

Conceptualisations of permanence can be problematic for children in foster care who may move from placement to placement and might not want to replace their birth family with an alternative familial unit (Schofield, Beek and Ward, 2012; Thomas, Jackl and Crowley, 2017). Nevertheless, creating enduring foster carer relationships are embedded in legislation and social work practice (Baginsky, Gorin and Sands, 2017). Expectations of permanence are demonstrated in the way foster carers are positioned as familial rather than professional (Mitchell, 2020) and by the value social workers place on foster care placements (Schofield, Beek and Ward, 2012). In the context of this family-orientated narrative, young people leaving care contemplate the normal destabilising nature of transition to adulthood as well as severing ties with a foster family they have been encouraged to think of as permanent.

Leaving Care

Becoming an adult and developing a sense of independence is commonly a gradual process, where a young person is 'launched' from a stable familial base (Nelson, 2019, p. xi). For young people leaving local authority care, transition is triggered by administrative systems and chronological age markers. Experiences of young people leaving their care placement differ from other young people in the wider population who on average leave home at age 23 (Office for National Statistics, 2019). In comparison with their peers, transition to adulthood from care is condensed into a shorter period and happens at an earlier age (Biehal and Wade, 1996; Stein, 2006b; Wade and Dixon, 2006; Munro et al., 2012; van Breda et al., 2020). Of the 80,080 children and young people in care in December 2019, approximately 25 per cent were aged 16 and over (DfE, 2020) and therefore approaching the start of this transitional period. Given the difficult childhood experiences of children in care, young people can encounter difficulties in their day-to-day lives once they

have left care and are living alone or at arm's length from established familial ties. Stein, a prolific researcher in this field, categorised young people's experiences into three different groups associated with their feelings and descriptions of their lives before going into care and support received whilst in care (2005). Detailed in Figure 1, young people can be categorised in three ways: *moving on*, *survivor* or *struggler*, to describe their leaving care experience.



Figure 1: Resilience Diamond (Stein, 2005)

Stein's leaving care typology highlights the differing positions of young people depending on their experiences when living with their birth families. Pre care experiences should be understood when thinking about young people's outcomes on leaving care as reflected in Stein's critique of the presentation of the care system in the *White Paper, Care Matters*. He referred to the varied nature of young people's lives before care and suggested that their outcomes needed to be seen in a wider context, rather than blaming the care system for society's problems (Stein, 2006b). He argued that the characterisation of care as wholly detrimental was inaccurate and that poor outcomes are not pre-determined as many young

people leaving care make successful transitions rather than survive or struggle (Stein, 2006b).

Notwithstanding Stein's recognition that some young people successfully manage the leaving care transition, for other young people, becoming a legal adult can lead to difficult social, health, relationship and financial issues without the safety net of a trusted parent or carer. For some young people the transition has become a 'signal to cut off support' when leaving a care placement (Brihelm-Crookall et al., 2020, p. 17) and on a practical level, problems in gaining work or sustaining a course (Furey and Harris Evans, 2021), managing a tenancy (Whalen, 2015) and coping with finances (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019). Although an incomplete picture, government data reported that in England, 39 per cent who leave care aged 19 to 21 were not in education, training or employment, compared with 13 per cent for all young people (DfE, 2020), placing young people at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion (Powell, 2018). In summary, children and young people who have been in care are one of the groups at 'highest risk of social exclusion as adults' (Jackson and Cameron, 2012, p. 1107).

Staying Put

Borne out of concerns about poor outcomes and treatment of children in the care system, in 2007 the *White Paper, Care Matters: a time for change* (DfES, 2007), was published and aimed for 'high levels of parenting and support' to enable children to remain with their families (Frost and Parton, 2010, p. 106). Referring throughout to attachment, stability and resilience as core themes for improving the quality of care, *Care Matters* set out measures to improve the lives of children and young people and counter perceived shortcomings in the care system. In addition to supporting families at home, recommendations also included policies to address poor educational outcomes, children's health and well-being, placement matching and leaving care. Reflecting the themes of attachment and stability, one of the measures identified was a pilot scheme to enable young people in foster care to continue to stay with their foster carers until their 21st birthday. Extending care reflects the theme of stability which is consistently raised in leaving care research where instability is linked to poor outcomes for young people leaving care (Ward, Munro, and Dearden, 2006; Ward, 2009). Although, research does not always define placement stability (Unrau, 2007), nor how extensive or longstanding relationships need to be, consistency is deemed critical for ensuring positive life chances for young people leaving care. The question of stability has been an enduring factor in placement practice for the reasons noted earlier, however the introduction of *Staying Put* established this concept within leaving care services. When a

young person's legal status changes from child to adult, other life changes are also likely, for example a change of social worker, reaching the end of their education placement, accessing different health services and possible changes in how they see themselves as young adults (Ward, 2011). Where multiple changes coincide, or where a move is unexpected and unplanned, research suggests that this can have a detrimental impact on the child or young person's feelings of being able to cope, consequently impacting on the success of any subsequent placement (Sellick, Thoburn and Philpot, 2004; Kelly and Hodson, 2008). Continuity offered through the *Staying Put* scheme aims to counter these concerns about changes in placement at this multifaceted transition point.

Organisations representing foster carers and young people's groups welcomed the pilot of *Staying Put* as it validated an existing, albeit unfunded and unrecognised practice of remaining with foster carers (Munro et al., 2012). Other than unofficially staying with their foster carers, Figure 2 sets out the options young people had when leaving their care placement.

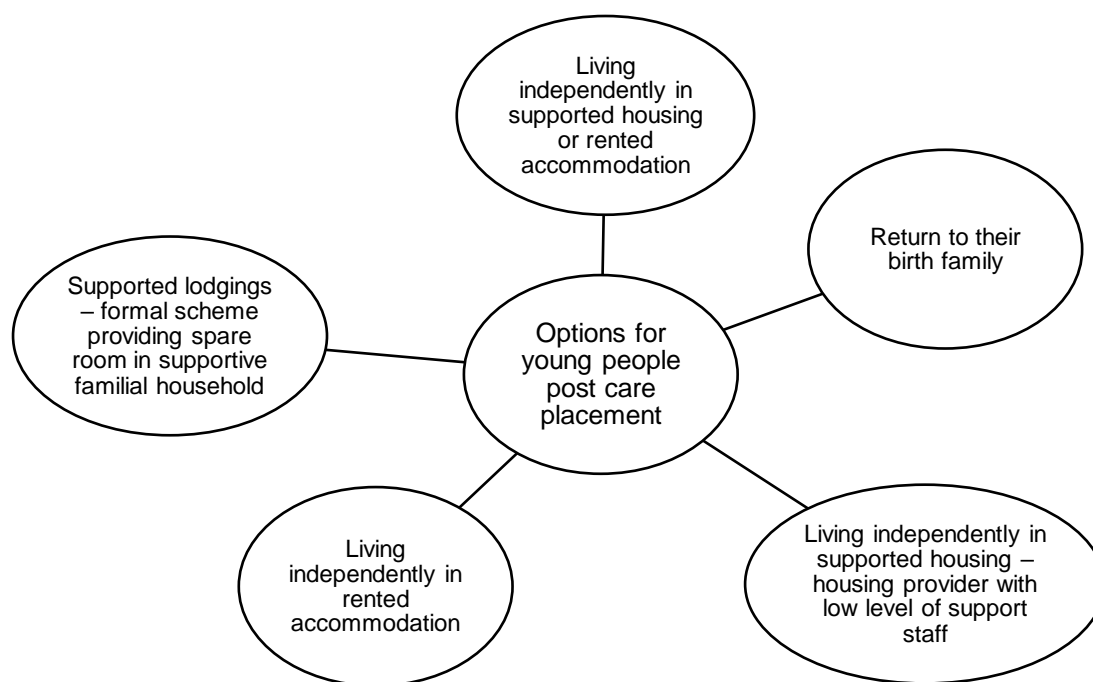


Figure 2: Options for young people leaving care (Munro et al., 2012)

Figure 2 includes the official options young people had at the time, but there were also concerns about rising numbers of young people living in a bed and breakfast and sofa surfing with friends or relatives (Browne, 2008). *Staying Put* provided another option for young people and recognised that for some, living independently was inappropriate. The

pilot of *Staying Put* involved 11 local authorities in England and the evaluation of the pilot focused on the following objectives (Munro et al., 2012, p. 6):

- enable young people to build on and nurture their attachments to their foster carers, so that they can move to independence at their own pace and be supported to make the transition to adulthood in a more gradual way just like other young people who can rely on their own families for this support;
- provide the stability and support necessary for young people to achieve in education, training and employment; and
- give weight to young people's views about the timing of moves to greater independence from their final care placement.

At the end of the pilot Munro and colleagues concluded that *Staying Put* empowered young people to have 'greater control of the timing of their transition' (2012, p. 105).

Following the evaluation, a statutory duty to make provision for and support *Staying Put* was introduced in the *Children and Families Act 2014*. As previously stated, for a young person to be eligible for support under *Staying Put* they must have been in care for a period of 13 weeks following their 14th birthday and also remain with the same carer when they turn 18. This qualifying period relates to the definition of a care leaver stipulated in the *Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000* detailed in Figure 3:

Eligible children	a) looked after, b) aged 16 or 17, and c) has been looked after by a local authority for a period of 13 weeks, or periods amounting in total to 13 weeks, which began after he reached 14 and ended after he reached 16.
Relevant children	a) not looked after, b) aged 16 or 17, and c) was, before he last ceased to be looked after, an eligible child.
Former relevant children	a) aged 18 or above, and either (b) has been a relevant child and would be one if he were under 18, or (c) immediately before he ceased to be looked after at age 18, was an eligible child.

Figure 3: Definitions of care leaving (DfE, 2015, p. 22)

Although it is discretionary for local authorities to provide a *Staying Put* arrangement for any young person, the duty only relates to *former relevant children* as defined in Figure 3. The legal distinction between child and adult is also significant as the young person is no longer defined as a *looked after* child after their 18th birthday. Therefore, foster carers are referred to as former foster carers and the placement must be referred to as an *arrangement* as the young person is legally an adult. Young people are expected to contribute to the costs of the arrangement either via state benefits or a proportion of their income. These technical details became necessary due to the existing legislation and regulation of foster care, both of which work to the definition of a child being under the age of 18. The DfE (2015) recommend that *Staying Put* is discussed with young people prior to their 16th birthday, and The Fostering Network (2017) advocate an ongoing dialogue that is incorporated into any planning discussions through the statutory review meeting. In practice guidance about *Staying Put*, the prevailing message is that the young person can ‘make the joint decision to establish the arrangement’ (The Fostering Network, 2017, p. 5) but if they leave their placement before their 21st birthday, they would not be automatically allowed to return (DfE, Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, 2013). These guidelines emphasise the importance of the young person’s decision at this point in their care pathway.

Initial take up of *Staying Put* by young people was good, however by 2018 numbers of *Staying Put* arrangements were levelling out (Donovan, 2018) and have since remained at a similar amount (Action for Children, 2020). Table 1 shows the number of young people *Staying Put* and as a percentage of young people leaving foster care. The figure calculated at 18 years is based on the number of young people still with their carers after three months.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number and % of Young People <i>Staying Put</i> at 18	1580 49%	1440 54%	1630 51%	1810 55%	1970 57%	1970 58%
Number and % of Young People <i>Staying Put</i> at 19	560 22%	820 30%	940 30%	970 31%	1050 32%	1170 34%
Number and % of Young People <i>Staying Put</i> at 20	330 13%	410 16%	550 20%	650 21%	660 21%	710 22%

Table 1: Number and % of young people in *Staying Put* arrangements (DfE, 2017; DfE, 2020)

The figures in Table 1 suggest a gradual increase since the beginning of the scheme, but charities and organisations working with foster carers and young people argue that there are factors preventing a greater increase of the *Staying Put* arrangement (Donovan, 2018). Issues such as challenging relationships between carer and young person, funding and placement capacity have been identified as possible barriers to greater take up by young people and carers (Action for Children, 2020). Whilst *Staying Put* does not suit every young person as they may want to return to live with their birth family or feel ready to live independently, the argument for extending time in the care system has been made by several national and international researchers and young people's groups (Munro et al., 2012; Jones, 2019; Okpych and Courtney, 2019; Action for Children, 2020). This sentiment is reflected in the Department for Education's statutory guidance where they state that 'no young person should "leave care" before they are ready' (2015, p. 9.).

Making Decisions

With explicit reference to the involvement of young people in the decision to stay put, a focus of this research was on the participant's experience of decision-making. To begin this

section, the issue of age in relation to the study is addressed. As discussed in later chapters, whilst child and adult are legally defined terms, perceptions of childhood and adulthood are partly subjective meaning that chronological age can be incidental. The use of the phrase 'young people' to describe the participants in my study was prompted by an advisory group (discussed in Chapter 6) and aims to underline that the participants were not children nor were they legally adults when making the decision about *Staying Put*. Understanding the liminal nature of this phase in a person's life the United Nations (1981) define young people as being aged between 15-24 years to recognise that this group have distinct needs from children or adults in relation to issues such as housing, health, employment and education (1981, p. 14).

Social care services may struggle to take a more bespoke approach to working with young people as services are generally organised using age-based parameters. Whilst 'binary notion[s] of childhood/adulthood' (Cocker, et al., 2021, p. 145), may suit the function of social care systems they do not reflect the lived experiences of young people who do not neatly fit into either category. Using the issue of safeguarding to illustrate, when thinking about harm, children's services will focus on removing risk and protecting the child in an imposed way, whereas in adult services, harm is contextualised and a more personalised approach is taken, allowing for a person to share a role in managing risk and making decisions (Huegler and Ruch, 2021). Holmes (2022, p. 9) argues that a 'boundary-spanning' approach is needed to reflect the fluidity of a young person's changing needs and understanding as they approach legal adulthood.

Holmes, and other writers discussing transitional safeguarding underline an interim space that young people occupy, based on the biological, social and psychological changes they experience during adolescence (Beckett and Taylor, 2019). A number of aspects of a young person's life become less concrete and they start to explore opportunities away from their parent/carer relationships, whilst continuing to renegotiate their identity (Gibson and Gibson, 2016). Consequently, social work systems designed for younger children do not allow for the 'specific transitional needs of young people' (Huegler and Ruch, 2021, p. 30). As explored further in Chapters 4 and 5, young people might want to be recognised as being adult and therefore able to take part in decision-making processes, however being accepted as adult or adult 'enough' will depend on 'different contexts' (Jones and Wallace, 1992, p. 4). Whilst young people may feel able and prepared to take a greater role in their lives, adults around them may continue to position them as immature and unready for the responsibility of taking key decisions regardless of age (Pole, Pilcher and Williams, 2005). In recognition of this

tension between lived experiences and social work systems as they approached legal adulthood, the young people's decision-making is located within the practice and legislative context of their chronological age to examine these dynamics.

The tensions already described about age and decision-making are exemplified by the application of statutory responsibilities to the involvement of young people. For example, although the *Mental Capacity Act 2005* outlines expectations that young people over 16 years have assumed capacity to make decisions, the *Children Act 1989* expressly expects the involvement of children to take account of age *and* ability when being involved in decision-making. Bringing together the application of *Staying Put* with experience of making decisions unpicks how young people experience these tensions, specifically in light of the inclusion of the service user's perspective in health and social care which has accelerated in the last 20 years, with service user groups being at the forefront of this change (Beresford, 2017). Whilst the involvement of service users in decision-making and service design has become more commonplace, it is not a straightforward marker of progress in increased participation. Gallagher et al. (2012) noted that whilst duties and responsibilities to involve service users are embedded into legislation and policy, the range of language – from engagement and involvement to consultation and personalisation – reflects the ongoing power relations between the user of the service and the service itself. Within social work this tension is further exacerbated by the involuntary nature of a person's relationship with services, where the extent of an individual's involvement with a service is dependent on mitigating factors such as assessment of risk factors, or their assessed capacity to participate in social work processes (Leeson, 2007).

The rights of a child or young person to express their views about matters that concern them, is underpinned by Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1999* and stipulated in the *Children Act 1989* and for older children, the *Mental Capacity Act 2005*. By extension a child or young person has a right to participate in decisions about their lives, which requires recognition of 'children as subjects rather than merely recipients of adult protective care' (Lansdown, 2001, p. 93). In Thomas and O'Kane's (1999) article about children's decision-making in the late 1990s, they concluded that both children and adults view decision-making in multiple ways. They highlighted the attitudes of children can range from assertive involvement where the child believes they should have a say, to avoidant where the child finds making decisions difficult (Thomas and O'Kane, 1999, p. 382). By contrast Thomas and O'Kane found that adults based their decisions about involvement on clinical, bureaucratic and value-based factors (Thomas and O'Kane, 1999).

In their more recent study about participation with young people in and leaving care, Dixon, Ward and Blower (2019) found that those who questioned a child's readiness for making or contributing to decisions contributed to a paradoxical situation where children were both denied a say in what happens to them whilst simultaneously facilitated to repeatedly share personal stories. In viewing children and young people as an unfinished project not ready for the responsibility of a decision, an ignorant and/or immature image of a child's point of view becomes constructed, resulting in their marginalisation from decision-making (Mannay et al., 2019). Whilst children do not always want to be the ultimate decision maker, they do want to be involved and informed (Morrow, 1999).

Personal Context and Rationale

This study is framed by two areas of practice that have featured in my social care and social work career to date: first the role of children and young people in decision-making and second, the multiple transition points within the care system. In various roles in residential care and statutory services my work has been characterised by a focus on participation. On an individual level or with groups of young people I have involved children and young people in personal decisions and in shaping and reviewing services. As a residential worker, social worker, participation manager and service manager, I became aware of the diverse attitudes and responses across the profession to the involvement of children and young people. It was during these experiences that I questioned the gaps between the rhetoric of involvement and day-to-day practice, specifically the way that power manifested in these interactions. Undoubtedly my participation experiences contributed to the emphasis on issues of power in the approach I have taken when thinking about the *Staying Put* duty.

When I first started this professional doctorate, I divided my time between my job as a lecturer and my head of service role in a local authority. As a manager, I was part of a working group to trial *Staying Put* during the pilot stage in 2008. The local authority where I worked committed to the scheme outside of the pilot as, like many local authorities, there was an appetite to develop new projects on the back of government innovation funded programmes such as *Quality Protects* and the *Children's Fund* (Frost and Parton, 2010). Once *Staying Put* was up and running, I continued to support fostering services to develop their *Staying Put* policies and monitor the local authority's application of the scheme. Working alongside children in care and leaving care services I recognised the impact of placement moves and changes for young people but only in the context of local practice. Once I joined the university as a lecturer, I developed a greater awareness of leaving care

through teaching and wider reading, specifically the national picture of young people's transitions from care. I became aware that young people leaving care can be poorly supported, which differs from the experiences when moving on from a birth family, and that extending care has been a topic of interest for researchers and policy makers (van Breda et al., 2020).

Undertaking a professional doctorate gave me the opportunity to connect these two areas of interest by exploring the impact of a policy from the recipient's perspective. Prompted by my experience, it was important that young people were central to my study and that I used my opportunity to impact and contribute to positive changes in practice with young people leaving care. I was minded that although it is important that children and young people are represented in research it is also important that messages and learning from research with young people are disseminated to effect change in practice (Mannay et al., 2019).

Thesis Structure

The remaining thesis is divided into four parts. Part One includes an overview of the policy and reviewed literature and the theoretical lenses informing the study. In Part Two the research process is outlined followed by Part Three which presents the themes I identified. The concluding Part Four draws together the discussion, reflection, conclusions and implications for policy and practice.

Part One: *Staying Put* in Context

Part One starts with the evolving policy context for young people leaving care, leading up to the introduction of *Staying Put* in the *Children and Families Act 2014*. The current practice environment is then briefly discussed in Chapter 3, highlighting the challenges and issues impacting contemporary social work. Chapter 4 moves on to focus on the literature reviewed which informed the study, including the thinking about young people's involvement in decisions and the corpus of work about the leaving care experience. The final chapter in Part One details the theories used to frame and underpin my study. First, Foucault's theories of power are introduced, outlining some of the core ideas used to inform my thinking and analysis. The chapter then moves on to conceptualisations of childhood and how these ideas relate to young people's agency and discourse about participation.

Part Two: The Research Process

Part Two describes how I conducted the study, starting with my research position and methodology, followed by the methods of data collection and ethical considerations. Part

Two concludes with detail about the use of constructivist thematic analysis to examine the data.

Part Three: Identified Themes

Each chapter in Part Three presents a key theme identified from the interviews with young people. Chapter 7 focuses on the issue of situated agency and considers the young people's overall involvement in decision-making and how they contextualised their experience of deciding whether or not to stay put. In Chapter 8 the theme of misalignment between young people and their support systems is explored, and the role professionals take in providing or withholding information about the young person's options. The final chapter in Part Three concentrates on the feelings of young people during the period leading up to their 18th birthday and the disjuncture between the lived experiences of young people and the application of the policy is recognised.

Part Four: Interpretation and Messages for Practice

Within the concluding chapters of Part Four I discuss the identified themes in the context of the existing literature and set out my contribution to knowledge about young people's decision-making, *Staying Put* and leaving care. I also present some of my reflections about the research experience and conclude with recommendations for policy and practice.

Part One: Staying Put in Context

Part One of my thesis provides an overview of the key subject areas that shaped the focus of the research questions and located the study in practice. Interactions between young people, foster carers and social workers exist within a broader context shaped by multiple practice and societal factors. In their study about theoretical coherence in relationship-based practice, Coulter et al. (2020) note the value of taking a ‘contemporary systemic approach’ (2020, p. 1221) to foreground the experience of service users within these wider factors. Applying the same principle to this study enabled exploration of different threads to create a sense of the interplay between the elements impacting on the decision made by young people at the heart of this research about *Staying Put*. The issues have been presented in separate chapters to reflect the multiple influences impacting on a social worker’s day-to-day work, and consequently the young person’s experience.

The first chapter in Part One sets out the significant legislation and policy developments in services for young people leaving care, highlighting the pathway for the development of *Staying Put*. The next chapter outlines current discussions in social work, touching on some of the broader issues in contemporary social work practice with *looked after* children and young people. Chapter 4 of Part One concentrates on the research reviewed about young people’s experiences of decision-making in the care system. The final chapter in Part One sets out the theoretical framework for this study, bringing together three elements of theory bound by their discursive underpinnings.

Chapter 2: Policy Context

Chapter Introduction

This chapter sets out the policy context for my study. As the focus is on *Staying Put* rather than the broader role of children's social work, attention is given to the evolution of leaving care legislation with some reference to the wider transformation of social care services for children and young people. Whilst media coverage and everyday discourse reduces all aspects of children's services to the task of child protection (Parton, 2014), legislation and policy relating to changes for children in care is a broad field and *Staying Put* is only one measure of a range of interventions at the end of a child's care pathway. Until 2014, leaving care legislation made no distinction between those young people moving on from foster care, residential care, or other care placements. *Staying Put* is the first policy aimed at young people leaving foster care.

Social work policy is subject to several ongoing influences, including:

- Politically advocated rational-technical approaches to right perceived wrongs in the system (Featherstone, et al., 2018).
- Measures taken in response to pervading concerns about risk (Munro, 2011).
- Changes in response to 'hostile media' reporting and interplay between coverage and political posturing (Warner, 2014, p. 1638).
- Social change (Evans and Keating, 2015).

These political and social influences combine to determine how social work will operate and translate policy into action (Denney, 1998). Changes to legislation resulting from political, economic, and social factors can lead to tensions between these external dynamics and challenge professionally led narratives of a relational based endeavour (Ruch, 2013).

Whereas many recent changes in children's social care have occurred following a high-profile injury to or death of a child, the introduction of *Staying Put* had a more incremental beginning. The chapter starts with a brief overview of changes to legislation relating to leaving care and concludes with the relationship between *Staying Put* and foster care legislation. This summary serves to highlight the background of *Staying Put* from a

legislative perspective and to underline the complexity of services for fostered young people as they become 18.

From 1948 to 2014

Services for young people leaving care were only briefly featured in early legislation, for example the *Children Act 1948* included grants for young people aged 18-21 (s. 20). Stein (2012) notes that there is scant information about services for young people leaving care between the 1948 Act and the 1970s. However, during this period, the age of 18 became an established marker of the transition to adulthood which became reinforced in children's legislation due to associations with mainstream societal milestones such as marriage, end of military conscription and transition from apprenticeship to adult wages (Stein, 2012).

In the 1960s, further measures to support young people 'formally in their care' were introduced by the *Children and Young Persons Act 1963* (s. 58). Powers to 'visit' and 'befriend' young people aged 17-21 marked a change in providing support prior to the accepted age of adulthood, possibly in recognition of a transition period from public care to independent living. Later in the 1960s, The *Seebohm Report* set out reforms for all social care services and alongside changes to social work with children, the report proposed more comprehensive after care services involving probation and the transfer of after care workers into social service departments (House of Commons, 1968).

Despite recommendations in the *Seebohm Report*, proposals about leaving care services did not materialise and instead specialist after care became diluted and a lower priority, in favour of higher profile 'frontline' social work in the newly bureaucratised departments (Stein, 2012, p. 16). Provision included in the *Children and Young Persons Act* was limited to accommodation in community homes for young people over compulsory school age but under 21 years (s. 50 (19)) despite consultation with early leaving care researchers and practitioners (Stein, 2012). Frost and Parton (2009) suggest that the emphasis of the Act was to address wider social problems, as the government believed that the 'twin pillars' of state intervention and professional support could address needs of children through broader welfarism (2009, p. 81-82) including young people in care.

Despite changes to legislation in the 1960s, services for young people leaving care did not improve during the 1970s and 1980s (Biehal et al., 1985). Early researchers such as Godek (1976), Mulvey (1977) and Stein and Maynard (1985) began to focus on difficulties experienced by young people and the relationship between being in care and life after care,

highlighting poor outcomes in education, personal relationships, and employment after leaving their placements. Additionally during this period young people started to come together to collectively highlight their experiences through groups such as *Who Cares?*, *Ad-Lib*, *The National Association of Young People in Care* and *Black and in Care* (Gupta, 2015). Through these groups young people expressed their views about their treatment in community homes, their lack of involvement in decisions, lack of privacy and a desire to see their friends and family (Andrew, Mantovani and Barn, 2005; Stein, 2011).

The *Children Act 1975* did little to progress leaving care services in the 1970s or address the concerns raised by researchers and young people. The 1975 Act introduced two elements that were relevant to children in care provision. The first change was the move from providing ongoing family-based help to a more protectionist approach to services. This change was founded on the belief that children would be less likely to return to their family with support, once they had been in care (Gupta, 2015). The idea of permanent state care became more prevalent than the previous family-based service and temporary nature of foster care, in part due to the media response and enquiry following the death of Maria Colwell¹ (Fox Harding, 1997). Maria's circumstances came to symbolise the risks managed by social workers, and concerns about reunification approaches (Fox Harding, 1997). This change in approach and response to media and public interest was viewed as the beginning of greater public scrutiny of practice (Butler and Drakeford, 2011). The second development in the 1975 Act was provision for children to have their own representation in court proceedings if deemed appropriate, and greater emphasis on seeking the views of the child in 'care cases' (Children Act 1975 s. 59 (1)). The establishment of consultative rights were further embedded in the *Child Care Act 1980* (s. 18 (1)) with the expectation that social workers should establish the 'wishes and feelings' of children subject to care proceedings.

Throughout the 1980s young people's groups and researchers continued to voice concerns about the experiences of living in and leaving care. For example, some concerns were raised about the lack of oversight of children's foster care placements, where the deaths and abuse of children in Hammersmith and Fulham and Derbyshire were highlighted by serious case reviews (Cosis Brown, 2011). Other messages were consistent with earlier work, highlighting the vulnerabilities of young people once they had left their care placement (Porter, 1984), the fragility of relationships and accommodation (Lupton, 1985) and the

¹ Maria, who had been living with her aunt and uncle under a foster care arrangement, was returned to her mother's care and subsequently killed by her mother's partner.

issues faced by young black people leaving care (First Key, 1987). However, the role of child protection continued to dominate the focus of reform, including the *Children Act 1989*. The 1989 Act was introduced during a time of disquiet and debate about public services and the role of the state in private family life (Frost and Parton, 2009). Fox Harding's (1991) analysis of the *Children Act 1989*, highlighted this interplay of political and influencing factors in policy development. She argued that the 1989 Act reflected a range of different, at times, conflicting perspectives on the state's role in childcare, which introduced greater emphasis on state paternalism and birth parent perspectives (Fox Harding, 1991). The changes to the Act included the theme of partnership with families which became a central tenet of practice (Allen, 2005). Balancing the rights of parents and children in matters of need or protection is complex and therefore it is unsurprising that Gupta (2015) refers to the 1989 Act as an 'uneasy synthesis' of differing intentions (2015, p. 90). Both the *Children Act 1989* and the key legislative change for adults, the *NHS and Community Care Act 1991*, were deliberately designed to change the function of local authority support from provider to facilitator of care services (Langan and Clarke, 1995). Emphasis on care and decision-making within the family and consultative participation with children reflected the move to a more consumerist model, echoing the theme of marketisation evident in legislation at the time (Deeming and Johnston, 2018).

The role of state support for children in care became more established within the 1989 Act and shared responsibility for the welfare of children in care extended beyond providing minimal intervention, evident in earlier legislation. The importance of having regard for both a child's protection and welfare was established, and the language of being *looked after* outside of a birth family became part of contemporary practice. The legal powers and duties for young people leaving care were confined to s. 24 of the *Children Act 1989*, under the heading of 'Advice and assistance for certain children'. Support was focused on providing advice and befriending services, and local authorities had the power to work with young people between the ages of 16–21 but were not compelled to provide specific types of services. Having a model that focused on facilitation and enablement may have seemed compatible with wider social work values, however for young people leaving care there was little regard to the growing body of work calling for more comprehensive and structured changes to improve services (Stein, 2012).

The *Children Act 1989* is often regarded as a landmark piece of legislation and in her address marking the Act's 30th anniversary, Lady Hale noted its success in consolidating previously disparate measures in family law (Hale, 2019). Whilst it was successful in shaping

many aspects of children's social care, national leaving care provision remained piecemeal and inconsistent (Broad, 1998). Having a response based on discretionary powers proved insufficient, despite claims by the post enactment report in 1993 stating that services were more focused and flexible to the needs of young people (Department of Health, 1993). The report did acknowledge that leaving care services continued to be 'fragmented and patchy' (DoH, 1993, p. 73) and further research and managerial oversight would be needed to make further changes.

Modifications for young people leaving care occurred slowly, and only gathered pace in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Carr and Goosey, 2021). In addition to the growing body of research about young people leaving care, several high-profile enquiries were conducted into the abuse and treatment of children before leaving their care placements. Findings from the report into the abuse of children in Welsh residential homes (Waterhouse, 2000), the 'pindown' enquiry into the use of excessive force by staff in residential homes (Levy and Kahan, 1991) and the sexual abuse of children in residential care (Kirkwood, 1993), exposed the lack of attention paid to the care system (Fawcett, Featherstone and Goddard, 2004). Although the focus of these enquiries centred on abuse within residential care placements, subsequent attention was given to the whole system, and political concerns about encroaching on family life became obsolete as for these children, the state was acting in a familial role. Fawcett, Featherstone and Goddard (2004) argue that the exposure of systematic problems, altered the 'terms of debate' (p. 89) about services for children in care, and led to a more interventionist approach.

In the 1990s, Utting published two reports about children in care: *Children in the Public Care* and *People Like Us*. *Children in the Public Care* and *People Like Us* were published in 1991 and 1997 and focused on the impact and response to abuse in residential care, recommending amongst other things an inspection framework and improved staff training (Frost and Parton, 2009). This government commissioned work reviewed safeguards in the wake of allegations of abuse within the residential sector in North Wales. Many of the 20 principal and multiple other recommendations related to structural changes about inspection, regulation, vetting of staff and protection of children in care placements, but also the inadequacy of services for children in and leaving care (Utting, 1997). The following year the government's response stipulated that new legislation would be prioritised to address gaps in support and preparation and the local authority's tendency to make young people prematurely independent (DoH, 1998). As well as this plan, in 1998 the *Quality Protects* programme was launched, which emphasised the role of the state in acting as *corporate*

parents to children in care and leaving care (DoH, 1998b). As noted in Chapter 1, the role of a *corporate parent* assumes responsibility for a child in care across services within a local authority and enables the state to act as if they were their own child. The notion of *corporate parent* was reinforced within the resulting *Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000*, extending corporate responsibility from children in care to young people leaving care.

As previously noted, there was no universal statutory framework for young people leaving care, and services were delivered based on locally agreed policy (Biehal and Wade 1996). Following the commitment to introduce new legislation, a consultation with young people called *Me, Survive, Out There?* (DoH, 1999) was issued to inform the process and went on to influence the *Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000* (Dixon, Ward and Blower, 2019). Frost and Parton (2009) note that during this period, leaving care was framed as an issue of social exclusion, where unemployment and homelessness influenced the debate, echoing earlier concerns about children in poverty. The aim of the *Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000* was to address these concerns by bolstering the planning and assessment of young people, providing a clearer statutory framework of support to improve a young person's life chances and delay the transition from care (Carr and Goosey, 2021). Within the response to Utting's report, the government's undertaking was to support young people until they were 18 and up to 21 'subject to affordability' (Stuart and Baines, 2004, p.37). Even though previous legislation positioned 18 as the age of adulthood, early transition continued to be an issue and the premature move to independence for young people leaving care was recognised. Despite criticisms noted by Utting about leaving care services the *Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000* did little to address the issue of early transition (Broad, 2005). The duties imposed by the Act focused instead on the nature of support and clarified eligibility as noted in Figure 3, Chapter 1. Studies conducted after the enactment of these changes recognised the attempts to strengthen services, but still questioned the consistency of provision and measures to prevent early transition from care (Broad, 2005; Dixon et al., 2006).

Policy development in the 2000s continued to evolve at pace. Earlier debates about the responsibility of the family (Frost and Parton, 2009) and the crisis in childhood (Scruton, 1997) gave rise to a raft of measures aimed at tackling social exclusion including the *Children Act 2004*, the roll out of children's centres, *Every Child Matters* outcomes framework, and a greater sense of partnership across all agencies working with children (Brammer, 2020). For young people leaving care, concerns continued to be raised about their poor outcomes and a consultation was conducted to bring together practitioners, researchers and young people to inform the White Paper, *Care Matters: Time for Change*

(DfES, 2007). *Care Matters* set out the government's intentions for reform of services for children in care including further strengthening of the *corporate parent* role, measures to improve education support, placement stability and health. Chapter Six of the report focused on transition to adulthood, raising questions about early transition and placement suitability. The other recommendations in *Care Matters* related to different pilot projects exploring best practice and schemes to trial new approaches, including *Staying Put*.

As highlighted in Chapter 1, *Staying Put* was different to previous initiatives for *looked after* young people as it was funded and aimed to align with experiences of young people in the wider population. Previous policy measures seemed to reinforce the ending of social care involvement at 18 years, with only those young people who had diagnosed mental health needs, or disabilities going on to receive adult services, and young people defined as *eligible* receiving a basic level of support (Munro et al., 2011b). As Munro et al. (2011b) noted, a longstanding quiet apprehension about creating continued dependency on the state, has influenced previous changes to legislation, marking the distinction between *Staying Put* and previous policy changes.

The year after *Care Matters* was published, the *Children and Young Persons Act 2008* formalised some of the intentions of the White paper including a duty to provide sufficient and suitable accommodation. These changes placed a greater emphasis on delaying transition for young people and introduced further regulation and guidance about leaving care (Brammer, 2020). The pilot schemes started under *Care Matters* continued during this time and concluded after the enactment of the 2008 Act. Following the pilot, *Staying Put* was incorporated into the *Children and Families Act 2014* (s. 98) where it became a statutory duty for local authorities to have a policy supporting this scheme. It is important to note that this duty is not an automatic path for young people to remain in their placement after their 18th birthday. The duty only requires the local authority to make provision for the *Staying Put* arrangement and retain the right to determine whether the arrangement is appropriate (Children and Families Act, 2014 s. 98 (5)).

Changes to legislation continue and most recently the *Children and Social Work Act 2017* included further measures aimed at improving services for young people leaving care. Local authorities are now expected to publicise their service under the guise of a 'local offer' (s. 2) and personal advisor support is extended to young people up to the age of 25 (s. 3). Like previous legislation, the emphasis is placed on preparation and support for young people leaving care.

***Staying Put* and Foster Care**

The final part of this chapter revisits *Staying Put* and the relationship with foster care guidance and regulation. In parallel with changes to practice for children and young people, revisions to standards for foster carers have developed since the 1990s. Sitting under the *Care Standards Act 2000* is the regulatory framework comprising the *National Minimum Standards* (Department for Education, 2011) and the *Fostering Services (England) Regulations* (2011). All of which stipulate the practice standards for foster carers and the agencies responsible for their registration. Registration of foster care placements reflects the *Children Act 1989* definition of child, whereby a child is defined as being anyone under the age of 18 (sch. 1 (16)). This means that young people remaining with carers are no longer regarded as *looked after* or a child in placement and carers are referred to as *former foster carers* (DfE, Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, 2013). The distinction is made in the use of language, where 'arrangement' replaces the word 'placement' and young people become 'excluded occupiers on a license' (DfE, Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, 2013, p. 13). To record the changes to the situation and specify payment terms, carers and young people enter into a license agreement setting out payment for rent, utilities, support and meals. All the financial arrangements relate to wider benefit, housing and tax systems, aligning *Staying Put* with housing allowance rules. The other difference for young people is that if the carer continues to foster other children, young people in a *Staying Put* arrangement may be subject to a disclosure and barring service check (The Fostering Network, 2016).

Previously stated in Chapter 1, *Staying Put* formalised an existing informal extension to some care placements. However, moving an organically occurring relationship onto a formal footing was only recognised in legislation relating to the child and not to the foster carer. Aside from practice guidance, there have been no changes to fostering standards and regulations to accommodate *Staying Put*. For foster carers who agree to *Staying Put*, they are no longer given the same financial support and any payment they receive is agreed within the local authority. Arguably the disconnect between the two systems means that there is potential for ambiguity in how foster carers are supported to move from placement to arrangement and subsequently how this may impact on the young person's ability to stay. Although there is guidance supporting *Staying Put* (DfE, 2015; The Fostering Network, 2016) this chapter has highlighted how discretionary and inexplicit elements of leaving care policy can prevent practice transformation without a clear framework.

Chapter Summary

At the heart of policy changes for young people leaving care are two significant considerations — finance and the role of the state in providing an ideal normative family for children and young people in care. In this policy summary, changes to the way services are configured have been set out including some contextual background. The reticence to provide more comprehensive services for young people leaving care could be explained by the hard reality of local authority budgets and the shifting line between welfare and risk. Having undefined end points for service provision, extending financial support or allocating resources to young people beyond their care placement, represents a fiscal challenge for central and local government, not least of all because budget planning requires some sense of certainty about when to withdraw services. Age and eligibility continue to be the key factors in determining how services will end, rather than the need of a young person leaving their placement.

The second consideration is how the state should intervene in family life. In early stages of family support, services are designed to prevent children entering the care system. Since the enactment of the *Children Act 1989*, looking after children in a care placement has been constructed as the last resort (Fawcett, Featherstone and Goddard, 2004). Positioning the family as being responsible for the care and protection of children has become the backbone of legislation post *Children Act 1989*, which is reinforced by a wide-ranging evidence base (Garrett, 2010). That said, a conflict arises where the state is acting in a parental role for children in care, whilst simultaneously looking to the family as the most favourable place for the child. The outcome of this tension is that the responsibility for children in care does not sit easily with any party. It follows that the same conflicted views are applied to young people exiting the system, where thinking about family and state responsibility coincides. In the next chapter issues of the state's role in the family are referred to in the context of the use of neoliberal ideals in practice.

Chapter 3: Practice Context

Chapter Introduction

Issues in contemporary practice are an important component in understanding the experience of *Staying Put*, as policy implementation reflects the wider environment of practice (Hardy, 2015). This chapter outlines some of the key issues impacting current social work that are relevant when thinking about how social work operates in practice. Rather than an exhaustive overview, key areas have been selected due to their prevalence in social work literature and relevance to the subject of the study namely neoliberalism, austerity and organisational issues. Whilst each area had a distinct presence in the literature, there are crossovers between them, demonstrating the interconnectedness between social work and wider political and social issues (Power and Raphael, 2018).

The Influence of Neoliberalism

It is challenging to capture the impact of a wide-reaching political economic approach, particularly as neoliberal ideology has influenced so many facets of practice since the late 1970s (Cummins, 2018). The belief that a free market is the primary way to 'achieve human well-being' has dominated changes to children's services since the 1980s (Rogowski, 2018, p. 72). Often associated with the Conservative Party of the 1970s–1990s, the pattern of change has endured through successive Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments, which is why party-political ideologies have not been referenced. The dominance of neoliberalism has come about due to two specific discourses. First the assertion that without neoliberal policies society would suffer greater hardships. This thinking was apparent in the late 1970s and in subsequent restructuring or changes to public services (Bamford, 2015). Neoliberal ideas are often framed by policy makers as an essential solution to improve efficiencies. However, neoliberal ideas are not limited to areas of existing commerce, and application of market forces are seen as positive and necessary in all areas of practice (Harvey, 2007). The second discourse justifying the proliferation of neoliberal ideas, is the benefits of neoliberalism, including promotion of individual dignity, freedom and choice, which have become compelling narratives in contemporary society (Harvey, 2007). Although neoliberalism has been an unnamed influence in the restructuring and organisation of social work in England, modernisation and reform has been characterised by managerialist processes that introduce ideas of individualism, competition and commodification into

relationships and social interactions (Garrett, 2010). Two facets of neoliberalism are set out starting with the concept of managerialism.

Managerialism

The rise of managerialism in social work has occurred over the last few decades (Rogowski, 2018). Methods of recording, monitoring and shaping practice have been described as a 'discursive strategy' to redefine the relationship between the manager and worker (Clarke, 1998, p. 234). Over time managers have become representatives of the organisation's bureaucracy and criticised for being driven by checklists which strip out the 'creativity of social work' (Bamford, 2015, p. vi). Transferring techniques from the business world into social work has been contentious but also significant in reshaping professional identity from historic notions of altruistic endeavour (Timor-Shelvin and Benjamin, 2020).

Efforts to standardise services to improve practice stem from managerial techniques to guide actions in a more prescribed way. Previous examples in social work include the role of checklist-based assessment tools accompanying the assessment framework in the 2000s (Cleaver, Walker and Meadows, 2004) and more recently the Graded Care Profile when assessing child neglect. Whilst routinised models have been criticised for diluting professional creativity and judgment (Ponnert and Svennsson, 2015), some social workers have found that such tools can be helpful in sharing concerns with families (Smith et al., 2019). Even though some elements of organisational process can be helpful, overwhelmingly social workers report that their undertaking of specific micromanaged tasks has lessened the amount of time spent with service users. In turn, social workers have felt a reduced sense of autonomy which has ultimately made their role less satisfying (Harlow, et al., 2013). In Munro's review of the child protection system in 2011, she argued that social work had become over bureaucratised and dominated by 'top-down direction and regulation' (2011, p. 128). Although her focus was on a specific area of practice, other writers have recognised similar issues in other parts of children's services (Blythe, 2014; Smith, 2019; Baginsky, Ixer and Manthorpe, 2021) highlighting the relevance for social workers supporting young people in my study.

A defining feature of contemporary practice is the division within services based on specialisms, age ranges, need or task. Moving away from generic teams, social workers are positioned to only focus on a set issue to restrict opportunities to widen their remit within the family (Frost and Parton, 2009). Fragmentation of the day-to-day job into specialist teams has been likened to a Ford factory conveyer belt where once a task is completed by one

specialist it is handed onto the next (Harlow, 2003). Compartmentalisation of task can be seen in all parts of children's services including leaving care services, where social workers and personal advisors have demarcated areas of responsibility and knowledge. Translating practice into task orientated work has destabilised traditional ideas of social work (Thompson and Wadley, 2018). Where previously, social work was seen as a helping profession, now by fulfilling the bureaucratic expectations of their role social workers are diverted from the relationship-based aspects of practice by becoming overly focused on measurable skills and knowledge for their given area (Thompson and Wadley, 2018).

Marketisation

Managerial techniques have undoubtedly shaped the nature of social work, however the second tenet of neoliberal thinking in this chapter is the involvement of the market, which has also fundamentally changed what constitutes a social work organisation. Bamford (2015) recalls Margaret Thatcher talking as the leader of the opposition in the 1970s, asserting that children's social work should be delivered by a charity. These ideas of disaggregated services have become an enduring presence through subsequent practice reviews. Use of market principles in children's services has been slower than in other areas of practice, for example adult services have operated with a purchaser/provider split since the enactment of the *NHS and Community Care Act 1990*. Following the 1990 Act local authorities shifted from being the dominant provider of services to being purchasers of care, entering a marketplace of private and voluntary sector to commission services (Newman and Clarke, 2009). Dispersing services in this way, created multiple 'proxies of state power' which led to decentralisation and new methods of regulation (Clarke, 2004, p. 36). Concerns about oversight of these multiple proxies have also been expressed by Jones (2015), who argued that distancing care decisions from the local authority exports care and protection issues outside of the context of democratic accountability (Jones, 2015).

Nearly 20 years on from Clarke's observations about the dispersal of services, the market has become an integral part of public services and created 'self-contained bureaucracies run on market principles' (Cleary, 2018, p. 2253). Although later to adopt a marketised approach, children's services have now fully incorporated these ideas in most aspects of practice. One example of embedded practice is commissioning residential or foster care placements from the private or voluntary sector (Sellick, 2011, 2014). Specific teams or roles to commission and contract services have become established, and payment by results and local performance measures are conventional methods of working with providers of care (Body, 2019). In the foster care sector, independent fostering agencies (IFA) make up a third

of fostering services, with the remaining placements being provided by the local authority (Ofsted, 2020). Although this number has remained static for the previous two reporting periods, data suggests that IFAs continue to increase their capacity of approved foster carers, whilst local authority numbers decrease (Ofsted, 2020). This increase in IFA foster carers could be a financial barrier to carers wanting young people to stay put. An IFA carer is likely to be paid a higher fee than a foster carer for the local authority (Narey and Owers, 2018), meaning that when the young person's placement converts to an arrangement, the carer's income will decrease substantially.

Contrary to the enthusiasm for the role of the free market in social care by various governments, recent unease about profiteering in the fostering and residential care sector has led to questions about the moral implications (Jones, 2018), and value and quality of services (Samuel, 2021). The hope for a mixed economy of providers has not panned out and of the 270 IFAs, 47 per cent of agencies are owned by 21 larger companies, of which only seven are not for profit companies (Ofsted, 2020). With only 4 per cent of placements provided by the voluntary sector, most children in IFA foster care placements are cared for by profit making agencies. In the most recent Local Government Association report, IFAs were making £278 million pounds in profit each year with continued 'appetite for further acquisition' of small agencies by large providers (Rome, 2021, p. 27).

Neoliberalism has changed how social work is understood and what the job looks like on a day-to-day basis. Attempts to challenge the proliferation of managerial process by calling for reform have yet to make any impact and McGrath-Brookes, Hanley and Higgins (2020), suggest that even recent calls for service reform are imbued with neoliberal tropes such as *freedom* and *potential*. Suggesting that neoliberal thinking is the answer to the problems it seems to have caused. The next subject relevant to leaving care services also relates to measures of state involvement, again presented as a necessary solution to an escalating problem.

Austerity

Following the global financial crisis in 2008, austerity measures have been severe and widespread throughout the public sector. Described as 'government chosen austerity' (McLaughlin, 2020, p. 27), cuts to services have appeared ideologically driven, to engineer less reliance on public services and further promote individualisation of social problems and problem solving (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2013, Lavalette, 2017). As a result of austerity measures, wider changes to the labour market, spiralling housing costs and reduced health

and social care services have contributed to a deterioration in living standards for many people (Lavalette, 2017). In this environment, social workers have taken on a more active role in gatekeeping the public purse and the language of eligibility, contracts and value for money have become commonplace in practice discussions (Jones, 2015). Under the pretext of innovation and creativity, services have had to adapt to 'do more for less' (Brown, 2015, p. 138) with social workers often signposting on to other services. However, drawing on community-based services is not straightforward, as public sector grants and contracts have also been cut, impacting on preventative and service user led organisations (Clifford, 2017). Consequently, many people fall outside of statutory services and are also unable to access community-based support. Austerity as a funding policy appears to be an accepted part of practice and the impact on families, one example being the use of food banks, which have become absorbed as an accepted social work intervention in the face of a shrinking welfare state (Pollock, 2019).

Once central to a social worker's agenda, structural inequalities, exclusion and poverty have become marginal concerns with greater focus placed on individualised interpretations of personal difficulties (Smith, 2021). Issues of poverty for example have become an 'abstract hypothesis' (Morris et al., 2018, p. 8) where social workers often talk about social justice despite having little awareness of the impact of poverty on their service users (Cummins, 2018). Smith (2021) argues that the disconnect is unsurprising as social workers have to focus on eligibility and rationing of resources, which may leave them feeling unable to challenge the measures that they employ. For some social workers the cuts to services and growing influence of the free market have led to resistance and public protest (Gwilym, 2017), however many on short term contracts and operating in pressurised work environments have felt unable to respond. In some cases, social workers have felt overwhelmed by the dissonance between their values and refusing family's requests for support (Grootegoed and Smith, 2018). Feeling hopeless to make changes, has led to some social workers questioning whether they have made the correct career choice (McFadden, 2015). Consequently, young people leaving care are supported within an environment that is resource poor.

Pressures in Practice

Alongside and sometimes in response to, calls for efficiencies in the last 20 years, social work education and practice has been reviewed by multiple academics and government appointed advisors (Munro, 2011; Narey, 2014; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2016;

Baginsky, Gorin and Sands, 2017; Narey and Owers, 2018). Each reviewer has attempted to tackle an aspect of the system to make improvements to the 'pot-pourri' of services (Bullock, 2018, p. 107). Despite years of reform instigated by reviews, social changes or high-profile cases of child death or injury (Jones, 2014), concerns about the practice environment remain. The next section highlights some of the key issues facing social workers and social work organisations building on those mentioned in the first part of this chapter. Whilst these issues have been presented as a list for the reader's benefit, the topics presented continue to illustrate the complex practice environment within which a young person is supported.

Demand and Workload

In Chapter 2 the relationship between the death or injury of a child and policy change was noted, but another consequence of an individual child's circumstances is the impact on demand for social work services. Following the death of Peter Connelly in 2007 there was a sustained media campaign about poor social work practice and referrals to children's services increased, due to a collective anxiety about managing risk in the community (Jones, 2014). In the three weeks following the initial media coverage, the court appointed social work service, Cafcass², reported an increase from 496 applications for care proceedings in September 2008 to 716 in December 2008 (Cafcass, 2012). In their review of this period, Cafcass (2012) concluded that the majority of applications made during this time were appropriate and related to children who needed court intervention.

After the initial increase in 2007/2008, there was a fall in applications and requests for social work support. However, from 2010 there has been a steady increase in court applications (Cafcass, 2021), referrals to local authorities for support, and child protection referrals (Foster and Harker, 2021). Rising numbers of children needing assessment and family support has led to increased levels of formalisation in practice in an attempt to cope with demand and sensitivity to risk (Featherstone et al., 2018). Omnipresent measurement of social work through shared IT systems has increased public exposure of failed targets, mistakes and unfinished work (Gibson, 2014). Social workers consequently face the task of balancing an increased demand on services and organisational expectations of bureaucracy whilst also experiencing feelings of shame and incompetence due to their shortcomings being made visible (Gibson, 2014). In summary, social workers experience external

² Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service

pressures to identify risk which may result in public scrutiny, simultaneously with internal pressures to fulfil the organisation's reporting requirements.

As well as an increase in child protection work, local authorities have also experienced additional demands on other areas of social work services. Relevant to my study is the increase in the number of children in care. Table 2 shows the Department for Education (2020) data detailing the increase of *looked after* children between 2012 and 2020.

Year	Children ceasing to be <i>looked after</i> during the year	Children <i>looked after</i> at 31 March	Children starting to be <i>looked after</i> during the year
2020	29,590	80,080	30,970
2019	29,570	78,140	31,770
2018	30,050	75,370	32,190
2017	31,410	72,600	32,940
2016	31,850	70,410	32,160
2015	31,350	69,470	31,360
2014	30,600	68,810	30,730
2013	28,650	68,060	28,980
2012	27,510	67,070	28,390

Table 2: Numbers of looked after children and young people in England and Wales (DfE, 2020)

The numbers of children in care relate to social work activity as each child in care represents different assessments, court proceedings, plans, meetings and individual support networks for every child or young person. Table 2 highlights an additional 13,101 children in care since 2012 and shows increases in the number of children entering and leaving care.

The increased numbers of children and young people needing a care placement since 2012 has exposed the shortages in available foster carers. Concerns about the aging population of carers and fewer numbers of newly approved people have been raised in service reviews (Baginsky, Gorin and Sands, 2017; Narey and Owers, 2018) and by fostering agencies and charities (The Fostering Network, n.d.). Narey and Owers (2018) suggest that the shortage

of foster carers is not 'absolute' and argue that most children needing a placement are found one on the same day (p. 12). However, whilst a child might be placed with foster carers, this does not mean that they have been matched with the best carer to meet their needs, and poor matching could lead to early breakdown of the placement (Hollows and Nelson, 2006). Zeijlmans et al. (2018) also found that matching processes can be compromised because social workers have pressured workloads, highlighting that higher demand on services can result in children and young people receiving a poorer quality service. The shortage of foster carers is another factor relevant to *Staying Put* as carers may not have capacity or space to have both the young person in the *Staying Put* arrangement and provide another foster care placement. Consequently, a tension in the system occurs where the needs of young people in *Staying Put* arrangements are in competition with the need to provide another child with a placement.

Retention and turnover

Following Peter Connelly's death, Jones (2014, p. 283) described the practice environment as a 'perfect storm' where the demand for services, reduced funding and social work recruitment and retention issues coalesced. With an increased workload and fewer workers, local authorities experienced significant pressure. Maintaining a stable workforce of social workers has been recognised as an international problem (Burns and Christie, 2013; Bowyer and Roe, 2015; Russ, Lonn and Lynch, 2020). Figures from the Department for Education (2021) in Table 3, show a small increase of social workers over the last five years. However, what can also be seen in their data is that the number of agency social workers and vacancies have increased, and turnover and caseloads have remained at a similar level. What this indicates is that despite having more people in the profession, there are still issues with retaining social workers and managing demands within a local authority team.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Number of FTE³ Social Workers	26,810	28,570	27,700	28,500	29,470	30,700
Number of Vacancies	4,320	5,470	5540	5820	5810	6000
Number of FTE Agency Social Workers	4,430	4,860	5,330	5,340	5,360	5,800
Turnover of Staff	17%	16%	15.1%	15%	16%	16%
Average Number of Children allocated per Social Worker	16	16	16.1	17.8	17.4	16.9

Table 3: Social worker workforce data (DfE, 2021)

Table 3 details the level of change across the year but does not provide any context for these changes. Possible explanations for social workers leaving their role are complex, as some workers move on for reasons other than the work environment. Some reasons include being promoted, moving to other roles within an organisation or leaving to have children (Burns and Christie, 2013). Hussein et al. (2014) found that newly qualified social workers intentions to leave were based on poor engagement with the role, feelings of being ill prepared and poor remuneration, but could be offset by being in a supportive team and empowering environment (Hussein et al., 2014). Social work has experienced constant change and reorganisation over a sustained period and working in such an environment has led to many social workers being moved from their chosen role and feeling disconnected from the wider organisation (Antonopoulou, Killian and Forrester, 2017).

³ Full time equivalent

Therefore, young people could be supported by a number of social workers due to the poor levels of retention, or temporary nature of the agency worker role.

Stress

The environment of children's services is by nature a stressful place to work, however the pressures of working with families in moments of crisis are only partially responsible for social worker's ill health or leaving their role. Where social workers are supported in small teams, with regular supervision they report job satisfaction and commitment to the role (Antonopoulou, Killian and Forrester, 2017). Conversely, working in environments with no visible or individual support can lead to burnout or emotional exhaustion resulting in disengagement from the profession (Travis, Lizano and Mor Barak, 2016). Feelings of burnout or emotional exhaustion were also featured in grey literature — 91 per cent of respondents to a Community Care⁴ survey reported such, regardless of the size of their caseload (McFadden, 2015).

The impact of emotional distress on social workers is commonly ill health and sometimes poor eating habits and drug or alcohol problems (McGregor, 2013). As well as affecting the social worker, the impact of stress can also lead to compassion fatigue which could result in dismissive or neglectful responses to services users and relevant to this research, young people (McFadden, 2015; Moriaty, Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2015; Truter, Fouché and Theron, 2017). Although not acknowledged by most of the participants in McFadden's survey, feeling frustrated or overwhelmed in pressured situations might not be immediately apparent to the social worker but could be to the service user.

The relationship between feeling burnt out and ineffective or absent supervision has featured in several studies about social work support. Supervision is recognised as a critical tool of support and practice exploration (Munro, 2010; Wilkins, Forrester and Grant, 2017) and one of the 'accepted tenets of the profession' (Wilkins, Forrester and Grant, 2017, p. 942). Even with this widespread recognition, format, frequency and quality of supervision are consistently highlighted as problematic, with scarce space for critical reflection (Rankine, 2019). Appropriate levels of support including supervision are often combined with other means of work led techniques to enable social workers to respond to the rigors of the role. However, in some cases, issues of well-being have become a device to measure a social worker's performance and their suitability for the role (Bache and Reardon, 2016; Wilkins,

⁴ Community Care is a trade magazine for social workers.

Forrester and Grant, 2017), making the supervisor ineffectual in responding to a worker's issues. Supervision should be a space for social workers to share their concerns about their work, which is compromised by the domination of risk and process focused discussion, with low levels of reflection (Wilkins, Forrester and Grant, 2017). Truter, Fouché and Theron (2017) argue that resilience to withstand pressure at work has become the social worker's individual responsibility, and if they are provided with a list of predetermined sources of support but still cannot cope, it is their fault.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has highlighted the many challenges and issues associated with contemporary social work practice. Whilst it is important to recognise these factors when thinking about the experiences of young people, many people continue into the profession and value the work they are doing (Hussein et al., 2014; McFadden, 2015). Nonetheless overbearing managerial processes, constant change, poor support, high workload and a fight for resources characterise many social worker's experiences. These issues may be invisible to young people leaving care but could impact on the way a social worker interacts with them or refuses resources or support. That is not to excuse unempathetic or neglectful practice but is in recognition that an individual response might reflect broader contextual issues. In Chapter 4 the young people's experiences of practice are outlined, as well as the wider literature describing decision-making and leaving care.

Chapter 4: Literature Review Context

Chapter Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature about children and young people's experiences of public care. To begin there is a brief summary of the search strategy for this chapter and rationale for material included. The two key areas relevant to the study are then set out. Firstly, studies relating to decision-making by young people, beginning with the wider literature about being involved in social work process and finishing with their experiences as they leave their care placements are considered. Secondly, focus turns to the national context for young people leaving care, with emphasis on what is known about their experiences, outcomes and issues as they transition from their care placement to independence. The chapter concludes with the limited studies relating to *Staying Put*.

Searching for Literature

Literature was identified through a combination of available databases, general web searches and focused hand searching through key social work journals and books. Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, ProQuest Central, the university library, Google Scholar and Google were used to identify material relating to the principal topic areas. Searches were also made in grey publications or media, for example Children and Young People Now, Community Care, Research in Practice, Social Care Institute for Excellence and The Care Leaver's Association and other children's charities. The subject of young people is well represented in peer-reviewed journals, although reports and briefings are also published in other ways. The decision to include grey material was taken for two reasons, one that *Staying Put* is a relatively recent measure and there are very few peer-reviewed articles about the scheme. Secondly, service user and practitioner-led work is often small scale and self-published and as Mitchell, Lunt and Shaw (2010) observe, practitioners and service users may not have the confidence to believe their work is worthy of publication in academic journals. It was important to include all types of material as professional or service user led work can offer insight into current or day-to-day practice (Becker, Bryman and Ferguson, 2012) and service users or practitioners are experts in their experience and as such their views should be recognised and open to scholarly debate alongside peer reviewed literature.

Search terms were straightforward for some aspects of the review, however exploring literature about both decision-making and young people leaving care required further thought due to the multiple descriptors of each element. For example, terminology about young people leaving care differs between peer reviewed literature and language commonly used in practice. Whilst the varied terminology can frame the diversity of experiences, variance adds complexity to the reviewing process as some terms are particular to academic literature and have not gained widespread traction in practitioner or service user discourse, for example 'aging out of care' (Stein, 2006c). To illustrate, leaving care has been described in multiple ways including but not limited to: 'care leaving', 'transitioning', 'transitioning out of care', 'transition from care', 'growing out of care', 'emerging from care', 'emancipated from care', 'aging out of care' and 'extended care'. To ensure that different terminology was picked up, Boolean operators like AND, OR and NOT were used to enable the search process, which Taylor, Killick and McGlade (2015) note as being helpful in practitioner research. Table 4 indicates the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to identify the literature in this chapter. The literature included outside of the stipulated date range includes foundational texts that provide historical context to the discussion.

Criteria	Rationale
Only include material from 2008-Feb 2021	Research carried out pre 2008 may include young people receiving services pre 2000 Children (Leaving Care) Act End search in February due to deadline for completion
<i>Staying Put</i> /extended care specific searches post 2012	Prior to 2012, <i>Staying Put</i> was not in use or known
Only material published in English	Due to language skills of the researcher
Only articles originating from Europe, Australia and America, unless article published by an INTRAC affiliated country (International Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care)	Due to similar social structures and welfare organisations or with shared understanding of leaving care.
Only hard copies or material available at ARU library or full text online	Due to the resource restrictions of the researcher

Criteria	Rationale
Include grey literature produced by service user organisations or commissioned Higher Education Institution projects	Some service user lead material is not peer reviewed and therefore would be absent. Also, there is very little material about <i>Staying Put</i> available in peer reviewed work.

Table 4: Inclusion/exclusion criteria

Using the criteria in Table 4, the following two sections relate to the literature about young people's decision-making and their experiences of leaving care.

Decision-Making

Although identified by Hicks over 15 years ago, decision-making continues to be discussed in multiple fields, including economics, neuroscience, health, psychology and engineering (Hicks, 2005). Studies may differ depending on the field, but there is consensus that the central principle of decision-making is making a choice between several courses of action (Hicks, 2005; Brunsson, 2007; Hardman, 2009; O' Sullivan, 2011). In her work about critical thinking, Halpern (2014) notes that it is overly simplistic to view decision-making as rationally weighing a series of choices. Halpern's comment is particularly relevant in social work where decisions are often made in emotionally complex situations (Munro et al., 2017). The difficulty for practitioner decision-making is widely recognised and noted that social workers use skills and judgement (Taylor, 2017) which involve 'multi-layered negotiation, applications of professional judgement and interpretation of knowledge and evidence' (O'Conner and Leonard, 2014, p. 1806). When writing about children and young people involved in social work services, this technical interpretation of making a decision is not applied. Instead, there is an emphasis on participative methods and levels of involvement rather than the more clearly defined language of choice and judgement more commonplace in adult decision-making research. 'Participation', 'involvement', 'having a say', 'decision-making', 'having a voice', 'listening' are used interchangeably to describe the ways in which children and young people have contributed to their own care decisions. Interchangeable use of language in the literature can be problematic as each descriptor can be interpreted differently. For example, terms such as *listening* need to be critically considered (Moss, Clark and Kjørholt, 2005) as being heard does not equate to determining a choice — children can be asked what they think or want without there being any commitment to act on their views. Whilst it is unlikely

that a child or young person will consistently make independent decisions about their care due to the involvement of multiple parties including parents and professionals, their right to participate is embedded within the legislative framework (Kennedy, 2020). The decision at the heart of my study is referred to as a decision that the young person makes with the foster carer, but the emphasis is on their part in what happens (The Fostering Network, 2017).

As introduced in Chapter 1, decision-making by children and young people is grounded in a children's rights paradigm. A child's right to share their views and contribute to significant decisions is enshrined in Article 12 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and the central legislative framework for social work practice (Carr and Goosey, 2021). Within the *Children Act 1989* the role of involvement is framed as sharing 'wishes and feelings' (s. 1 (30) (a)), whilst the *Mental Capacity Act 2005*, stipulates that anyone over the age of 16 has presumed capacity to make decisions that affect them (Johns, 2017). Regardless of the intentions of the legislative and policy measures, a child's or young person's involvement is more often predicated by a social worker's assessment of their ability to make a decision, based on age and perceived maturity. Assessment of competence to make decisions is either informed by formal application of the Gillick competence test⁵, individual assessment by the professional or determined by a local policy based on a chronological age or organisation of services and service provision (Leeson, 2007; O'Hare et al., 2016). Rather than children and young people being seen as agents with rights and accepted as decision makers, they are more often viewed as objects of service intervention who are enabled by adults to participate in processes (Berrick, Dickens, Pösö and Skirenes, 2015). As decision-making is often contingent on an adult's decision, there is a broad field of work that looks at the importance and value of participation (James, 2007; McCafferty, 2017; Merkel-Holguin, 2020), experience of being involved in participation projects and boards (Nybell, 2013) or the perceptions of their level of participation. Most of the research in this field is concerned with different aspects of participation, instead of focusing on children and young people being agents engaged in decision-making about their own fate (Berrick, et al., 2015), which is the focus of this study.

The next two sections of this chapter focus on two perspectives about decision-making by children and young people. First, research that highlights the social worker's perspective,

⁵ Widely used in social work practice, Gillick competency tests stem from case law relating to a child's role in medical decisions without parental consent (Shah, 2021).

including their approaches to involving children or young people. The second section then brings together research involving children and young people and highlights their experience of participation in social care processes. Both are included because, as previously stated, children and young people are routinely reliant on practitioners to facilitate their involvement (Zeijlmans et al., 2019) and are not independently participating in their care decisions. First, as children and young people's involvement in decision-making is routinely facilitated by the social worker, literature pertaining to the social work perspective on this involvement is considered.

Process, Organisations, Skills and Attitudes

In exploring the literature relating to social workers' perspectives on involving children and young people in decision-making, some consistent organisational issues were apparent. An organisation's meeting structures, paperwork, IT systems, supervision, visiting patterns, funding panels all constitute the daily task of a social worker, within which a relationship with a service user is formed (Hodgson and Watts, 2017). In a study about participation in child protection conferences, social workers identified that organisational processes and their own misunderstanding about work systems limited the way they had involved a child (Vis, Holton and Thomas, 2012). In other studies, about participation in care and family support services, social workers were committed to involving children in decisions and systems but felt that unclear guidance or uncertainty about the parameters of a child's involvement meant that the child's voice became excluded (Vis and Fossum, 2013; Harkin, Stafford, and Leggatt-Cook, 2020). Formal meeting settings were another barrier identified by social workers, where there was a disconnect between their intention to involve a child, and the realities of what they were able to achieve in practice. Social workers might value the involvement of children and young people, but if the processes remain adult orientated, they are unlikely to succeed (Diaz, Pert and Thomas, 2019; Harkin, Stafford, and Leggatt-Cook, 2020). Being child focused within meeting structures was found to be insufficient to be genuinely inclusive (Harkin, Stafford, and Leggatt-Cook, 2020), suggesting that even if social workers were willing to support a child's participation, the environment in which they are working inhibits their attempts. For some social workers, the presence of a child or young person at a meeting was found to be effective in influencing whether or not the child's voice was presented (Vis, Holton and Thomas, 2012; Porter, 2020).

All the studies detailed so far suggest that despite drives to include children and young people in decisions, practice techniques or systems can inhibit rather than facilitate their involvement. Concerns about the absence of the views of children are reflected in wider

research about assessment and planning where the prioritisation of adult engagement leads to the child becoming invisible (Brandon et al, 2012; Ferguson, 2017; Harkin, Stafford, and Leggatt-Cook, 2020). These barriers to participation are relevant to my study as young people will have been involved in meetings with social workers about *Staying Put*. Thinking about how much influence they felt they had was an aim of my study and could build on knowledge about the formal processes relating to decision-making by young people leaving care.

The pressures on social workers operating within bureaucratic and resource poor organisations noted in Chapter 3 also featured in the explanations for poor levels of participation. Barriers to relationships resulting from normative organisational activity are relevant to this study as I am interested in how young people have experienced support as they make their decision about *Staying Put*. Limited time and turnover of staff were seen as barriers to involve and prepare a child for their statutory review meeting (Diaz, Pert and Thomas, 2019) and a general block to building relationships with children (Barnes, 2012; van Bijleveld, Bunders-Aelen and Dedding, 2020). Social workers also felt the lack of time, tools and materials restricted their ability to make their interactions with children and young people more participative (McLeod, 2006; O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016; Harkin, Stafford, and Leggatt-Cook, 2020).

Barriers to participation resulting from organisational structure, systemic resource issues and forums for participation provide useful context when exploring the decisions made by young people leaving care. However, there are other issues identified in the literature which also could help me think about the experiences of young people making their decision about *Staying Put*. Some studies found that social workers felt they lacked skills and confidence to facilitate better involvement. In their work about the child protection system, Munro's (2012) report about a child-centred system and Ferguson's (2016) study about communicating with children, found that social workers had varied levels of skill which influenced their ability to use participatory methods of intervention. As well as deficiencies in skill, some social workers felt insecure in their ability to involve children and young people. Although Winter et al.'s (2016) research is about communication more generally, their work highlighted how low levels of confidence impacted on the worker's ability to talk to a child, potentially impacting on their involvement in decisions. In studies about social work attitudes to participation in Israel, and review meetings in England, an absence of specific participation training was felt to be a barrier for workers to effectively involve children (Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2020; Diaz,

Pert and Thomas, 2019). The lack of understanding about how to involve children, meant they did not always employ appropriate participative approaches.

While Munro (2012), Ferguson (2016), and Winter et al.'s (2016) work recognises the problems for children if their worker lacks the means or confidence to involve them, Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2020) suggest that there is a need to address this concern alongside considerations about broader attitudinal barriers. Shemmings' (2000) early work about attitudes to children's decision-making found that there were two dominant dichotomous discourses: upholding the rights of a child or rescuing them from harm. This practice quandary was found to shape a social worker's position in their day-to-day work and could be relevant to the young people making their decision about *Staying Put* as they will have had adverse childhood experiences. Shemmings (2000) identified that either social workers believed that a child should be involved regardless of age, or they believed that participation should be restricted for fear of causing more harm and distress. In their study about participation in Dutch child protection services, van Bijleveld, Bunders-Aelen and Dedding (2020) identified the tensions between protecting children and working in a participative way. They highlighted social worker's reluctance to work participatively was based on concerns about a child's capabilities due to their experiences (van Bijleveld, Bunders-Aelen and Dedding, 2020). Their work supports earlier studies which also identified reduced involvement where children and young people had been subject to abuse or neglect (Archard and Skivenes 2009; Vis and Thomas 2009) or receiving services in a statutory social work setting (Healy and Dartington, 2009). Being both protective and facilitative appears to challenge social workers even if they have the tools to support participation (van Bijleveld, Bunders-Aelen and Dedding, 2020) as they face a balancing act between the child's participation and best interests, and their own anxieties about making decisions about protection and harm.

Shemmings' (2000) research also highlighted how social workers conflated participation with independent decision-making. This conflation of terminology was also found in Kosher and Ben-Arieh's (2020) more recent study where participation and consultation were viewed interchangeably. Interchangeable use of language can be problematic and result in different approaches by social workers as consultation only relates to gathering information from children and young people whereas participation means they are 'joining in the decision-making' (Stabler, 2020, p. 27). The prevalence of a protectionist stance identified by Shemmings, was also found in Križ and Skivenes' (2017) comparative study. Children were deemed incapable of knowing what the right course of action would be, but also that they

needed protection from the effect of participation. Whilst some social workers excluded children for reasons of protection other research found that participation was limited due to concerns about a challenge to the social worker's authority (Kosher, and Ben-Arieh, 2020) or because of fears a child could have 'unrealistic requests' (van Bijleveld, Bunders-Aelen and Dedding, 2020, p. 291). Varied attitudes to participative practice were also noted by Vis, Holtan and Thomas (2012) who identified a lack of consensus between the social workers in their study. They concluded that social workers tended to think participation was appropriate when the child's involvement was unlikely to change the outcome, particularly in contentious situations. These studies about the context of the decision are useful to think about the young person's decision to stay put, as consensus is needed if the young person remains with the foster carers.

Other elements also influenced the social worker's attitude to participation. A number of studies highlighted the age of a child or young person as a determining factor in whether they were supported to participate in decision-making (Vis and Thomas, 2009; Križ and Skivenes, 2017; Alfandari, 2017; Woodman, Roche, and McArthur, 2018, Rap, Verkroost and Bruning, 2019). Whilst social workers often expressed the importance of children's participation, intentions did not translate into practice where issues of capacity and understanding for younger children (Woodman, Roche, and McArthur, 2018) and distress (Alfandari, 2017) were felt to be more important. Common to these studies about capacity and appropriate participation is the suggestion that social workers generally agreed that older children were more likely to be involved in decisions that impact them. However, as noted earlier in this section, there may be other considerations applied regardless of the age of a child, concluding that the reasons why a child is not involved are multifaceted. The young people in my study are making the decision later in their care pathway and in the context of established relationships with their foster carers, therefore it will be interesting to locate their experiences within the research reviewed in this section to understand if age was a factor in their involvement in their decision. In summary, social workers may face ethical dilemmas when involving children in decision-making due to dominant discourses of protection which override their participative intentions. Any barriers resulting from organisational structures or process can reinforce the operation of power in a normative way during which the professional perspective is given primacy. The next section highlights the multifaceted nature of decisions further by drawing on research that presents the perspectives of children and young people.

Children and Young People's Experience of Participation

There is an emerging body of work which considers the lived experience of children and young people's involvement in formal decision-making meetings with social workers (Bolin, 2016). Primarily the research focusses on the interaction between child/young person and the professionals, exploring their agency in these settings (Aubrey and Dhal, 2006; Pert, Diaz and Thomas, 2017). Although there is often a focal point for decision-making in the form of a meeting structure (Dillon Greenop Hills 2016), this work can add to an understanding of decision-making generally. As Leeson (2007) argues, children need ongoing practice to make decisions as this increases their confidence and proficiency. From her study with younger children, she goes on to say that children are expected to prove their capability of decision-making, often without adults allowing them opportunities to try (Leeson, 2007). This issue is relevant to understand decisions made by young people leaving care, as it provides a sense of the experiences of decision-making during their life in the care system.

Whether or not a child or young person feels involved in particular aspects of the social care journey was the aim of a number of different studies, some of which related to child protection. Whilst these studies are useful to understand a system-based approach to participation, the relationships between children, young people and social workers are different to relationships in longer term work. These differences are because interactions centre on decisions about risk and sometimes whether children are removed from their birth family. The focus of the work in these interactions is likely to include birth families in emotive circumstances. Whilst these concerns may have been resolved to some extent for children and young people in the care system, the formality of assessment, planning and support are similar. For this reason, involvement in wider social work decisions have been included in this review where decision-making was part of the study.

Generally, children and young people involved with social care services felt they had limited opportunities to participate in decision-making relating to their lives (Leeson 2007; Bessell 2011; Goodyer, 2014; Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, and Pastor, 2017). Information about process or what they should expect was often minimal (Leeson 2007; Bessell 2011) yet for many children the need to be involved was important. In Cashmore's (2011) work relating to court proceedings there was a complex mix of some children wanting to be involved and recognised in the process, and others who felt that their involvement might compromise their relationships with family. Regardless, of these reservations they still wanted to be taken

seriously in the decisions that affected them reflecting the distinction between decision-making and participating in decisions.

In research where involvement and participation felt possible, children and young people were able to identify facilitative factors that either helped or could improve their involvement. Individual worker traits were identified as being helpful, for example workers that projected a non-judgmental approach, ability to listen and those who provide opportunities to talk were deemed important assets to children when asked about their views of services (Mainey, Ellis and Lewis, 2009). Across a range of practice situations including child protection, statutory review meetings and residential care, being honest and trustworthy were also cited as key traits to feeling able to talk to professionals (Cossar and Long, 2008; Pert, Diaz and Thomas, Cossar, Brandon and Jordan, 2016; Schofield, Larsson and Ward, 2017). Although hard to specify what these elements look or feel like, what is apparent is the need to feel that there is care and interest from their worker. In Narey and Ower's (2018) review of fostering services, children and young people identified that care and interest shown by the social worker is a necessary trait for a successful relationship. Trust in a relationship was also found to be key in supporting a sense of agency (Munford and Saunders, 2015) and in developing a participative environment (Roesch-Marsh, Gillies and Green, 2017).

The issue of agency is relevant to the experiences of children and young people in or leaving care placements. For this group, time, opportunity and more established relationships with professionals mean that there are multiple interactions where decisions are made. In Priestley's (2020) study about agency and empowerment, the young people experienced the paradox of participation, where their views about policy were sought when in a focus group, but not in their individual experiences with social workers. Through their involvement in the group, they became aware of the possibilities for change and their ability to act (Priestley, 2020). Agency was identified as a resilience factor in the lives of young people in residential care (Schofield, Larsson and Ward, 2017). Personal narratives about behaviour and actions shaped the young person's understanding of how change came about. Schofield, Larsson and Ward's (2017) study about leaving residential care, found that young people had a mixed understanding about their power in decisions made. In matters relating to them, young people stated that they felt powerless but when a placement ended as a result of their actions, they felt powerful (Schofield, Larsson and Ward, 2017). This interpretation of agency suggests that young people need support to help them understand the parameters of decisions made. The inclination to be involved in decisions was also reflected by Gaskell (2010). Young people felt confused by decisions made about them, and

the lack of involvement conveyed a sense of not being valued or respected by workers. Despite the desire to be involved, young people felt disillusioned by the response deterring them from future attempts (Gaskell, 2010). The wish to be involved is not confined to older children and young people, recognition was important to younger children in care who wanted to talk and have their views included in assessment (Winter, 2010).

Studies about placement moves highlight the impact for children and young people when feeling excluded from decisions. Children and young people felt that they had a lack of understanding about why a move had happened and generally expressed feelings of confusion about their situation (Nybell, 2013; Goodyer, 2014; Mateos et al., 2017). Nybell's (2013) study exploring the voice of American children in foster care, outlined the complex nature of self-advocacy with young people, describing fluctuating confidence, opportunity and relationship quality as determining factors for their involvement in decisions made about their lives. An overriding message in Nybell's (2013) study was that young people felt greater weight and time was needed to facilitate their involvement in placement choices. This is consistent with an earlier study by McLeod (2006) and a more recent study by Goodyer (2014), who noted that a lack of say in placement moves increased the young people's anxiety and feeling heard in their choice of placement was the single most important factor.

Other studies have found that children and young people felt removed from decisions about where they live. In Coy's (2009) study with young women who had been sexually exploited, participants expressed their sense of powerlessness in the frequency and unexpected change of carers. The result of these changes meant that young women did not invest in their placement, and they chose to bypass the local authority to find their own accommodation to combat the possibility of further moves (Coy, 2009). Young people living in residential care also felt in the dark during placement changes (Kor, Fernandez and Spangaro, 2017) leading to feelings of disconnect with professionals during changes they experienced, contributing to an overall weaker sense of agency.

Further studies repeat messages of young people feeling unable to participate in decisions about when and where they moved to. In a Canadian study with participants aged 15 years old, a reduced or absent sense of agency is reported before moving but also in opportunities to express their view after the move has taken place (Hébert, Lanctôt and Turcott, 2016). In turn this led to greater instability, as young people lost trust in adult relationships and experienced feelings of rejection. The impact on the relationships with adults was a notable

finding of Munford and Sander's (2015) study focusing on young people's agency in New Zealand. Young people again reported that they were not included in making decisions about where they lived and other aspects of their care. Being isolated in this way meant that young people felt distant from the adults they were working with and wanted this bond to help them face the transitions they were experiencing.

The research combining the issues of leaving state care and decision-making is limited, highlighting the value of my study in this field. During the planning for post care support, some young people leading up to their 18th birthday say they felt they made no contribution to or were unaware of their pathway or transition plan (Mitchell et al., 2015; Glynn and Maycock, 2018; Brihelm-Crookall et al., 2020). Whilst these studies are not specifically about decision-making, the lack of involvement in planning suggests a continuation of exclusion from key events highlighted by previously noted research. Young people leaving care understood leaving to mean becoming self-reliant, which could bring about apprehensions but also hope (Kor, Fernandez and Spangaro, 2021). However, it is more likely that young people's sense of apprehension is exacerbated by a lack of participation and not feeling listened to (Paulsen and Thomas, 2018). Overall, much like other aspects of the care pathway the experiences of young people leaving care suggests that there is a general lack of involvement in the decisions as they make the transition to living away from their placement (Bessell, 2011; Daly, 2012; Törrönen & Vornanen, 2014; Glynn and Mayock, 2018).

The literature presented in this chapter about participation in decision-making has underlined the mixed experiences of children and young people making decisions about their care. Social workers can be caught between conflicting discourses about a child's protection and their right to participate in decisions (Shemmings, 2000). These personal conflicts coexisted with other systemic and structural barriers, reinforcing Lundy's (2009) assertion that a child's participation is more likely if thought is given to questions of what, how and when a child is being involved. In the second section, the literature underlined that children and young people recognise their exclusion and echo some of the social worker's reasons for feeling unable to participate. Both elements are relevant to thinking about the young people in my study, as the decision to stay put is explicitly understood as a decision and the young people are approaching legal adulthood. None of the literature has specifically addressed *Staying Put* based decisions, therefore my study is informed by this wider range of decision-making research. The next section of this chapter reviews the studies relating to leaving care, which

help locate the young people's decision in the context of what is known about this period of the care journey.

Leaving Care

This section explores the literature relating to options for young people leaving care and the impact of moving on from their care placement. Although the focus of my study is not specifically looking at outcome measures, research highlighting young people's experiences and issues about leaving care is helpful in locating both the driver for *Staying Put*, and context of a young person's life in care and opportunities and challenges once they have left their placement. The core issues commonly discussed in research about young people leaving care are education, employment, housing and social problems, which are areas of life that generate fears and anxieties for young people about future choices (Arnett, 2015). Young people will be grappling with these issues alongside the experience of renegotiating their relationships with carers and social workers, and in the case of *Staying Put*, decisions about whether or not to stay with their foster carers. In the first section the literature relating to the core issues for young people leaving care are explored, followed by a discussion about living arrangements for young people as they reach the age of 18.

The experiences of young people leaving public care are multifaceted and nuanced due to a number of different factors. Young people will have come into care at different ages and for multiple reasons, they will have experienced a range of placement types and had varying support from professionals, friends and family. Like any other social group of people, homogeneity can only be identified within specific boundaries and is problematic when explaining the transition for all young people, reflected in research with this group (Pinkerton, 2011). Therefore, it should not be assumed that experiences of care are negative and although not the dominant narrative, the impact of becoming *looked after* can be beneficial for many children and young people, and result in positive outcomes in family life and education and employment (Morgan, 2014; Sebba et al., 2015; Selwyn and Biheim-Crookall, 2017). There is also research that suggests greater stability can be achieved for children and young people who remain in care through to adulthood, compared with those who return to their birth family (Wade et al., 2010). However, being in care can also accentuate difficulties experienced before becoming *looked after*, characterised by a care system that is often inconsistent, unstable and transitory (Stein, 2006; McAuley and Davis, 2009). These experiences could have implications for young people's decision-making due to the influences and possible pressures that might impact on them during this time.

Despite such wide-ranging experiences during their care pathway, research relating to young people leaving care continues to reflect a consistent picture of less favourable outcomes in different areas, compared to peers without care experience (Biehal et al., 1995; Dixon and Stein, 2005; Stein and Munro, 2008; Stein 2012, Dixon and Baker, 2016; Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017). These findings suggest that even when the benefits of being in care are significant, leaving care marks a different life phase, underlined by Stein (2012), who noted that positive care pathways can be undermined by the leaving care junction. *Staying Put* was introduced to ease this junction and establish a less difficult transition from a foster care placement.

The recurring discourse about leaving care is often associated with outcome indicators measured by local authorities for national government comparison, for example education, employment, health, housing, and broader social problems. What constitutes an outcome is not considered in this literature review, because I am more interested in understanding the decision-making process and intersubjectivity between young people and other actors. However, as outcomes feature in much of the research it should be acknowledged that measuring or defining outcomes is complex, with researchers trying to delineate between measures and perceptions (Tilbury, 2004). Further caution is given by Akister, Owens and Goodyer (2010) who stated that outcomes can be measured in absolute terms but can also be relative to the individual, making comparison problematic. Although issues such as employment or social problems are often discussed individually, there is significant overlap in how different life choices impact on a young person's life trajectory, making it impossible to attribute outcomes to specific issues. Additionally, researchers do not always differentiate between the experiences of young people leaving residential, kinship or fostering placements, which may also account for difficulties faced by young people due to different levels of support or ties with family members. For the purposes of my research the experiences of young people leaving their placement are collectively viewed, primarily because the changes to policy are often informed by an overall narrative that young people leaving public care are more likely to experience difficulties.

Not (consistently) in Employment, Education or Training

The measurement of young people's participation in education and employment is commonly known as NEET (not in employment, education or training) and has become shorthand for young people on the margins of opportunity, who tend to lack aspiration (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). As part of their *corporate parenting* responsibilities, local authorities must collate education and employment information about young people leaving

care. The most recent figures suggesting the numbers of young people not in education or employment range from 27 per cent at 17 years to 39 per cent for 19–21-year-olds, compared to 13 per cent of the wider population of 19–21-year-olds (DfE, 2020). Whilst the DfE does not offer explanation for this disparity, other studies suggest that children in care are likely to have an unsettled journey through the education system (Jackson and Cameron, 2014), compromising their ability to go onto further and higher education and seek employment. Although children in care have higher levels of special educational need, lower levels of GCSE grade 5 and higher levels of longer-term absenteeism (DfE, 2020), explanations about educational experience are complex.

Being in care itself may not explain why children and young people have low attainment or participation in education. A complex picture of childhood abuse, neglect or living in families experiencing poverty prior to being in care, could account for a disrupted education (Berridge, 2012; Welbourne and Leeson, 2012). Driscoll (2013) reflects this understanding and states that it is unsurprising that children and young people entering the care system struggle with education, given the reasons they become *looked after* in the first place. Rather than being in care, it is more likely that aspects of the system, notably changes in care placements resulting in moving school and higher periods of school absence, that account for those young people struggling in school (Jackson and Cameron, 2014; Sebba, et al., 2015). Furthermore, many aspects of the care experience are positive, with children at the beginning of their education and those in longer term placements comparing favourably with other children not in care (Sebba, et al., 2015). Whilst some of the problems arising from early childhood experience could be addressed by being in care, through additional support and resources, it would be difficult to distinguish whether low attainment is a result of early experiences or the impact of being *looked after*.

When thinking about the significance for young people leaving care, the timing of transition to independence can coincide with a combination of endings in personal relationships, organisations and care placements. This in turn could impact decisions about education, as the need to identify accommodation is prioritised over education choices (Hollingworth and Jackson, 2016). Uncertainty about emotional and financial support, being underestimated and a lack of practical support have also been identified as contributory factors to the low numbers of young people going onto higher education (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014; McNamara, Harvey and Andewartha, 2017). However, as previously noted, pre care experience could also be a significant factor, and as Berridge (2012) suggested, higher education might be unattainable due to a fragmented secondary school education.

When examining the issue of employment, young people leaving care cannot be disconnected from the wider picture for all young people. At the time of writing, the issues facing young people under the age of 25 include higher levels of unemployment than the wider population (Powell, Francis-Devine and Foley, 2021), transient positions, zero-hour contracts and uncertain employment status (Forth and Metcalf, 2014; Green, 2017). Whilst many young people not in care live with adverse life factors, the experience of being *looked after* brings additional challenges.

As well as the consequence of a fragmented education negatively impacting on young people seeking employment, other difficulties have been identified in older research. Uncertain housing can mean that providing permanent addresses to employers and certainty about location of home can impact on employer perceptions and decisions about work (Dixon, 2008). Finding a home and trying to establish networks can also impact on employment, due to the practical difficulties and the emotional impact of young people fending for themselves (Biehal et al., 1995). Dixon (2008) also found that the benefit system influenced decisions about the job market, with young people leaving care having to weigh up short term employment with the complexities of claiming benefits. Whilst these earlier studies predate later changes to leaving care support, young people continue to report confusion and difficulties in both claiming benefits and dealing with the repercussions of balancing work with benefit claims (Barnardo's, 2014).

Tackling Physical and Mental Health Issues and Other Social Problems

Health is not an issue that young people leaving care tend to prioritise over other aspects of their life (Liabo et al., 2017). However, where health issues are a concern, a poor transition from care could compound any existing problems (Stein and Dumarat, 2011). Whilst in care, children and young people are likely to experience general health issues in line with their peers, but to a greater extent (Mooney et al., 2009). With respect to the mental health, young people are more likely to experience mental ill-health and distress and use services than other young people (Melzter et al., 2003; Havlicek, Garcia, and Smith, 2013; Tarren-Sweeney and Vetere, 2014; Bazalgette, Rahilly and Trevelyan, 2015), highlighting the need to ensure that any move is carefully considered, which could be a factor in my study.

Other issues already outlined also interrelate with the young person's physical and mental health. For example, the ability to remain in employment or education, maintain a tenancy and relationships could be compromised for young people living with mental ill-health (Melzter et al., 2003; Stein and Dumarat 2011; Liabo et al., 2017). Seeking support once the

young person has left care is also more difficult as the help of carers and social workers to facilitate appointments and navigate waiting lists becomes limited or non-existent (Bazalgette, Rahilly and Trevelyan, 2015; Butterworth et al., 2016; Liabo et al., 2017).

Education, employment and health are common concerns for many young people as they move into adulthood. However, many young people leaving care experience additional factors in their lives, including higher levels of problematic substance use (Dixon, 2008; Baidawi and Mendes, 2010), involvement with the criminal justice system (Ministry of Justice, 2016) and early parenthood (King et al., 2014; Centre for Social Justice, 2015). None of these studies suggest that leaving care is inherently a predictor of these additional issues, instead the nature of a young person's individual circumstances mean that these complicating factors are symptomatic of other elements of their care experience and arguably create further obstacles to a smooth transition.

What Young People Said

Having outlined the messages from research *about* young people, this section focuses on some of the topics previously raised *by* young people about their transition from care. There were some commonalities between these two areas of research. For example, young people also stated problems already highlighted in this chapter about facing employment and education difficulties without support (Ofsted, 2012; Gilligan and Arnau-Sabatés, 2017; Brady and Gilligan, 2019; Furey and Harris-Evans, 2021). The following issues are other topics raised which are relevant to my study, giving a broader sense of the young people's experiences of transitioning from care in relation to decision-making, support and guidance.

As with other areas of research in this field, many of the studies conclude with a picture of young people navigating a multitude of personal and organisational difficulties. In her research, Rogers (2011) observed that despite asking open questions, young people more often spoke negatively about their experiences of leaving care. Further underlining the breadth of experiences, some studies have captured positive feelings and experiences where young people had optimistic ideas about moving out of foster care, associating adulthood with independent living and learning to drive (Liabo et al., 2017), feelings of preparedness (Adley and Jupp Kina, 2014) and pleasure when reconnecting with families (Duncalf, 2010).

Despite some aspects of hopeful and important changes for young people, in general emphasis was placed on the challenging aspects of the transition. Several studies highlighted how isolated and lonely young people felt once they had moved on (Duncalf,

2010; Rogers, 2011; Hiles et al., 2013; Baker, 2017; Liabo et al., 2017) and in Adley and Jupp Kina's (2014) study, young people talked about feeling overwhelmed by the experience. Arguably this could reflect many young people's experiences of moving out, however for young people leaving care, the option to 'boomerang' between independence and returning home (Tosi and Grundy, 2018) is not possible. Without this safety net, the need for support and social networks are accentuated, however young people felt that levels of support were an issue during this time. These perspectives are valuable when thinking about *Staying Put* as the decision appears to be irreversible. Furthermore, young people may not have had experience of living independently and may be reliant on their support network for guidance.

In the study by Hiles et al. (2013), focus groups of young men reflected on the balance needed between greater levels of independence and the support and guidance needed to make successful independent living achievable. The views of the young people in Hiles et al.'s study highlight the need to provide young people with a structure that enables them to take risks and develop confidence. Unfortunately, the young people in this and other studies talked about the gaps in support, underlining the constantly changing social networks and difficulty in making contact with workers (Hiles et al., 2013), lack of general support (Harris, 2009; Duncalf, 2010, Baker, 2017) and reliance on professional support as there were holes in their personal network (Berzin, Singer and Hokanson 2014).

Even if support is needed, sustaining a relationship with their social worker or carer may not be straightforward and could be complicated by complex feelings and associations with the transition from care. Some young people described feelings of abandonment by workers and carers once they had left care (Rogers, 2011) making it hard to reach out even if help was needed. For other young people barriers included the social worker's professional status as a block to form trusting relationships (Hiles et al., 2013), that social workers were perceived to be only concerned with their job (Rogers, 2011), or that previous experiences of workers put them off (Baker, 2017). Notably for young people in a Swedish study, they identified the need to talk to someone at all times, not just when things were difficult (Höjer and Sjöblom, 2014). Also underlined by one young person from Ayre et al.'s (2016) study about financial education who said that workers were only there when they were 'in the shit' (2016, p. 9). A more proactive stance is suggested by some young people, who note that workers need to interrogate the reasons why help might be rejected, and the need to ask more than once if support is needed (Adley and Jupp Kina, 2014). These studies about support are relevant to my study as they provide context about the actors that contribute when the young person is

making their decision about *Staying Put* and indicate some of the factors that might influence the participation and subjectivities of young people in this decision-making process

As well as support in the transition to leaving care being important to young people, the issue of preparation was also discussed across several studies. Typical factors raised were insufficient time to prepare (Hiles et al., 2014), focus on practical rather than emotional readiness (Baker, 2017) and an overall feeling that preparation was inadequate (Harris, 2009; Rogers, 2011; Baker, 2017) or inconsistent (Ayre et al., 2016). Planning was also viewed as a patchy experience, where young people felt they were subject to the planning process rather than taking an active lead (Dixon and Robey, 2014; Baker, 2017). Also highlighted was an absence of finance planning (Ayre et al., 2016) and a general feeling that pathway plans did not support their transition (Dixon and Robey, 2014; Hung and Appleton, 2016; Baker, 2017). The views about young people regarding preparation are key when thinking about *Staying Put* as I am interested in the young people's role in their decision which will also reflect any plans about their future.

Aside from support and preparation, the other element to feature in the literature is what young people say about accommodation after leaving their placement. Centrepoin't's report *From Care to Where?* highlighted the difficulties for young people navigating through the benefits system and housing market whilst leaving care, noting the lack of preparation, planning and understanding about living independently and not having enough money to rent privately (Gill and Daw, 2017, p. 14). Further issues relating to accommodation have been explored by other researchers, often repeating messages about having inadequate information and grasp of the systems. Some young people talked about the difficulties in finding stable accommodation, sharing how ill-informed they were about where to start (Ayre et al., 2016) and how difficult it was to find somewhere to live (Duncalf, 2010). Many studies focused on the practical aspects of finding somewhere to live, however for some young people the type of accommodation was the problem, feeling they were living in unstable or unsuitable places (Gill and Daw, 2017) or feeling unsafe and nervous about where they were living (Liabo et al., 2017).

The picture described by young people in this brief summary of their perspectives, highlights the gaps in support and understanding needed to face the changes they will experience as they leave care. It is apparent from the experiences of young people that they need a range of factors, including organisational support, as well as a safety net of care provided by a trusted adult. Sen's (2018) description of housing as a 'gateway issue' captures the systemic

nature of support young people need when leaving care (2018, p. 183). Meaning that without the security of a place to live, choices about day-to-day life are more likely to be problematic — however without the practical and emotional support and preparation, maintaining a tenancy to establish a sense of security may be hard to achieve. Delaying the move from care has been established as a possible solution to manage the young person's transition, making the move to other living arrangements detailed in Chapter 1 more aligned with the young person's timescales.

'Extending' Care?

Internationally, leaving care support has concentrated on short term interventions that have a practical focus (Mendes and Rogers, 2020). In part, it is likely that this focus is due to the fear of creating dependency on state support (Jones, 2019). The much quoted 'accelerated and compressed' description of leaving care coined by Stein (2016, p. v) has helpfully shed light on the need to rethink the abrupt ending of some young people's care experience. In response, a number of options for support beyond a care placement have developed alongside other independently organised solutions. As introduced in Chapter 1 and 2, the concept of extended care describes those arrangements that delay the transition from a care placement. These arrangements ensure that support for young people is based on individual needs rather than responding to chronological age or 'bureaucratic constructs' (McGhee, 2017, p. 4). In England the two main schemes associated with extended care are *Staying Put* as detailed in Chapter 1 and *Staying Close* for young people in residential care. The extended care agenda is not universally applied, as young people in residential care are not automatically afforded the same opportunity to remain in placement at the time of writing due to affordability (Narey, 2016), and the perceived risks of young people across a wide age range living in the same placement (Munro, 2019). Currently the *Staying Close* pilots are ending, and early evaluation work suggests that the scheme provided young people with greater stability, increased involvement in community activities and feeling happier over time (Dixon, Cresswell and Ward, 2020).

The research relating to extending a young person's stay in foster care is somewhat limited. North American research is broader as their extended care scheme has been in place since the *Fostering Connections Act* (2008). Similar to *Staying Put*, the North American policy enables young people are able to remain with their foster carer until they are 21. The North American scheme stipulates that only young people engaged with education, employment or living with a health issue are eligible (Courtney, 2019). Early studies about extended care by researchers from the United States of America suggests that young people had improved

outcomes in education, employment and were less likely to be involved in criminal behaviour (Courtney, 2015). Likewise, the evaluation from England's *Staying Put* pilot was generally positive and found that remaining with carers supported young people to maintain more stable relationships and stable housing (National Care Advisory Service, 2012).

As it has been previously noted, *Staying Put* and *Staying Close* mark a different approach for young people leaving care and as McGhee (2017) recognises, there needs to be a change in culture as well as policy to ensure that young people do not leave their placement prematurely. The number of young people using *Staying Put* and extended care schemes in other countries has only increased in limited numbers following their introduction, suggesting that there are ongoing issues with implementation. Although not the focus of my study, the experiences of young people could contribute to the understanding of the transition to *Staying Put*. The barriers identified in the existing literature centre on finance, information, young people's choice and organisational issues.

Financial Constraints

Funding has been identified as a problem for *Staying Put* from the outset, and levels of investment have been described as inadequate (The Fostering Network, 2018). Central Government has funded *Staying Put* through an implementation grant, and at the time of writing this funding has not been guaranteed beyond 2021 (Action for Children, 2020). Furthermore, ongoing funding cuts and savings targets jeopardise expansion or cementing the use of *Staying Put*. Action for Children's (2020) review of *Staying Put* found that successful schemes were problematic due to the financial implications of implementation. Managers in the review highlighted that budget cuts made it 'hard to maintain good practice' in promoting and running *Staying Put* (2020, p. 20), exacerbated by biennial funding announcements. In summary, changing practice and attitudes is arguably more difficult when funding is precarious and incrementally agreed.

As well as the funding arrangements between central government and local authority, there are more localised resource issues resulting from the change in policy. *Staying Put* arrangements have reduced the capacity in the foster carer network, as the turnover of young people has slowed (Donovan, 2018). With fewer available foster care placements, local authorities may be forced to widen their use of independent fostering agencies or residential care placements to meet local need. In turn, this may impact on the ability of young people to extend their time in placement, as there are no payments for independent fostering agencies to support *Staying Put* (Donovan, 2018). Funding was also identified as a

prohibitive factor for individual carers and young people. Regarding the take up of the scheme, young people were found to be prevented from *Staying Put* due to local policies and payment restrictions, and because of confusion and inconsistency about how the scheme could be used (Action for Children, 2020). Feelings of confusion and uncertainty were also introduced to the relationship as a result of money paid to carers by young people. Both foster carers and young people struggled with the financial aspects of their relationship where benefits, agreements and pay became routine topics to navigate (Action for Children, 2020).

Take Up and Other Barriers

In addition to finances, there were other factors identified in the available research explaining the barriers to young people engaging with an extended care option. Studies conducted in select states in North America acknowledged that not all young people will want to continue living with their carers (Berzin, Singer and Hokanson, 2014). For example, some young people were keen to leave, and saw moving on as a sign of freedom (Napolitano, Sulimani-Aidan and Courtney, 2015). However, this determination to move out might be as a result of issues with the system rather than their desire to be independent (McCoy, McMillen and Spitznagel, 2008). In other research young people stated that they did not remain with their carers, as they were uncertain about *Staying Put* and their situation and were not aware that they could stay (Goodkind, Schelbe, and Shook 2011). Uncertainty about *Staying Put* was further highlighted in Hiles et al.'s study (2014). Although not specifically about extended care, the focus group of young people in this study described the period leading up to their 18th birthday as being 'in limbo' (2014, p. 6) and that decisions about *Staying Put* were vague.

Whilst barriers to *Staying Put* and other options might be as a result of organisational issues and finances, the question of who is eligible for extended care was also identified in the research reviewed. For example, in England, the original pilot scheme for *Staying Put* included local authorities who expected young people to be in education and employment, while others only expected the need for an established relationship (Munro et al., 2012). Since the change in legislation, the only stipulation is that the young person needs to have been *looked after* as described in Chapter 1. Although guidance issued by the DfE (2015) and the Fostering Network (2017) aims to clarify eligibility — carers, young people and local authorities still report feeling unclear about the parameters (Action for Children, 2020). In particular there is uncertainty about young people who go to university and those involved with temporary opportunities away from the carer (Action for Children, 2020). In North

America where the eligibility is more restrictive, questions about what constitutes a health issue have been raised in relation to eligibility, including whether or not a substance misuse problem qualifies as a health issue (Stott, 2013).

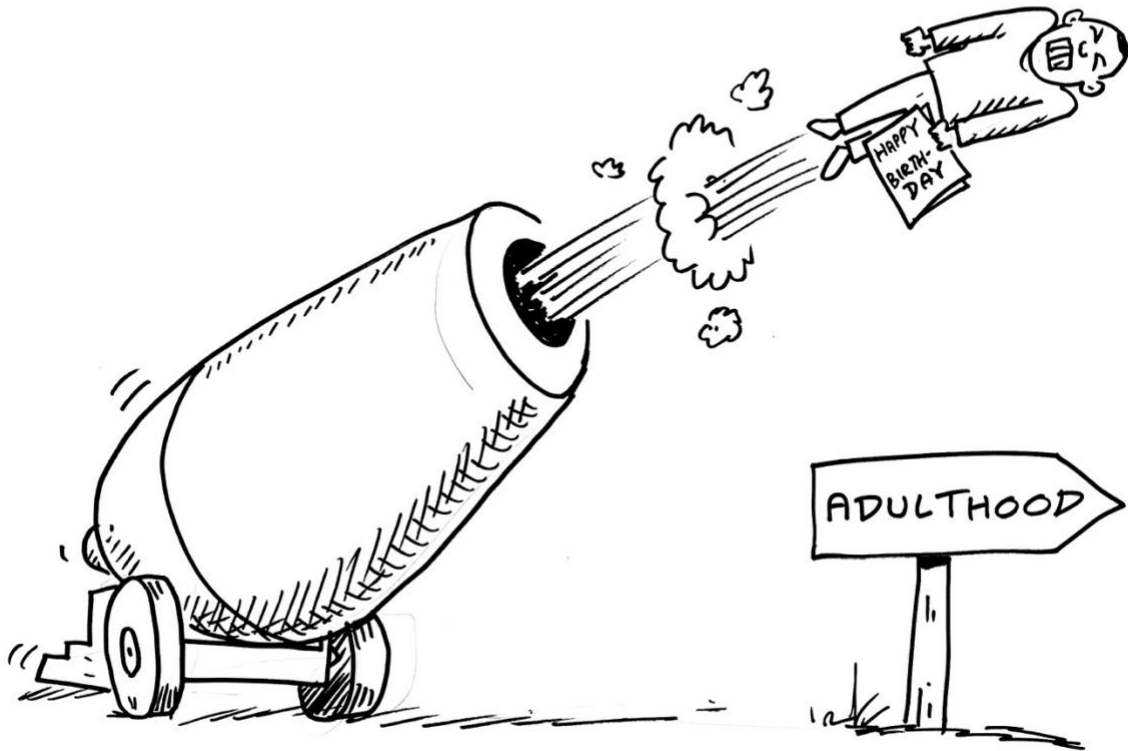
The final point highlighted by the research reviewed centres on the question of transition. Extending care is designed to elongate the transition for young people, however there is still an end point of any arrangement. In Jones' review of North American literature about extended care, she raises the question of what happens after the extension to the placement, suggesting that young people will still need help even after the extended period (Jones, 2019). Jones' conclusion illustrates that *Staying Put* and similar schemes are not in themselves a solution and only partially address the issues faced by young people leaving care.

Whilst the studies outlined in this section present a picture of the merits and outcomes of *Staying Put* and other extended care schemes, none of them develop a wider understanding of the young person's perspective of *Staying Put* leading up to their 18th birthday. My research aims to address this gap by talking with young people about their feelings and thoughts leading up to their decision about *Staying Put*.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented an overview of the two fields of research most relevant to my study. As explained in the introduction, viewing *Staying Put* through the context of decision-making, draws together two key aspects of the leaving care experience – the experience of leaving itself, and the young person's agency in the decision-making process. The chapter has presented a mixed picture of experiences with some sense that little has changed over the last 20 years. Researchers were consistent in identifying inconsistencies in both the leaving care experiences and the involvement in decision-making. There is however an evident change in young people's understanding about their rights to be involved and to also receive a different service. In the next chapter I set out the theoretical ideas that have informed my study.

Launched into adulthood at 18....



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Chapter 5: Theoretical Context

Chapter Introduction

Articulating a theoretical frame, also expresses the ontological and epistemological stance of the researcher. Setting out a research lens enables the reader to see the blueprint used to shape the methodological decisions made (Grant and Osanloo, 2015) and tools used to provide an overarching idea that 'organises many others' (Collins and Stockton 2018. p. 2). This chapter outlines three theoretical threads that have helped me think through the experiences of young people *Staying Put*. Although seemingly disparate, each element provides shape to how ideas and actions become constructed through discourse and discursive practices. The first thread is Foucault's conceptualisation of power and how his ideas about discursive practices play a role in the subjectification of young people. The second thread is the conceptualisation of childhood and how society comes to understand what childhood means. The third thread is about the discourses of participation and how these link to concepts of childhood.

The chapter starts with an overview of key theories of power, then moves on to outline Foucault's Ideas about power that are of particular relevance to my study and their application in social work. The chapter then sets out my rationale for using a Foucauldian understanding of power, outlining how this provides a useful tool when responding to the research questions. The chapter concludes with an overview of discourses of childhood and how they are useful to understand in the context of participation and the way we work with children and young people in social work practice.

Social Work and Power

Social work is a profession that intersects the private domain of people's lives with the structures and legislative frameworks of local, national and international government bodies and treaties. Through relationships, the application of duties and statutory powers are negotiated and applied at the invisible boundary between the social worker's professional and personal actions (Thompson, 2020). It is therefore accepted that issues of power are central to social work practice, whether this is through the mandate of a legal framework, working with people experiencing discrimination, or the less visible interactions between a professional and a person in crisis or need (Hasenfeld, 1987; Tew, 2006; Dominelli, 2018).

Social work education and practice is attentive to issues of power, to address the potential for oppressive and dehumanising consequences of any intervention. This recognition is evident in the profession's current value statements and frameworks that reflect an anti-oppressive stance (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018; British Association of Social Workers, 2018). As a result, using a theoretical framework focusing on power for this research, reflects personal practice experience and professional values, commonplace in doctoral research (Trafford and Leshem, 2008). In summary, this research focuses on decisions made by young people in public care, where issues of power are entangled within legal status, age and individual vulnerabilities, as discussed in Chapter 4. Using power as a theoretical lens is useful to explore operations of power, and the relevance of power manifestations to the decisions young people make.

Power – A Contested Concept

Despite awareness of potential power imbalances between service users and professionals, there is a lack of agreement about the nature of power, and a lack of clarity to offer a consistent shape to any discussion (Tew, 2006). Lukes (2009) also noted an absence of cohesion in discussions and referred to power as a contested concept that can lead to a lack of a clearly articulated definition. In itself this disparity allows for the coexistence of different understandings which could be beneficial to generate multiple strands of thinking, however, Tew (2006) suggests the absence of consensus complicates the analysis of power dynamics in practice. Therefore, it is necessary to establish which explanation of power forms the theoretical basis of this research, in order to uncomplicate the discussion. The following section sets out the key, albeit contrasting, perspectives considered as possible approaches and concludes with my rationale for the use of Foucault's work to explore the young people's experiences.

Typologies of Power

There are numerous conceptualisations of power, underlining how 'central' it is to an understanding of the operation of society (Haugaard and Clegg, 2014, p. 1). Helpfully, Smith (2008), identifies four ways to categorise how power is described: *potential*, *possession*, *product* and *process*. His categorisation is used to set out the frameworks considered for this research.

Power as *potential* relates to the personal capabilities of an individual. The sociologist Parsons (1969) focused on the concept of agency in a political context, and rejected the idea that power was merely a coercive force (Haugaard and Clegg, 2014). His ideas centred on

the collective capacity of people to act in accordance with a shared set of values or community objective (Scott, 2006). Power, according to Parsons, becomes an integral tool to maintain social order and is a 'specific mechanism' that collectively binds legitimate concerns (1969, p. 308). This model presupposes that there is shared acceptance of the authority figure and subsequent legitimisation of exchanges of power (Smith, 2008). In summary Parsons (1969) argued that people give and withdraw power to political leaders in elections, demonstrating that power resides ultimately with members of society as a whole.

Parsons' functional understanding of power is not suitable for this research because, as Smith (2008) highlights, it is difficult to examine different power relations that could be at play. Specifically, the premise that interactions are founded on collective mutual aims, does not allow for analysis of different understandings or perspectives and recognition that the exercise of power could come from divergent positions. In contrast with approaches that view power as enabling social function, power can also be viewed as an entity possessed by a person or body of people, referred to by Smith (2008) as *possession* power.

Possession power, also described by Scott (2006, p. 31) as 'command' power, views the use of power through formal legitimated structures with particular interests. Power is understood to be located in people or organisations and used to maintain order and discipline through their decision-making and position (Smith, 2008). Through hierarchical structures, power is symbolic of the organisation or person, and their position authorises their right to exercise power. Two understandings of possession power were proposed by Hobbes an English philosopher in the 17th century and Weber, a German sociologist in the 19th century. Hobbes discussed a head of state using coercion to maintain order, whereas Weber focused on social structures, with power as a commodity to be taken or bestowed, presupposing that one individual has to relinquish power to empower another (Hindess, 1996). Other structural explanations of power associated with possession-based models lie in the tradition of some Marxist, anti-racist and Feminist interpretations, with means of production, white privilege or patriarchy as the site of legitimacy. For example, the Marxist philosopher Althusser argued that organisations exercise power through repressive or ideological bodies to maintain class order (Althusser, Jameson, and Brewster 2006).

Although structural understandings of power are often referred to in social work education (Smith, 2008), there are some issues in presuming that power is an entity located in the authority of one party, for example social workers. Dominelli (2002) argues that oppression as a result of state or organisational power is too simplistic and ignores the possibility that

people can be both oppressed and oppressive. Dominelli's point underlines why possession power has not been used in this research. Whilst structural issues of class, gender and/or race have implications for power and power relations, a dichotomy of power/powerlessness between social care professionals and young people would need to be assumed, which misses the complexity of the social worker/ service user relationship. In the analysis of the young person's decision, intersectional themes could be relevant, however I am focussing on the lived experience of each young person, rather than starting from a presumption of oppression.

The next category in Smith's (2008) typology is understanding power as a *product*. In Giddens' (1984) work about social reality, the sociologist suggested that power was not just a product of organisational structure or individual agency, instead it was the intersection between these elements that constituted power. Giddens' structuration theory proposed that individuals have the freedom to act, however they are also influenced by the structures in which they operate (Stones, 2014). Power is exercised and created by individuals, therefore individual agency has 'structural qualities, and the social structure is part of the human activity' (Sadan, 2004, p. 67). Power as *product* is therefore a dynamic interaction between organisation and the individual, underlined by Arendt (1970) who argued that a person or group's power is expressed and reinforced by a binding collective. She goes on to say that once the collective disperses the power is dissipated (Arendt, 1970).

Using Giddens' theory of structuration would enable an analysis of power relations between individuals and organisations. However, his theory is grounded in an understanding of individuals and less on how power can be exercised through structures and relationships, which might be significant when examining the context of the young person's decision-making. Smith (2008) also suggests that Giddens' explanation of power does not account for the level of awareness of individuals and how they have understood or interpreted a way of being, for example more positive uses of power.

The final category in Smith's typology is power as a result of *process*, where power is understood as being more fluid and dynamic. One example is Lukes' (2009) three dimensions of power, building on earlier work by Dahl (1957) and Bachrach and Baratz (1970) amongst others. Dahl (1957) regarded as a proponent of the first face of power, understood power to mean an expression of force between A and B. Characteristic of possession forms of power, A exerts power over B to achieve their ends. Criticism of Dahl's emphasis on overt and coercive interactions, was made by Bachrach and Baratz (1970) in

their development of the second face of power. Bachrach and Baratz (1970) considered how hidden expressions of power prevented particular issues coming to the fore, resulting in individuals either acting against their will or taking a decision they might not have reached independently (Scott, 2006). Lukes (2009) considered the two phases and developed his theory which challenged structural ideas and models focused purely on authority, political or behavioural positions (Downing, 2010). He set out three dimensions of power including open aspects such as decision-making, closed elements that occur behind doors through agenda setting mechanisms and the final insidious use of power that when exercised makes people act in ways that go against their best interests (Lukes, 2009).

Lukes' third dimension model offers a basis for the analysis of power in decision-making, however, he perceived power as conflictual and considered that individuals can act without an awareness of their motivations (Haugaard, 2009). Although a young person may make a decision without knowing why, adopting this theoretical model might not support an understanding of the experiences of young people as their understanding may not have resulted from conflict and it might be that the young person did not make a decision at all. Lukes' work might support an understanding about why a decision is reached, nevertheless the aim of this research is to explore how the decision is experienced, specifically the influences and nuances of the young person's relationships and understandings.

The ways of understanding power described so far, are well embedded in the traditions of social work education and practice. Whilst these frameworks can help social workers make sense of aspects of their work, there are limitations in viewing power as concrete or symbolic. The modes of understanding power discussed in this chapter, focus on specific aspects of power relations, with emphasis on ideas of power over individuals or groups contributing to an understanding that power is automatically concentrated in the hands of social work professionals and perceived bodies of power. Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield (2014) suggest that there needs to be a more critical consideration of established forms of knowledge in contemporary practice, including an exploration of practice that moves beyond established ways of thinking. Several other social work academics also argue that analytical tools used to explore social work need to reflect the changes in the practice, political and social landscape (Gilbert and Powell 2010; Featherstone and Green, 2012). Exploring alternative frameworks is not about 'erasing the past' but looking at new questions that arise from current practice (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014, p. 2). Re-examining power in this context requires a framework that considers our existing understandings, but also

encourages 'critical inquiry into knowledge and practice' (Chambon, 1999, p. 52). Foucault's ideas about power as a process, offers this framework.

Foucault – An Introduction

It is important to note that Foucault's work is not a coherent set of ideas that are easily applied. Not only did his thinking evolve over time but his concepts are dense, and his use of language is elliptical leaving it open to multiple meanings (O'Farrell, 2005). O'Farrell's (2005) suggestion that using Foucault can be a subjective process is helpful to think about, not to act as a caveat for potential flaws in the discussion, but in the context of social work practice, which is bound by perception and subjectivity (Thompson, 2020). This means that using any framework is about giving shape to the thinking rather than using it as a tool to prove or disprove a chosen model. Therefore, it is useful to adopt the approach recommended by Foucault (1974, p. 523), who suggested that his work should be used as a 'tool-box', and flexible to the needs of the user. Nevertheless, there is some critique in using Foucault's ideas as an analytical device. For example, Hardy and Jobling (2015) suggested that an exploration of 'how' rather than 'why', can overlook matters of causality. However, my study did not aim to identify causes of a young person's decision to stay or leave; instead, the aim was to explore the experience of the decision and examine mechanisms of power in this process. Using a Foucauldian lens is helpful to think about how this expression of power contributes to an understanding of the young person's decision-making experience.

Foucault on Power

Even though Foucault (1982) asserted that power was not his primary concern, he explored the impact of power relations and how knowledge developed in societal contexts.

Specifically, Foucault was interested in the 'petty dominations and larger battles' (Rabinow, 1984, p.6) between the individual and the state, organisations, and the construct of sexuality and mental ill health. Whilst tracking the pattern of Foucault's ideas is problematic, thematic strands relating to sovereignty, discipline, biopower and governmentality do evolve (Prado, 2009).

In his early work, Foucault explored the way in which sovereignty was perceived as a source of power, referring back to the work of Hobbes, mentioned earlier in this chapter. He focused on the ideas of progressive sovereignty characterised by a controlling force exerted by people or institutions with birth rights or inherited authority (O'Farrell, 2005). Foucault proposed that society functioned through people's acceptance to concede some of their own rights and give up their possessions, for the benefit of the state (Schirato, Danaher and

Webb, 2012). Sovereign power becomes visible through rituals and processes that assert the sovereign's authority. For example, public punishment becomes politically symbolic, whereby injuries are physically and visibly inflicted (Foucault, 1975). Here the authority figure is using public acts to reinforce that they are responsible for the life or death of the people (Rouse, 2007). In his lecture *Society Must be Defended*, Foucault argued that the theory of sovereignty was evident in feudal societies in the Middle Ages, and whilst these societies remained, this understanding of power became inadequate (Foucault, 1976). Foucault argued that to understand power there was a 'need to cut off the King's head' (1980, p. 121) in order to explore new mechanisms that regulated life, conduct and people's bodies (Foucault, 1979). Seeing the analysis of sovereign power as limited, he began to explore the role of disciplinary and regulatory power relations (Rouse, 2007).

From Sovereignty to Biopower

Foucault suggested that whilst structures and patterns of sovereign power endured, the use of public injury in the name of a monarch had diminished (Downing, 2010). He argued that a new disciplinary power operated by making people permanently visible. Rather than marking people during specific visible rituals, such as open forms of chastisement, a permanent visibility allowed power to be exercised more fluidly (Rouse, 2007). Foucault suggested that this visibility is underpinned by ongoing recording of what individuals do and say, describing it as 'a direct and continuous relation of writing to the body' (1975, p. 50). For example, mechanisms such as census data, records of employment, registration of crimes and health records all form an account of who we are and what we do. In turn this enables the intervention of disciplinary power as it is based on a perpetual state of coercive pressure before a crime or transgression has even occurred (Downing, 2010). As a consequence of disciplinary power, people are not governed by the threat of death, instead they fall into patterns of behaviour that are regulated and ordered.

By expanding the 'dimensions' of power (1982, p. 209), Foucault emphasised how power becomes established and sustained within social and economic frameworks of discipline and regulation (Epstein, 1999). In this phase of his work Foucault argued that 'power is everywhere: not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (1976b, p. 93). He built on the idea of distributed mechanisms of power in his identification of biopower and biopolitics, meaning that power is dispersed through social bodies to discipline and order society (Schirato, Danaher and Webb, 2012). Biopower is a normalising power and operates to manage the administration of life and biological function (O'Farrell, 2005). In contrast to the individual concerns of disciplinary power, biopower regulates the whole

population as a 'political problem' (1976, p. 245). In order to do this, governments and organisations use specific technologies, processes, relationships and behaviours to carry out the function of social ordering (Rose, 1999). Through application of these biopolitical mechanisms, technologies serve to promote conduct and cohesion where the individual is engaged in continual processes that self-manage and self-regulate (Dean, 2010). Viewing power as a measure to promote the welfare of a population marked a change in his perspective about the nature of power relations, underlined by Foucault's assertion that '...if power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think that one would be brought to obey it?' (1984, p. 61).

The successful exertion of biopower to regulate people's lives through individual interactions and exchanges is subtle, and underlines Foucault's thinking that power is not wielded (Gaventa, 2003), instead power is relational, existing in actions (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014). Foucault sees the operation of power as part of a strategy of negotiation and struggle (Rouse, 2007). Therefore, power can only operate where there is capacity for the recipient to react and resist (Schiato, Danaher and Webb, 2012), not recognised in earlier understandings of power situated within a sovereign state. To summarise, biopower and biopolitics can be used to protect society from people who are outside of social norms, under the guise of protecting everyone's physical and moral well-being.

Governmentality and the 'Subject'

Each stage of Foucault's thinking takes on a distinct position and rarely refers to previous work (Gutting, 2007). However, his assertion that power was not a product of war remained, and Foucault continued to think about co-production of power as his ideas developed (Rouse, 2007). In the latter stage of his work, including his lecture series in 1978–79, Foucault moved on from the language of biopolitics to talk about government rationality, which he referred to as governmentality. In Foucault's work, *Security, Territory, Population and The Birth of Biopolitics*, he focused on '... power which has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument' (1978, pp. 107–8).

Foucault built on his argument that power is exercised in a productive rather than punitive way, and through specific activity will shape, guide, or affect the conduct of people (Oksala, 2013). The term governmentality refers to this construction, articulation and management of a population (Muller, 2017). As noted previously in this chapter, people are instructed and encouraged to govern themselves and power is not discharged from a central point of

authority, it is distributed among the population. Behaviour and cohesion are achieved in a non-directed way, as the focus is on conducting the conduct of people (Oksala, 2013), conduct meaning both the act of leading and directing, but also in the moral sense of how people behave (Dean, 2010). Foucault suggested that self-governance will rationally guide people to be ordered and therefore clear about how things are or ought to be. Thereby, in order to be managed in this way, people need to be defined by a state's mechanisms which are designed to make people known and visible, in order to become a subject (Oksala, 2013). For example, organisational administrative processes and categorisations, such as employment contracts or job titles shape how people work or behave in society and how individuals are defined by their characteristics, reflecting the neoliberal techniques discussed in Chapter 3.

Foucault identified a system for his evolving interest in subjectivity and subject, as 'modes of objectification' (1982, p. 777), where aspects of state procedures and techniques contribute to the transformation from 'human beings into subjects' (1982, p. 777). The first aspect is use of the 'status of sciences' (Foucault, 1982, p. 777), meaning language and inquiry associated with human sciences and economic theory when describing the self. For example, a child becomes known or 'subject' through multiple procedures and measures including personal child health records, school tests and exams and their parents' socio-economic situation.

The second 'mode of objectification' relates to the way individuals take on 'particular subject positions' including divisions within themselves or from others that come through interactions and discourses (Woodward, 2002, p. 89). A person will draw on or be defined by established categorising language and terminology to locate themselves in relation to other people, resulting in power operating to create distinct groups (Gilbert and Powell, 2010), for example a *looked after* child or young person. To illustrate further, Foucault used the example of the distinction between ill and well, or mad and sane (1982, p. 778). In summary the *subject* is not a pre-existing entity whose decisions are made by self-interested concerns. Instead, Foucault argued that power relations transform the self into a subject (Gordon, 1991) and particular types of self are politically driven (Foucault, 1979). One example is the Central Government funded *Troubled Families* programme, where help is targeted at families facing multiple problems including unemployment, criminal and anti-social behaviour, and low school attendance (Hargreaves et al., 2019). Through their categorisation of what constituted *troubled*, the government defined how identified families become known and what was needed to transform them out of their *troubled* status.

The final 'mode of objectification' is how human beings turn themselves into a subject (Foucault, 1982, p. 778). When talking about subject Foucault means being both attached to an identity through self-awareness and being controlled or 'subjected' (Cremonesi et al., 2016). This complex position of control and action is a result of the interplay between different technologies that can modify and alter the subject (Foucault, 1982). Foucault identified four types of technology: production, sign systems, power and self (1988, p. 17), and identified power and self as being fundamental to the constitution of subject (1982). Therefore, people become constituted as subjects in particular times and places, through the discursive practices in which they participate, including the relationships and networks that they use and inhabit (Foucault, 1982).

Returning to Power

In addition to the expansion of his ideas about subject and subjectivity, Foucault returned to the concept of power/knowledge in the later period of his work and underlined the relationship between governmentality and the construction of knowledge. In earlier work, Foucault argued that discourse is a vehicle through which subjects are constituted and knowledge established (Gaventa, 2003). The inseparable relationship between power and knowledge gave rise to the concept of power/knowledge reflecting the enmeshed nature of these elements. Foucault was interested in how knowledge became established, recognising that no body of knowledge could be formed without social practices and systems to support it (O'Farrell, 2005). The significance of knowledge in examining issues of power, is the relationship with conceptions of truth, and Foucault argued that truth can be presented in ways that appear apolitical but are not; instead, they are part of the 'art of government' (Hindess, 2005, p. 393). For example, Lemke (2001) explained that a government identifies and enables a problem to be addressed, whilst also suggesting how and why the concern could be managed. In doing so power is expressed by both identifying what is problematic, but also how the issue is processed, addressed and understood. Whilst the solution might seem neutral, knowledge presents the governed reality (Osaka, 2013).

In summary, Foucault's work identifies distinct manifestations of power relevant to a particular historical period. Observing the role of the judiciary and symbols of state in feudal societies, Foucault challenged this understanding of power as society progressed into the late eighteenth century. He then moved on to identify discipline as a way to exercise power through the bureaucracy and administration of the state. In the final phase of his work, Foucault recognised that although sovereign and biopolitical mechanisms continued, governmentality operates to maximise the potential of subjects and utilise individual

capacities to self-govern instead of exerting control and discipline for its own sake (Dean, 2010). As it was noted at the beginning of this section, Foucault's ideas are complex and at times open to contradictory interpretations (O'Farrell, 2005), so the next section addresses some of the criticisms of his work, before returning to the relevance of his work to social work and this study.

Whilst Foucault's conceptualisation of power offers a useful framework to explore the decision to stay put, there are some contentions that need to be acknowledged. Although his work is critiqued in multiple disciplines, the following section focuses on some of the main issues identified.

The first tension is that of applying a Foucauldian lens to a social work study underpinned by ideas of participation. As noted in Chapter 5, social work practice is founded on established concepts of power and agency based on ideas of possessional power (Smith, 2008) and humanist traditions of autonomy and self-determination (Chambon, 1999). A number of writers suggest that Foucault's work does not support an understanding of agency, relevant to an exploration of the young people's experiences about decision-making, as it sits 'uneasily' with an established social work narrative of liberation (Garrett, 2018, p. 182). Bevir's (1999, p. 67) reading of Foucault concluded that the 'individual subject is not an autonomous agent', underlined by Webb (2014, p. 130) who refers to Foucault's perception of individual freedom as 'a fallacy'. These readings are based on Foucault's assertion that the subject is a social construct and as summarised by Bevir, an individual cannot be autonomous as they are unable to have 'experiences or exercise his reason outside all social contexts' (1999, p. 67). This interpretation would suggest that young people are unable to express any individual or independent thought outside of the discursive practices that define and shape their experiences.

In his later work however, Foucault underlines that his interest is in the possibility of options in human actions (Power, 2011). In *The Subject and Power*, Foucault emphasised the role of power as being both positive and oppressive. He refers to power within relationships as 'reciprocal... less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation' (1982, p. 791). Therefore, there is scope for people to challenge and evolve within the existence of power relations, underlining that the question of agency is more complex than traditional understandings of being liberated or being oppressed, and that resistance is possible.

The application of a Foucauldian lens in this research recognises that established ideas of autonomy and self-determination are constructed and formed by discursive practices, meaning that any examination of young people's decision-making has to be seen in the context of their experiences. In her work about children and young people's participation Hartung (2017) argues that ideas of agency and participation are themselves limiting to our understanding of their operation due to their discourses being 'embedded within complex cultural, social, political and economic processes' (p. 53). She goes on to say that children and young people's decisions will correspond with these established discourses and 'close down' ways of understanding the dynamics between the subject and wider social structures (Hartung, 2017, p. 54). This interpretation forms that basis of my application whereby the idea of autonomous decision-making is possible but needs to be seen within the boundaries of how agency, participation or decision-making are understood.

As reflected upon earlier, a fundamental issue with using Foucault's ideas is the nature of the work itself. Described as 'contradictory' (Downing, 2010, p. ix) and 'problematic' (Garrett, 2018b, p.469), Foucault's work is not a coherent corpus, resulting in sometimes conflicting interpretations (O'Farrell, 2005). Drawing on his original text in translation and the vast Foucault inspired oeuvre, presents researchers with a seemingly unworkable task. However, Allen (2012) suggests that a more 'piecemeal' approach is justified, recommending that a Foucauldian lens should not be used as a coherent blueprint against which an overarching interpretation can be judged. Therefore, in this study, the most relevant of Foucault's ideas have been selected as useful tools to aid the analysis of power relations, rather than a practice model through which solutions can be found.

Foucault ideas have also been perceived as relativist and passive, particularly when examining power relations in sensitive or politically charged settings. In Fitzpatrick's (2002) consideration of the democratisation of the welfare state, he suggested that Foucauldian theorists tend to observe power relations from a distance, taking the stance of a 'foreign correspondent'; objectively reporting an incident (2002, p. 14). This is also noted by McNay (1994) in her work exploring the relationship between Foucault and feminism. She noted a relativist logic in his work which appears to create distance from a political context. Garrett (2019) also argues that if social workers take this remote or distant position in their analysis of power, specifically in relation to the oppression of individuals or groups, it marks an abdication of their professional responsibilities, citing the International Federation of Social Work's aims of protest and solidarity. He goes on to say that the 'coolly detached' discussions about governmentality, imply that exploration of an issue occurs outside of the

issue itself (Garrett, 2019, p. 495). Consequently, he argues that a reluctance to state a position by being a passive onlooker, nullifies the ability of social workers to assess whether an element of practice is progressive or not, for example whether funding cuts or service decommissioning is justified (Garrett, 2019). In my study the question of objectivity is of concern as my aim is not to compare or comment on whether a young person's decision to stay put is right or wrong. There is no truth to be uncovered, instead patterns of experience are explored to develop understanding.

Further critique levelled at Foucault's work relates to his inattention to matters of equity and equal opportunity, specifically to how 'social structures provide different groups with different opportunities for agency' (Bevir, 1999, p. 77). McNay (1994) suggests that Foucault's undifferentiated conceptualisation of power, leaves questions about experiences of oppression. Applying a Foucauldian position can create a conflict when trying to understand how power is expressed, as there is no specific explanation for women's experiences (McNay, 1994). McNay's argument could apply to other marginalised groups, in this case young people leaving the care system, where structural or material disadvantage may be an issue (Garrett, 2018). Furthermore Smith (2011) also questions Foucault's focus on softer exchanges of power rather than more brutal methods of maintaining order. Smith gives the example of the role of the shepherd who on the surface is seen as benign and cajoling of their flock, when their aim might be more malevolent (2011, p.11). This example underlines that caring and nurturing of the herd is not necessarily about their well-being, instead it is to fatten them up for a better financial return when sold at market. Paying attention to wider explanations of oppression is not the primary aim of this research, instead I aim to examine the power relations whilst making the decision about *Staying Put*, rather than trying to explain the power differentiations in a broader social context.

In summary, Foucault's work is not beyond reproach, but some of his ideas provide a useful way of illuminating the power relations that operate between young people and their support network. Foucault's thinking about power can offer different nuance and insight into social work as the following studies demonstrate.

Foucault and Social Work

The tendency to focus the negative expression of power is commonly discussed in social work literature, which Tew (2006) described as 'binaries of oppression' where one party has power over another (p. 37). However, application of a Foucauldian understanding of power to social work challenges the view that power is symbolically represented by the social

worker or the local authority and instead power can be identified in the way organisations and individuals operate. Chambon (1999) argued that Foucault's ideas can support an understanding of how social work practice develops and how power evolves through discursive practice, which moves beyond the individualisation of power. By looking at social work using Foucault's theoretical framework, Chambon (1999) suggests we 'unsettle' long held assumptions and those factors that reinforce our thinking (p. 52) about power and how power operates.

A number of writers have examined different aspects of social work practice using Foucault's work (Parton, 1991, 2012; Healy, and Mulholland, 1998; Fook, 2002; Curran, 2010; Garrity, 2010; Angel, 2016). Gilbert and Powell (2010) applied Foucault's concept of governmentality to explore the construct of expertise and tensions between professionals and service users. They highlighted the use of social policy as a way to reinforce the construction of people through surveillance techniques and use of professional discretion, concluding that Foucault offers a vehicle to critically analyse neo-liberal means of practice. Foucault's thinking about surveillance also features in work by Chase (2010) and Keddell (2014). In both studies the writers discuss the role surveillance plays in knowledge production about families (Keddell, 2014) and how oversight of young people seeking asylum becomes normalised and consequently acts as an instrument 'of power and control' (Chase, 2010, p. 2064).

In other research Foucault's concepts have been applied to understand how power relations operate in social work practice, helping to frame the expression of power in a nuanced context. In their research, Winter and Cree (2016) looked at home visiting as discursive practice. They identified social work visits as a strategy of knowledge/power and described how power is 'embedded' within human relationships and practices (Winter and Cree, 2016, p. 1176). Power relations were also central to McGregor, Devaney and Moran's (2019) study about placement stability in Ireland. They identified sites of power at a meso, macro and micro levels, based on the perceptions of power by young people in foster care, concluding that greater recognition of young people's views and 'power talk' is needed (McGregor, Devaney and Moran, 2019, p. 11).

In these examples writers have selected aspects of Foucault's thinking to guide their analysis of particular practice issues. Although none of the studies are unique in their respective subject matter, each author explained that applying a Foucauldian lens enabled an exploratory framework to question the nature of practice itself, underlining Chambon's (1999) assertion that using Foucault's work can dismantle existing ideas and ways of

thinking about established practice. From the literature reviewed there is very little research using Foucault's work to explore leaving care, highlighting the value of exploring this subject using a Foucauldian lens.

Applying Foucault to the Staying Put Decision

Within this final section the rationale for the use of Foucault's conceptualisation of power is summarised, whilst making links between Foucault's approach to interrogating ideas within a social constructivist paradigm. The issue at the heart of this research is a young person's decision-making at the end of their formal care placement. Whilst research about leaving care has increased over time, the use of Foucault's ideas enables further examination of how leaving care, and the corresponding decision-making, is experienced. As Winter and Cree (2016) state, it is through problematising ways of knowing that alternative understandings can be highlighted (p. 1176).

Taking Healy's (2000) argument that practice cannot exist outside of relationships of power, examining the decision-making about *Staying Put* requires thinking outside of binary understandings of power and powerlessness as noted earlier in this chapter. Accepting that social work is established through discourses (Healy, 2000), underlines the importance of examining how power is experienced by young people. To comprehend power, Foucault argued that it is necessary to understand what is said and not said (Schirato, Danaher and Webb, 2012). However, this is not to focus on language itself, but the mechanisms, procedures and processes combining to form 'rules of formation' (Foucault, 1972, p. 59). In a social work context, rules of formation relate to what is known/discourse or what is not known/non-discursive practices and exploring knowledge flow could provide insight into how the young person's interactions are both interpreted and used.

In my study, examination of what is said, who said it and how terminology is constructed, supports the analysis of how power relations operate in the decision-making to stay put. Focus on the relational exchanges between the young person and their network through their communication could help to locate power exchanges within a broader practice context. How young people are made *subject* through these constructions, supports greater thinking about their experience of decision-making in context. Summarised by Foucault, studying the 'body of anonymous, historical rules' located in a specific 'social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area' facilitates a better understanding of the conditions in which people are able to speak out (1972, p.51).

Earlier in this chapter, criticisms of Foucault's tendency to take a relativist stance were viewed as being avoidant and passive (Garrett, 2019). However, using Foucault to explore the young person's decision-making responds to wider philosophical questions about what is known about the world. Rather than looking for causal explanations, his interest was in discursive practices within a specific period and therefore how they are understood at the time. In previous chapters I have set out the background for this study in recognition that the young people's experiences need to be seen in context. As discussed later in Chapter 6, my study is underpinned by a social constructivist position and Foucault's thinking about how situations are understood and what types of knowledge gain hold (Winter and Cree, 2016, p. 1176) complements research about people's lived experiences.

Rather than use Foucault rigidly to analyse the data, the concepts of power/knowledge, discourse and subject will be drawn on when discussing the themes identified. My research aims to focus on the experience and subjectivity of the young people making and explore the decision about *Staying Put* as a process not an outcome or event. By problematising this element of the leaving care experience, the intention is to examine what young people say but also question the process of decision-making, for example whether or not the decision is a decision at all. A Foucauldian lens is critically applied as part of the discussion in Chapter 10 about the experience of making the decision to stay put.

What Does it Mean to be a Child?

The next section of this chapter turns to the question of how children and young people are defined and understood, which is significant for my research in two ways. First the relationship between the construct of childhood and adulthood impacts on epistemological and methodological choices about the young people's involvement as participants (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). Second, how discourses about children and young people determines the extent to which their rights are understood and carried out through policy and practice. How childhood is understood relates to both the shape of social policy identified in Chapter 2 and the practice of social workers when involving children set out in Chapter 4. Although the young people in my study were talking about a period at the end of their childhood discussed in the introduction, the legal definition set out in the *Children Act 1989* regards them as children until they have turned 18. Foucault's thinking about the role of discourse is useful to explore the ways that children as *subjects are* transformed through ongoing relationships and practices in a moment in time — apparent in the historical depictions detailed in the next section.

A (very) Brief History

Kellett (2014) advises caution when tracing the biological or sociological perspectives of childhood, stating that ascribing positions to a particular timeframe is an oversimplification of the issues (2014, p. 15). Nevertheless, recognising historical constructions of childhood can illuminate patterns of regulation and response, particular to a child's role in society at the time (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). Often founded on Eurocentric and heteropatriarchal ideals, conceptualisations of being a child have evolved, with some arguing that *childhood* did not exist in the Middle Ages and only became recognisable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Ariès, 1962). Although criticised for confining his study to middle and upper classes and depictions in art, Ariès' work contested the universal understandings of childhood and prompted further critical analysis about children's experiences (Heywood, 2001).

In the 17th century, children were thought to be born with original sin that discipline and education could correct (Hendrick, 2015). Images of 'anarchistic' children who lacked sufficient parental control (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998, p.11) were understood as a dangerous force, which unchecked would threaten social order and well-being (Hendrick, 2015). However, by the late 17th and 18th century, the menace of an unchecked child was countered by more romanticised depictions, although education was still considered key to their transformation. Two influential ideas came from Locke and Rousseau, with Locke (1689) suggesting that children were born as blank slates and Rousseau (1762) placing emphasis on a child's natural goodness. In both cases, education and experience were necessary in protecting the child's innocence to help them become responsible adults. However, images of innocence where children were born with 'unspoilt purity' were idealised (Garlen et al., 2020, p. 1). Such depictions did not reflect the experiences of children in working class families, who were employed and contributing to the household income (Kellett, 2014).

Moving into the 19th century, idealised views of childhood became a 'solidly rooted' paradigm within middle class society (Kellett, 2014, p. 17). Education had become key in marking progress, offering a framework for childhood to start and end through educational attainment (Postman, 1994). Opportunities for children in working class families starkly contrasted these idyllic perceptions and use of child labour during periods of industrial growth highlighted misguided perceptions of a universal childhood (Goldson, 1997). Nevertheless, the desire to protect children and maintain the innocence of childhood became an enduring discourse, evident in gradual changes to employment and education policy (James and James, 2004).

School became instrumental in reshaping children's lives from worker to pupil, creating a foundation for a national model of childhood (Hendrick, 2015). In addition to the prominence of education, by the late 19th and early 20th century the fields of psychology, sociology and psychiatry were also expanding to examine human experiences (Goldson, 2004). Through education and these developing social sciences, knowledge and expertise about children began to develop, which formed a combined picture of childhood (Garlen et al., 2020). Professionalising childhood through application of knowledge created a network of organisations concerned with the transformation of children into adults (Goldson, 2004). Foucault (1981) argued these mechanisms were used to *know* a subject and ensure that childhood became 'reinforced and renewed by whole strata of practices' (1981, p. 55).

By the Second World War childhood came to symbolise the future regeneration of society (Kellett, 2014) and ensuring the protection of children imperative to economic growth and prosperity of a post war country (Fox Harding, 1997). Protective narratives of childhood continued, and co-occurred with other interpretations, creating a 'multiplicity' of contemporary discourses (Prout, 2005, p. 144). Singular ideas about children as 'biological entities' were replaced by socially constructed understandings that moved in and out of favour depending on the issue in question (Wyness, 2000, p. 22.). These multiple discourses are apparent during the 1980s and 1990s, where children were seen as either the 'cause and product of wider social disorder' (Goldson, 2004, p. 38) or vulnerable to the outside world (James and James, 2004). The interchange of vulnerability, responsibility and agency can be seen in descriptions of children in care and young people leaving care. A child in care can simultaneously be described as 'deprived and disadvantaged' (Sen, 2018, p. 1) and as a 'risky young offender' (Evans, 2017, p. 25).

Disappearance and Adolescence

For some writers the question of childhood became obsolete as society evolved, fearing that social progress eroded this phase. In his foundational work *The Disappearance of Childhood*, educationist Postman argued that technologies like print and television blurred the lines between childhood and adulthood, stating that 'everything is for everybody' (1994, p. 76). He argued that opening up areas of society that were previously unknown to children was instrumental to their loss of innocence. Binary and linear understandings of child to adulthood have also been recently recognised as insufficient. The terms youth, adolescent or teenager used across different disciplines, intersect traditional child and adulthood phases but continue to reflect the dichotomous portrayals of innocence or menace (Roberts, 2012). Seen as a period of transition, this interim zone is neither childhood nor adulthood and

spans an awkward period where protection and risk-taking overlap (Kelly, 2006). Arnett (2015) argues for the blurring of edges between child and adulthood by framing the years between 18 and 25 as *emerging adulthood*. Redefining a space between child and adulthood emphasises the need to move away from suppositions that chronological changes automatically equip someone to navigate adulthood — assuming competence comes with age. Although Arnett's theory promotes greater awareness about transitions between child and adulthood for young people leaving care (Mann-Feeder, 2019) it has yet to proliferate into wider practice application with established developmental schemas continuing to shape a child's progress.

Despite alternative perspectives from writers including Postman and Arnett, childhood has continued to be thought of as a distinct phase, with emphasis on a child's vulnerability and unfinished state that moves between becoming and being an adult (Uprichard, 2008). The popularity of this construct is founded on adult conceptions of how childhood should be, rather than a child's lived experience (Kehily, 2004) which is then transformed by knowledgeable adults (Cook, 2020). Although contemporary ideas of childhood are contentious, Smith suggests that children are predominantly defined 'in terms of their relationships with adults and adulthood' (2010, p.181), evident in the use of chronological social markers to permit or prevent children's access to supposed adult roles. Therefore, childhood operates as an apprenticeship for adulthood dependent on biological, cognitive and emotional developmental stages (Mayall, 2000). These incremental steps are based on accepted and established child developmental knowledge, which Mayall (2000) argues is a 'political enterprise' (220, p. 247). Consequently, the subjectivity of childhood is produced in social and political spaces through different forms of knowledge, highlighting the circumstantial nature of a child's experience. One such context is a child's rights to participate, which is now discussed.

Article 12 and the Language of Participation

The discourses discussed in the previous section determine whether children and young people's rights are executed, and in my research how social workers and foster carers approach the involvement of young people's decision-making. Positioning children as objects of concern (Cashmore, 2002) contrasts with more rights-based perspectives that recognise children as rights holders (Smith, 2010). Attempts to assert the latter understanding are founded on Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child* which specifies that children should have the opportunity to 'be heard in judicial

and administrative procedures' that affect them (United Nations, 1989). Childhood researchers have increasingly 'celebrated' the changes in approach to the involvement of children and young people resulting from Article 12 and focused on a newfound agentic child narrative (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 98). Lundy (2007), however recognised, that there are barriers to the implementation of Article 12 and developed a model of participation highlighting the conditions needed to ensure a child's involvement. Figure 4 shows her model with the checklist of 'space, voice, audience and influence' which recognises the interrelated elements of participation and the need to uphold other parts of the UN Convention to discharge Article 12 (Lundy, 2007, p. 938).



Figure 4: Everyday Spaces Participation Model (Lundy, 2007, cited in Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015))

Lundy's work highlighted the shortfall in monitoring the effectiveness of Article 12, still evident more than a decade on. Recognising that whilst the UN Convention sets out a mandate for participation, gaps between rhetoric and practice are an ongoing issue (Collins, Rizzini, and Mayhew, 2020, p. 296).

Much of the terminology relating to participation is also associated with broader concepts of agency, involvement and decision-making, where participation is often a 'proxy for agency' (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 98). The concept of agency can be problematic, and Gallagher (2019) suggests that it is necessary to move beyond the idea that it is something that a child either has or doesn't have and think about how agency is expressed and to what effect. He argues that notions of agency that 'liberate children from structural constraints' deny the relationship between established patterns, responses and conventions (Gallagher, 2019, p. 197). Gallagher's paper highlights the need to think about the context of terminology and how language can obscure how power operates in children and young people's lives.

In a similar way to agency, participation also has multiple meanings and can refer to involvement in political and public matters as an expression of citizenship or democratic responsibility (Davis and Hill, 2006), and is also a core neoliberal ideal where choice, autonomy and involvement are strategies for conducting the self (Smith, 2012). Participation has also been used as a catch all term for any process where a child or young person shares their opinion (Flekkøy and Kaufman, 1997). Consequently, participation's wide-ranging scope means that pinning down what it does and does not include is complex and imprecise (Sinclair, 2004). Notably, the literature contrasts participation with the act of decision-making, which is discussed in the context of making choices (O'Sullivan, 2011), using skills and judgement (Taylor, 2017) and 'multi-layered negotiation and interpretation of knowledge and evidence' (O'Conner and Leonard, 2014, p. 1806). These understandings of involvement present challenges to children and young people who have a right to be heard but may not be viewed as capable enough to determine an outcome. Vis, Holtan and Thomas (2012) also note that the relationship between decision-making and participation can be problematic, as decision-making starts by defining a problem and ends when a conclusion is reached. They went on to assert that in statutory practice, the problem may not be mutually agreed due to the involuntary nature of the relationship or the social worker's perception of what the issue is — leaving the child out of the process (Vis, Holtan and Thomas, 2012).

Typologies of Participation

The benefits of participating in social work processes for service users and particularly children are well documented (Morrow, 1999; Sinclair, 2004; Atwool, 2006; Malone and Hartung, 2010; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010; Dickens et al., 2015; Vis and Fossum, 2015; Beresford, 2017; Toros, 2020). To analyse this participation, various researchers have developed typologies of participation, including ladder-based models (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1997, Franklin, 1997), pathways (Shier, 2001) and circular frameworks (Treseder, 1997) to theorise the extent to which a child participates in either individual or community decisions. However, many of these typologies are linear and position children as autonomous social actors which do not consider 'contexts and relational processes' (Abebe, 2019, p. 1). Furthermore, models of participation are not easily applied in statutory social work services where risk of harm coexists with participative intentions (Healy, 1998; Sanders and Mace, 2006). This duality may be relevant to the young people in my study as their decision-making occurs when they are legally defined as children but relates to their future selves as adults.

Decisions about whether a child is competent to participate are most likely to be contingent on an adult's assessment of whether a 'threshold is met' (Moran-Ellis and Tisdale, 2019, p.218). Such a threshold might be informal, based on perceived vulnerabilities and potential harm (Garcia-Quiroga and Agoglia, 2020) or formal, using a Gillick competence test to establish whether a child is capable (Shah, 2021). Using these informal or formal assessments supposes an implicit understanding of what ability looks like, based on standards of maturity and independence. Assessments of maturity link to ideas of *being* an adult, which assume the adult as a capable social agent; whereas discourses of childhood are anchored in ideas of *becoming* where the goal of *being* has not yet been reached (Lee, 2002). Discourses that construct children as unfinished, position adult citizenship as a future goal, where participation in civic life identifies their adulthood (Kjørholt, 2008). Consequently, the association of participating in decisions becomes integral to functioning adulthood (Kjørholt, 2008). Children as competent social actors conjure a strong rather than weak image of childhood, further aligning with more adult attributes (Mayall, 2000).

The 'rise of the participating child' may appear to democratise childhood but could also be symbolic of the 'entrepreneurial subject' (Smith, 2012, p. 24). Participative social work is heralded as being a way to recognise the value of a service user's contribution, however application is still linked to professional expertise and knowledge that assesses a child's agency through established instrumental measures (Smith, 2012). Participative approaches

therefore become additional discursive practices that regulate and survey children and also generate new self-maximising individuals (Jenks, 2005). These interpretations do not invalidate participative approaches but reflect that power relations operate in processes that are seemingly designed to promote agency (Gallagher, 2008).

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented three key theoretical ideas that have informed my overall thesis. Starting with the issue of power I drew on Foucault's thinking about how concepts of sovereignty, biopower and governmentality, help to re-examine taken for granted ways of knowing (Chambon, 1999). The chapter then moved onto the social construction of childhood, underlining how the notion of the child fluctuates between the child as an autonomous and responsible being when committing a criminal offence (Parton, 2006) to being dependent and unready for adult thinking when determining their risk within the family (Smith, 2010). *Staying Put* guidance is written with an underlying assumption that the young person is competent and an equal party in the decision-making process. However, this chapter has described how childhood is understood in a variety of often conflicting ideas, rather than one overarching discourse. These changing discourses suggest how concepts of childhood and participation become constituted and come to develop new relationships between power, knowledge and the development of 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1975, p. 30).

This final chapter of Part One concludes the contextual factors relevant to the exploration of the young person's experience. The next part of the thesis moves on to how the knowledge and thinking from Part One informs the research design.

Part Two: Research Design

The next part of the thesis details the rationale for using a qualitative methodology to underpin my research. Chapter 6 focuses on my ontological and epistemological position and the relevance of my professional background, and the chapter continues with the design decisions made. I have written this chapter in the spirit of Silverman's (2011) suggestion that this part of a study is a 'natural history trip' (2011, p.335). Rather than provide a list of events, I have tried to demonstrate my active role in the factors that have shaped my study. Reflections of the learning and limitations are discussed later in Chapter 11.

Chapter 6: Research Methodology

Chapter Introduction

This chapter details how my study was conducted. Starting by setting out the questions that formed the basis for my research, attention then moves onto the philosophical paradigms underpinning my research, and the interrelationship with my professional identity and experience. The thinking and approaches taken throughout the study are then set out including issues of access, involvement of an advisory group, and method of data collection. The chapter continues with the ethical issues I considered during the research process. Although the ethical discussion is located towards the end of this chapter, it is important to emphasise that these issues formed the foundation of research echoing the point raised by Shaw and Gould (2001), who note that matters of ethics need to be a lens through which the research is seen, not an additional box to tick. The chapter concludes by explaining the use of constructive thematic analysis, using Braun and Clarke's (2013) six stage approach.

Research Questions

Literature discussed in Chapter 4 presented two key areas relevant to young people leaving care. The first was a complex picture of a young person's trajectory into adulthood, highlighting some of the issues encountered at the end of their childhood care experience. The second area of research related to young people's involvement in decision-making. What is not prominent in the literature is the experience of young people making a decision about *Staying Put*. To develop a better understanding of this decision, and the relationships between the young people's experiences and wider practice, my research addressed the following questions as stated in Chapter 1:

- How much influence does the young person feel they have in making the decision to stay put or not?
- Which factors inform and influence this decision?
- What are the young people's thoughts and feelings about making this decision?

Before discussing my choices about approach and design, I set out my ontological and epistemological position and relationship with my professional social work identity.

The Researcher's Position

Ontology and epistemology are terms that are often conflated, and consequently have a 'confusing representation' (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019, p. 8). Both elements relate to the issue of enquiry (Stainton-Rogers, 2006), with ontology addressing the nature of social reality (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019) and epistemology relating to how people 'know' and gain knowledge and what is considered valid knowledge (Stainton-Rogers, 2006).

A starting point for researchers to establish their ontological position, is to consider the two dominant notions of reality and how this is understood. Objectivists presume that there are facts and truths that can be gathered, regardless of individual interpretation, whilst interpretivists or constructivists question ideas of a single reality (Bryman, 2016). Depending on their stance, a researcher seeks to explore meaning and investigates the world from their expressed position (Hammersley, 2014). Considering the question of *Staying Put*, the decision-making by a young person could be examined in several ways. One option is to consider specific timescales of the decision, the numbers of factors involved or number of young people reaching a specific decision. An alternative line of inquiry is to try and understand the decision, and the experience of the decision maker. My interest lies in how this decision is uniquely constructed, and the intersections and interrelationships between multiple factors relating to each young person. Taking an idiographic approach places me within the social constructivist paradigm. This means I view the decision as subjective and constructed through language, meaning and experiences (Engel and Schutt, 2013). Studying such a complex issue requires examination of the decision in its fullest context, and with recognition and regard for the various influencing factors. Taking a socially constructivist approach can facilitate the 'foregrounding of service-user perceptions and lived experience' which broadens the sources of social work knowledge (Goodyer, 2013, p. 396). Using a positivist approach may not achieve the same ends due to randomisation measures and aspects of 'context stripping' to minimise experimental bias (Guba and Lincoln, 2004).

Rather than set up a false binary between the two positions, some have called for more open and progressive discussions about using different approaches which span the paradigms (Guba, 1990; Denzin, 2010). As Rubin and Babbie (2014) point out, it is important to acknowledge the value in other thinking even if we choose to disregard it, as it enables us to shine a light on any potential bias in our own research. The enduring debate between proponents of each position is a well-worn path and feels removed from day-to-day use of research to improve practice for the benefit of service users.

The Social Worker as Researcher

In addition to ontological and epistemological perspectives, Urquhart (2013) explains that research decisions can reflect an individual's professional values. From the early stages of the research process when I started the doctoral programme, my social work identity has been present in my thinking. As well as acknowledging factors such as professional context, Berger (2015) emphasises the importance of self-examination in locating ourselves within a study. Use of internal reflexive dialogue is integral to questioning my personal impact on accessing the subject area, my relationship with participants and interpretation of the research findings (Berger, 2015). This multifaceted process includes understanding the impact of my personal characteristics (gender, ethnicity, race for example), my political self and finally my practice experience. Recognising how each element acts as a lens through which I carried out this research is critical when undertaking research within a profession, due to the inherent conflicts in role and organisational familiarity (Costley, Elliot and Gibbs, 2010). For example, having a previous role in children's participation work is likely to influence my thinking about the experiences of young people's involvement in their decision. Researching an area of practice that is well known due to previous or existing experience requires a reflexive approach (Dodd and Epstein, 2012). However, this is not straightforward, particularly when grappling with the additional challenge of being an 'insider', outside of the research field — in this case a social worker who had previously worked in a local authority.

Although I am not a young person, I have a shared understanding of social work language and process that an 'outsider' might not. Insider research examines an issue or setting from the perspective of a member of the researched community (Coghlan, and Brannick, 2014). Reason and Tobert (2001) assert that this is a valuable standpoint and is founded on the premise that research is not just to find out what is going on in the world, it is there to change it. Insider research is unique as it is underpinned by knowledge of the research area and the context in which it takes place (Costley, Elliot and Gibbs, 2010). Research of this nature recognises the voice of the social worker and gives permission for the researcher to think like a practitioner as well as a researcher; affirming that whilst research is important, practice is too (Dodd and Epstein, 2012).

Issues of duality between practitioner and researcher are more evident where researchers are situated within organisations (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). Although I no longer work within a local authority, practice relationships and residual references to my previous role still exist through shared language and meaning derived from experience in practice. It is more

accurate to consider myself as an 'outsider/insider' rather than the conventional insider researcher, reflecting my external role with internal knowledge and relationships with local authority staff which continue as a social work educator. Although I conducted this research outside of the research field, my 'inside' perspective was still relevant. For example, my understanding of the work and team culture enabled me to build trust with key gatekeeping managers and workers. Sharing an affiliation or identity can denote authenticity and credibility to participants, or in this case gatekeepers which can be reassuring when sharing information (Mitchell, 2006; Berger, 2015).

Whilst carrying out the research, I was aware of the impact of my previous role and insider knowledge. On the one hand I recognised that young people might have felt less inclined to talk with me if they had difficult experiences, conversely my understanding of the organisation, language and systems might have been reassuring in our interactions.

Understanding language and process also facilitates trusting relationships and problem solving with gatekeepers who share a professional standing (Mitchell, 2006). Perceived authenticity in the researcher has been regarded as a strength in many research studies (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1984; Mitchell, 2006), and shared characteristics between researcher and researched enable participants to more readily allow access into their world, making the boundary between them more fluid (Mercer, 2007). I also had to be mindful that previous experience can become the focus of practice-based research and act as a safety blanket for the researcher (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). Being a reflexive researcher can mitigate the impact of the safety blanket 'through use of journals and candid self-examination' (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014, p.139). I was aware that the purpose of reflexive thinking must not be minimised as just another tenet of the research process, nor a functional process to achieve an end product (Ruch and Julkunen, 2016), instead it was an active endeavour that enabled me to explore my decision-making throughout the research process. The next section sets out how my thinking translated into my chosen methodology.

Methodology

The qualitative methodological adopted in my study is derived from an understanding that reality is constructed through 'culturally defined and historically situated interpretations and personal experiences (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 35). In Part One of this thesis, I discussed the theoretical ideas that have influenced my research which are recognised as 'post' theories. These theories are characterised by challenges to established assumptions, questioning 'dominant hierarchical arrangements' (Fook, 2002, p.82), and that what is regarded as

knowledge is intrinsically linked with power (Fawcett and Featherstone, 1998). Another common feature of post theories is the examination of what purports to be truth and meaning. By problematising what constitutes objective and subjective perspectives, post theorising encourages a more nuanced understanding of social phenomena (McGregor, 2019). How meanings are constructed is relevant to my research as each young person's view is situated in a specific context, due to their varied experiences and circumstances. Using a qualitative methodology means that data can generate multiple meanings and multiple truths (Healy, 2001). Where modernist forms of enquiry are attuned to unearthing answers, a qualitative methodology aims to be more open to the divergent perspectives of others and 'upends' the tradition of a knowledge hierarchy that positions researchers or other professionals as singular experts (Fook, 2002 p. 83). My study is influenced by these ideas and has guided my research questions and design.

The strategy to translate a researcher's values, positions, ontological and epistemological thinking into research practice is through the overarching methodological framework (Sarantakos, 2014). The framework is built on 'theories and practices' that subsequently determine the researcher's decisions (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 31, 2013). Ordinarily interpretivist/constructivist researchers opt for qualitative research design (Rubin and Babbie, 2014). However, Denscombe (2008) highlights the need to recognise that qualitative and quantitative approaches are not mutually exclusive, and research decision-making still needs to be critically considered for each research project.

Quantitative approaches work from a hypothesis and aim to measure, generalise and replicate (Bryman, 2016), with observation and measurement used to identify consistency, patterns and predictors of action (Sarantakos, 2014). Therefore, a quantitative approach is not suitable for my research, as decision-making is both subjective and intangible and understanding would not be achieved through quantifiable means. As the opening chapters have discussed, decisions and transitions from care are multifaceted and required an approach that enabled me to gain insight into the lived experiences of those involved. Furthermore McLaughlin (2012) guards against using experimental design in social work research due to the complex contexts, where controlling the environment would be problematic as each young person's circumstances vary. Using a qualitative framework enables a view of participants 'living in dynamic, complex social arrangements' (Rossman and (Rallis, 2011, p.6). Moreover, the focus of the research is the young person's experience of the decision to stay put, not whether or not a decision was made, further validating a qualitative approach.

As previously noted in Chapter 4, young people's perspectives can be marginalised and dominated by a professional narrative. Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2015) argue that when researching with children and young people, the methodological paradigm chosen needs to be orientated to engage children and young people as active agents. Beresford (2012) also recognises that user involvement in research is a methodological choice and whilst this research is not user led, the foregrounding of participant perspectives is part of the same paradigm. As part of the process of orientating the research towards the participants, I worked with a young people's advisory group to test out my thinking.

Young People as Advisors

Before talking about the contribution of the advisory group, like many other aspects of the research process the use of language to describe actions and activity are significant. Framing the work of the group through their name was an important first step in the process. Regardless of whether a group steers or advises a researcher, their involvement communicates the researcher's open-mindedness and lack of preconceptions (Rhodes et al., 2002). Willmott (2019) clarified the distinction between steering and advising, stating that a steering group has more say in a project and contributes to leading the direction of the work, whereas advising is about contributing ideas and suggestions. Willmott's understanding reflects the approach I took where the role of the group was to advise on specific areas including language used, participant information, questions and dissemination. Marking this distinction is an important step in setting the parameters for the group which will be discussed later.

Why an Advisory Group?

In Chapter 4, much of the research about children and young people in the care system focussed primarily on the perspectives of professionals or researchers, and not those of people with care experiences (Mannay et al., 2019). Involving an advisory group recognises the gap between researcher and researched and can provide a forum for children and young people to inform the process using their understanding of social care experiences (Dixon, Wade and Blower, 2019). Despite having considerable experience working in this field, it was essential to recognise that I view *Staying Put* and decision-making through the eyes of a practitioner. Therefore, the role of an advisory group provided space to connect with the children and young people currently receiving services to ground the research process in practice, include their perspectives and offer opportunities to reflect critically on any research decisions.

Selection of the group

Rather than identify a group specifically for my study, an existing participation group of children and young people was involved. As well as being a practical decision due to time and resource limitations, the group was already trained and experienced in supporting projects and initiatives aimed at informing and improving services. Drawing on the support of an existing group also meant that relationships were formed and established (Dixon, Ward and Blower, 2019). Therefore, questions and discussions about the research were easier to facilitate, as time was not needed to support the group to bond and develop group confidence. The benefits of an established infrastructure for a participation group are helpful in the research process if members need additional support (Jones, 2005; Lansdown, 2011), particularly if the topic revisits distressing experiences (Morrow, 2012).

The young people in the group were aged between 14-18 years-old and had a range of experiences including being in and leaving care. Specific permission was not required for the group to be involved as they were already established using an arrangement that group members make individual decisions about whether they take part in any specific activity the group participates in. Working within their 'opting in' system, young people and workers were provided with an information sheet in advance of me attending (Appendix 1), and at the beginning of the meeting, each group member signed a consent form (Appendix 2) once I had explained the purpose of my attendance. All ten of the young people present at both meetings consented to participate. Consent and information were revisited each time I attended the group.

A meeting plan was agreed with the coordinator in advance, confirming attendance to the group on four occasions; two prior and one at the end of the data collection phase and a final meeting to share the work before dissemination. The first meeting was used to explain the research, agree what could be changed as a result of their involvement and discussion about participant information and consent forms. Activities were devised to do this, drawing on my previous experience and acknowledging that poor interactions can deter future participation (Shepard, 2002). Art and game-based activities enabled questions and ideas to develop and based on their feedback, changes were made to my information and consent documents including changes to colours, shapes and font. The other issue discussed was the language used to describe the participants. The group suggested I avoid using young adult, care leaver or child and adopt the term *young person*. Their rationale was that *young person* was commonly used in the local authority and would be familiar to participants. They objected to other terms due to their associations with being 'grown-up' and dissociated from

social work services. One group member explained that young adult was inappropriate and said, 'well they haven't all left home yet, have they?', underlining their understanding of adulthood as moving away from their foster carers.

The second meeting a month later focused on confirmation that their suggestions had been adopted which was important to demonstrate the impact of their involvement, noted by Ackerman et al. (2003) as consistently missing in participation work with children and young people. During the second meeting the issue of anonymity was discussed and one of the young people suggested that they propose some names for the participant pseudonyms, highlighting that they might have too much to think about '... meeting a new person and everything'. I felt this was a tangible connection between the advisory group and the participants and highlighted the value of involving non researchers, who can see things differently and offer challenge and suggestions (Rhodes et al., 2002). I also shared my topic guide (Appendix 3) to share my thoughts about the areas I wanted to cover and talk to the group about anything I had missed or misjudged. The group made some helpful suggestions including their thoughts that some young people might not know about *Staying Put*, prompting me to address this during the interviews by asking them at the beginning of the discussion. The group also suggested that I should ask the participants for their ideas about what should change, which I also included, and the participant's recommendations are included in Chapter 12. Attending the group on both occasions was useful in raising questions or issues that I had not considered but also triggered different ideas, for example having an abbreviated topic guide to give the young people (Appendix 4).

Due to the restrictions as a result of Covid-19 the third and fourth meetings were cancelled. I was not able to complete my plan to check in during later phases of the research, however I provided the coordinator with an update about my progress to share with the group. As restrictions ease, I intend to reconnect with the coordinator to progress my original intention to involve group members in sharing my research with the two local authorities, an idea advocated by Mannay et al. (2019).

Negotiations with Local Authorities as Gatekeepers

The research participants for this study were selected from two local authorities with whom I had existing connections. Having established relationships with both organisations was the central reason for their selection. As well as existing links, constraints of time and resources were also a consideration, common to many research decisions (Kvale, 2007). Selecting two local authorities was intended to both widen the possibility of recruiting participants and to

ensure that I had as diverse a group of participants as possible to reflect the experiences of those young people who remained with their foster carers and those who moved on.

The contact and maintenance of the relationships with gatekeepers was initially straightforward due to the appointed link manager required for the doctoral programme. However, once they had left the organisation, identifying contacts became more complicated, which I reflect on in Chapter 11. Figure 5 is a simplified representation of contact with the relevant people in each local authority, illustrating the layers of agreement required before talking with young people directly. Heptinstall (2000) commented on the challenges of research with local authorities 20 years ago, highlighting that negotiation occurs at many levels within an organisation, not just the organisational decision makers.

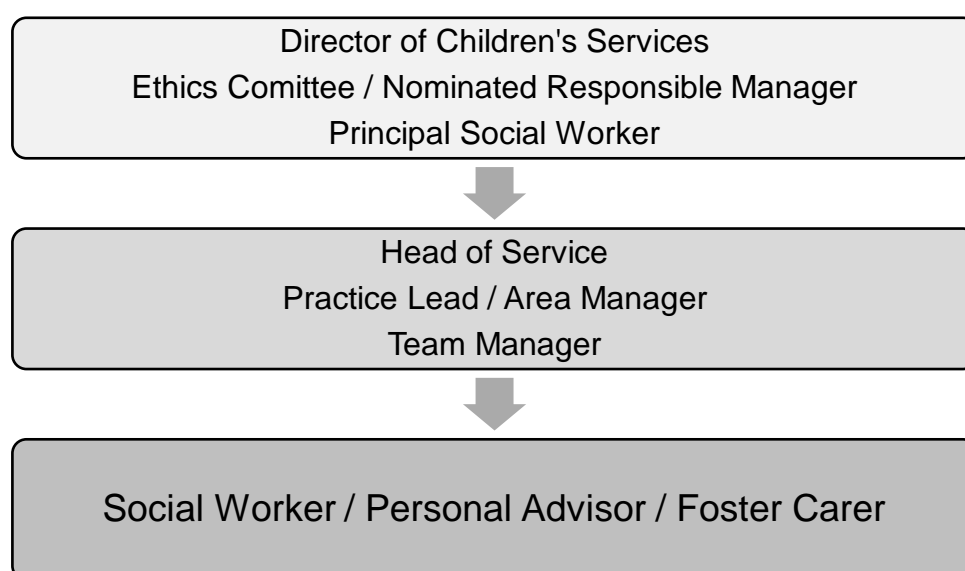


Figure 5: Gatekeeping decision makers

Consent was sought and gained from each layer indicated in Figure 5, including the local authority's Director of Children's Services and ethics panel, as well as the Principal Social Worker — due to their oversight of children's services. Formal permission from the respective ethics panels is detailed in Appendix 5. In Figure 6 the detail of this process is shown, highlighting the actual number of meetings and discussions needed to make the initial phone call to the young people.

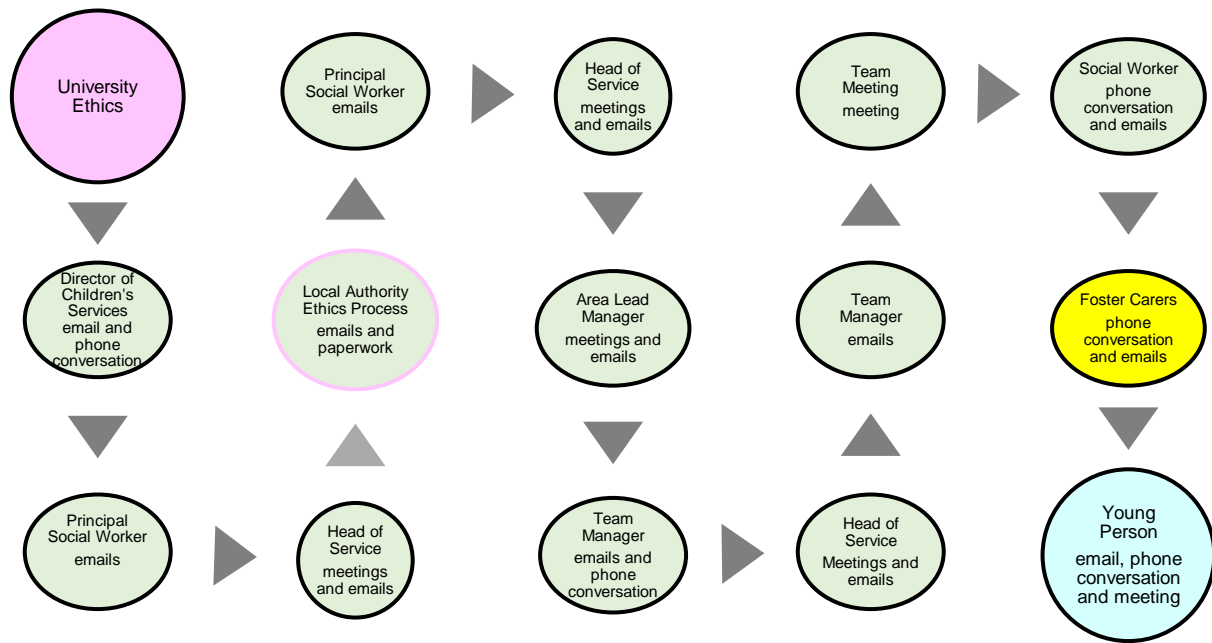


Figure 6: Detail of gatekeeping process

The pale green circles in Figure 6 indicate the contact I had with the local authority and the pink highlight denotes the formal ethics approval by the university and the local authorities (Appendix 5). The nature of identifying participants is reflected on in Chapter 11.

In order to ensure that delays were avoided, written information (Appendix 6) was provided at each stage, and meetings were held with managers and practice leads to explain the research and respond to questions as briefings were useful tools to start conversations (Punch, 2014). Meeting managers also provided a useful opportunity to build connections and respond to any questions in the moment, recognising their limited time to read information could act as a barrier to involvement (Shaw and Gould, 2001). Whilst these meetings were positive and open, the gap between this level of manager and young people was too wide to identify potential participants — further meetings and discussions were needed with team managers and individual social workers and personal advisors. Attending team meetings was the most successful part of the process as it was in this forum that workers identified who they would approach in specific timescales using my participant selection criteria.

Participant Selection

As is common with a qualitative study focusing on a specific field, the selection of participants for my research was purposeful. Iphofen (2009) notes that purposive selection is

often seen as implicitly inferior to random selection but suggests that all selection processes have an element of convenience. Other types of participation selection, such as random or probability sampling, would not have been appropriate as I was researching a specific experience. Table 5 details the criteria used to identify the ten participants interviewed for my study.

Participant selection criteria
A young person is deemed an eligible child, within the meaning of paragraph 19B (2) of Schedule 2 to the Children Act 1989, immediately before he/she reached eighteen.
Originally placed by Local Authority A or B.
Living under a <i>Staying Put</i> arrangement or independent living setting.
18-21 (relates to the period for <i>Staying Put</i> placement and the timescale for the introduction of the duty).

Table 5: Participant selection criteria

Table 5 specifies the need to have lived in foster care as some young people live in other types of care placements where there is no option to stay put once they reach their 18th birthday. I decided not to stipulate any other specific circumstances or personal characteristics as this could have limited participant options further.

There were two reasons for talking with young people once they had made the decision to stay put or leave their placement. The first reason being that the period between the age of 16 and 18 can be a time of enormous change and uncertainty for a young person in care (Dinisman and Zeira, 2011). Asking questions about choices they may not yet be aware of, might have felt overwhelming and unwelcome. I am aware that reaching the legal age of adulthood does not necessarily negate these feelings or create certainty as, this period could present further anxieties and complications. The second reason being that decisions to stay put or leave can be made at any point between a young person's 16th and 18th birthday and can also be changed during that period, so waiting until the final decision was made enabled not only the decision but also the decision-making process to be explored.

Denscombe (2008) confirms that it is not easy to know what an adequate number of participants is for any study. In proposing a minimum of ten young people my aim was to capture a range of decisions including those who chose to stay with their foster carers and

those who chose to leave. I knew that identifying young people would be challenging regardless of where they were currently residing. In the case of young people *Staying Put* I was aware that in the two local authorities involved, the recorded number of young people in *Staying Put* arrangements was lower than the national figure of 26 per cent (DfE, 2020). However, recruiting young people living independently could also have been problematic as young people's links with social workers after the age of 18 years can be inconsistent and distant (Gill and Daw, 2017). I also considered that numerous participants might come forward, which would have stretched available resources. The second possibility was considered more thoroughly due to the message it could send to young people if they were not selected, and a contingency plan was developed to manage this eventuality. This plan included prepared emails and letters explaining my situation and ongoing contact with the young people's workers to check numbers of participants coming forward. As it transpired, eleven young people were able to take part, and one decided they could not continue during our initial phone conversation. Seven of the young people were recruited through social workers or personal advisors and three young people were referred to me by other participants. Using a network or snowballing approach is an effective method when researching specific issues especially when participants are considered to be harder to reach (Lee, 1993; Liangputtong, 2012).

Data Construction

Having established the use of a qualitative methodology, methods of data collection also need to align and reflect the researcher's axiological position (Silverman, 2010). The term data collection suggests a neutral transaction with the researcher receiving the data from the researched. Therefore, data construction seems a more accurate descriptor, as it acknowledges the active role of both party's co-construction of the interview process (Bucknall, 2014).

Generating data that serves the purpose of research can come about through a variety of methods, however rich data is preferred to gain a deeper understanding of a subject with lived experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Individual semi-structured interviews were chosen as they enabled me to try to understand 'themes of the lived daily world' of the participant (Kvale, 2007). Taking a constructivist approach might suppose that the interview starts with a blank sheet of paper and ask the participant what they think are the key questions (Morris, 2006). However, using semi-structured interviews to explore the experience of a decision, allowed me to steer the discussion within predetermined areas of

interest, whilst allowing room to adapt and respond within the discussion (Denscombe, 2008; Rubin and Babbie, 2014; Bryman, 2016).

In any form of interview structure, the researcher's approach is key, with Kvale describing the interviewer as a 'traveller who walks alongside the participant to hear what they choose to share' (2007, p. 19). Researching social work issues requires sensitivity and ability to show genuine interest in the participant (Morris, 2006). Therefore, a researcher's interviewing skills and ability to read paralanguage are important. Drawing on professional skills is valuable, however it is important to distinguish professional experience from that of a researcher, as there is a difference in motives and approaches. This distinction is reinforced by Denscombe (2008) who guards against an oversimplification of interviewing skills.

Planning aspects of the interview can mitigate against interview drift or interviewer paralysis (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019). Therefore, it is important to plan the stages of the interview, beginning with thematising and designing, to think about how each topic could contribute 'thematically and dynamically' to understand and respond to the overarching research question (Kvale, 2007, p. 57). As already noted, I used a topic guide to form an interview map which provided support and focus (Appendix 3) whilst being mindful that although a guide can provide structure, the benefit of a semi-structured interview is being flexible to the responses given (Morris, 2015).

Developing the topic guide was helpful to think about the possible journey of the interview and as mentioned prompted by the advisory group I created a basic visual representation for the young people. I developed a young person's topic guide to offer reassurances about the content of the interview and to provide a reference point for the conversation (Appendix 4). I also planned the use of drawing materials and plain or predesigned paper for young people to use during the interview (Appendix 7). Art materials were introduced for two reasons. First in recognition that young people use multiple media to communicate, interpret information and connect ideas (Bagnoli, 2009; Hearn and Thomson, 2014) and second because art can provide a useful distraction (Henderson and Mathew-Byrne, 2016) thus averting the researcher's gaze. I did not intend to use this work as data as it is important not to assume that young people would want to draw or share their drawing (Moore, Saunders, and McArthur, 2011). Most of the young people chose to doodle, with one young person writing out the questions as they were asked, using materials I had provided.

Acknowledging the social and relational nature of interviews (Flewitt, 2014), I thought about how I used questions to build rapport and ensured that I did not take an interrogative stance

which can make the participant feel uncomfortable (Hopf, 2004). Starting by introducing the art materials provided an opportunity to have a non-threatening conversation about the research and where I could share something of myself, namely my limited art skills. During the interviews I also had a piece of paper to use if I felt that the young person was struggling with eye contact. Often by looking down at my doodling provided a space for the young person to think without feeling awkward. Likewise, ending the interview by inviting young people to talk about things they might have wanted to add or pass on to other social workers or foster carers, ended with a more open and conversational tone. This free time is important as it can allow young people a moment to reflect and to transition out of the interview (Flewitt, 2014). Although the core subjects in the topic guide remained the same, in the final three interviews I included a specific question about the concept of independence as this has been raised in previous interviews. Being flexible in semi-structured interviews is helpful when unanticipated issues arise (Rubin and Babbie, 2014) and in this case I was interested in whether the young people in the final three interviews, also had thoughts about being independent.

At the end of the interview the process of transcribing was explained, what it would look like and an offer to go through it with them once they had received it. I gave the young people a choice about whether they wanted to receive the transcript by email or post and clarified why there was a deadline for their responses. I explained that they would have two weeks to let me know if there were any inaccuracies in how I had understood them or things they were uncomfortable about sharing. A lack of response was not automatically interpreted as consent to the transcripts and those young people who did not reply in the timescale were contacted by text to check that they had received it and further offers of support were given. Eight out of ten young people said that they had read the transcript and affirmed their agreement to its accuracy by email or text, the other two young people said that they did not want to look at the transcript and that they were 'ok with what I said' and 'I was fine with it on the day and still am'.

Preparing the practical aspects of an interview is important to both the researcher and participant (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019). Interviewing young people required thought about venue as interviewing children and young people in places they feel safe and comfortable is a primary consideration (Flewitt, 2014). I asked all of the young people their preferred place — most decided that they would like to be at home, and some asked to meet in cafes. Café meetings were thoroughly discussed to ensure they were aware of the issues of confidentiality in a public space. Likewise, home visits were also discussed to ensure that

there was a quiet communal space, as I did not want to sit in a bedroom or noisy room with distractions. The café based interviews were most challenging as they were both noisy and lacked privacy at points in the interview. In these situations, I checked their feelings by pausing when other people were in earshot and asking if they wanted to continue.

Concerns about noise and interruption also related to the use of a digital recorder to capture the interview. Although the recorder did not appear to faze the participants as suggested in other research with children and young people (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019), I was mindful about how I introduced the device and explained that the recording would not be shared with other people. As a back-up I took additional batteries but also recorded the interview on a phone as I found the sound quality varied on the recording device.

The final practical element I had not considered was the need to contact young people using text, as young people did not consistently use phone and email communication. Rather than sharing my personal number I bought a phone to ensure my privacy and boundaries, which also made it easier to check in with young people before and after the interview. Symbols of care such as checking the welfare of young participants are important facets of the research process (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Botterall, 2015). Another symbol of care and regard is payment for participation. Payments for young participants are considered problematic and associated with notions of inducement (Cree, Kay and Tisdall, 2002). Although I had made young people aware that I was not able to recompense them for their involvement, I wanted to acknowledge their contribution and show the value I had placed on their time (Graham, Powell and Taylor, 2015). I did this by taking food and drink to leave with them at the end of the interview. As these tokens were unexpected, they are not considered as an inducement which is an important factor in ensuring the integrity of the research.

Quality

The issue of integrity is an important facet in ensuring the quality of any research produced (Birks, 2014). Markers of quality can be problematic for qualitative research as traditional standards, such as validity, reliability and objectivity are aligned with quantitative forms of inquiry (Denzin, 2011). Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed more relevant measures and using their four markers – credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, this section addresses their categories of quality in relation to this research.

Flick (2018) suggests that Lincoln and Guba's (1985) first measure, credibility, is the most important of their quality markers. Producing credible research is important for involved

participants and ‘end users’ (Birks, 2014, p. 221) if the researcher wants to make any impact with their work (Kumar, 2019). Measures of credibility suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) include understanding the field of research, peer debriefing, member checking and triangulation. Whilst the first three elements relevant to this research are noted in Table 6, the role of triangulation is not relevant. Triangulation can be associated with getting to the right answer through mixed methods and triangulation of data (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Using more than one method of data collection is seen by some as beneficial in offsetting perceived limitations in qualitative research when one research method is used (Bryman, 2016) and the researcher aims to present a valid and trustworthy set of findings using mixed methods (Gray, 2014), although, ‘better results’ are not guaranteed (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 161). It is more important that decisions about data collection methods are grounded in the research questions and the most appropriate way to investigate them, enabling the researcher to stand by the data collected (Silverman, 2010). Furthermore, demonstrating credibility through triangulation is at odds with my epistemological position as the aim of my research was not to seek findings considered to be objectively true, rather to construct meaning and context from the data (Fielding and Fielding, 1986). This thinking is better associated with *crystallisation*, which enables the researcher to acknowledge that there is no single truth to be discovered, instead there are multiple perspectives of an issue or event (Ellingson, 2009).

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) Marker	Measures Taken
Understanding the field of research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing personal experience. • Discussion with social workers and managers from the local authorities. • Working with the advisory group. • Literature and policy review.
Peer debriefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using regular supervision and peer discussion and review to check my assumptions and challenge my thinking during the research process.
Member checking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returning transcripts to participants and supporting them to ask questions.

Table 6: Quality Measure: Credibility

As noted in this chapter ideas of truth and objectivity are methodologically problematic as understandings are constructed in specific times and spaces (Foucault, 1972), meaning that how we read or hear something we have said previously will change through the interpretation of someone else. An alternative approach can be member checking (see Table 6), where data or analysis is returned to the participant. Member checking is regarded by some as key to checking the *accuracy* and credibility of data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). However, returning material to participants is not a neutral or technical process and does not automatically denote good research practice (Birt et al., 2016). I chose to share transcripts with young people, not to render their accounts as valid or *true* but to enable them to see changes I had made to identifying information and ensure the personal information had been appropriately redacted. Sharing interview transcription is ‘littered with challenges’, not least of all because of the delay in process (Forbat and Henderson, 2005, p.1117). Without the motivation of validating data, sharing of transcripts is seen by some as being polite or compensatory (Page, Samson and Crockett, 2000), however it also reflects an overall respect for and recognition of the participant (Kvale, 2007).

Transferability is the second marker of quality identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985), meaning the way that findings from one study can inform another. However, demonstrating transferability is not a straightforward task as the application of research findings moves the burden of responsibility onto the reader (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Therefore, the researcher needs to be explicit in setting up the context so that others can make decisions about how knowledge can be transferred and why their work is relevant to other settings (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Table 7 identifies the measures taken in this study.

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) Marker	Measures Taken
Context setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detail of the historical and practice setting in Chapters 1-4. • Detail included of the research process and decisions in Chapter 6.
Participant description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymised detail of the participants in Part Three.
Identification of value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevance and contribution detailed in Chapter 12.

Table 7: Quality Measure: Transferability

The third and fourth measures suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are dependability and confirmability. Both elements relate to the trustworthiness of the process where dependability relates to the logic and traceability of the research (Nowell et al., 2017) and confirmability is concerned with the researcher's use of data to draw conclusions and is established when the other markers are achieved (Nowell et al., 2017). Table 8 and 9 sets out these quality markers and the actions of the researcher.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) Marker	Measures Taken
Clarity of purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rationale for and purpose of the study discussed with the advisory group, supervisors and local authority managers and social workers. • Detail of purpose and rationale set out in Chapter 1.
Participant selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion with supervisors and advisory group. • Detail set out in Chapter 6.
Clarity about data analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion with supervisors and peer study group including sharing anonymised transcripts. • Sharing stages of the process with supervisors. • Detail and examples of the process set out in Chapter 6. Followed an established model of analysis.

Table 8: Quality Measure: Dependability

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) Marker	Measures Taken
Researcher reflexivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintained research journal throughout the process. • Reflective and reflexive discussion with supervisors and peer study group. • Inclusion of reflexive thinking in the thesis (Chapter 6 and 11).
Coherence between data and conclusions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing discussion with supervisory team, including draft reading prior to final submission.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) Marker	Measures Taken
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detail of the data is set out in Part Three, alongside analysis in Chapter 10 and conclusions in Chapter 11.
Justification of theoretical, methodological and analytical choices (Koch, 1994)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing discussion with supervisory team, including draft reading prior to final submission. • Rational set out in Chapter 1, Part 1 and Chapter 6.

Table 9: Quality Measure: Confirmability

Alongside Lincoln and Guba's measures, consideration has also been given to Morrow's (2005) suggestion of social validity and Ballinger's (2006) measure of coherence which can provide a helpful gauge during the research process. Here researchers have to consider and stipulate why their research is important and why the interpretation has meaning (Morrow, 2005) and there is coherence between epistemology and the method employed (Ballinger, 2006). Both areas have been discussed in supervision and addressed in this thesis and noted in the Table 6 to 9. Through these discussions researchers recognise their role in the construction of data through reflexive engagement (Morrow, 2005; Ballinger, 2006), demonstrated through my use of journals and supervision including examination of the ethics in the study. This summary demonstrates the researcher's response to the issue of quality and lays the foundation for an ethical approach to undertaking the study.

Ethical Considerations

As a social work researcher, I worked within parallel ethical frameworks, first, working within the university's research ethics policy and second, my professional code of ethics (British Association of Social Work, 2018). Although each framework relates to their respective field, there are shared expectations regarding conduct and consideration of participants, resulting in a congruent relationship between the two. Ethics procedures for the university and the local authorities reflected these similarities through their application processes.

A central principle in research ethics is that participants should be protected from risk of harm, with the protection of dignity and safety being critical in social research (Silverman, 2010). However, when involving people with lived social care experience, protection from harm is not straightforward. Iphofen (2009) suggests that researchers should consider that most participants have life experiences that render them vulnerable at some level, and

researchers should consider how their participation exacerbates this vulnerability. Research involving any 'vulnerable' group can lead to researcher paralysis or avoidance (Iphofen, 2009; Alderson, 2014). This is where the researcher becomes so concerned by the ethical dilemmas they face, they exclude some people from the research process — potentially reinforcing their marginalisation (Alderson and Morrow, 2011).

Mendes, Snow and Baidawi (2014) highlight that research involving young people leaving care has the potential to bring traumatic and difficult issues to the fore, even if this is unintentional. From my own professional social work practice, I was aware that young people living in the care system often have difficult experiences. I therefore addressed this ethical concern from the outset by developing plans to support participants during the research process. Support before, during and after the interview was core to the structure of each meeting. For example, I identified support networks, provided information about support contacts, offered multiple opportunities to pause and stop, and provided time before and after the discussion for general questions and thoughts. In each interview, if the young person appeared to be upset, I was able to regulate the discussion by moving onto more general topics and, where appropriate, ask the young person if they needed external help, for example contacting their worker or carer. Whilst recognising the distinction between researcher and social worker, I still utilised my professional skills to try and create a supportive and empathetic environment. In their research with young people leaving care, Mendes, Snow and Baidawi (2014) support the use of professional experience but state that recognition of potential distress is in itself insufficient. They recommend researchers in this field to use their professional social work skills to support young people.

Strategies to minimise distress when researching sensitive life experiences are complicated by a lack of 'a reliable point of reference for decisions' about how to manage concerns about risk (Newman and Kaloupek, 2004, p. 383). Although social work is not the point of reference discussed, practice experience did act as a useful resource and influenced my thinking and understanding of the participants. For example, I ensured that I avoided direct questions about the young person's care experience and birth family relationships. Wherever references to sensitive subjects arose, I reiterated that they could choose not to share these details. Although this might seem a routine part of any research discussion, there is additional significance with children or young people with care experience, who can often feel that they are compelled to share personal information without question (Winter, 2006).

Consent

In a research relationship the choice to participate needs to be informed and retractable (Kumar, 2019). Being informed about retracting consent and the parameters and intentions of research is a tenet of preparatory ethical discussions (Rubin and Babbie, 2014). Rubin and Babbie (2014) also recognise that this is not a straightforward contract of agreement. Like any type of enquiry, social work research requires participants to share personal aspects of their lives, however many service users have experienced instances of coerced consent in their interactions with social workers (Rubin and Babbie, 2014). With this in mind, thought and recognition were given to the young person's understanding of consent.

There were two planned stages of consent. First, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, was permission at an organisational level, the second was a consent form which was discussed with each participant. Social workers and personal advisors were provided with information about the research as well as the information sheet and consent form for young people, to enable them to discuss the research before agreeing to take part (Appendix 8 and Appendix 9). This was to ensure professionals gave potential participants clear and consistent information. Although this was a lengthy process, it gave young people a further opportunity to decline or think about their involvement. The space also enabled social workers or personal advisors more time to talk to young people with additional learning needs which is important as assumptions based on age can mask differences in ability (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). For example, one young person found reading difficult and relying on written information would have been a barrier to their participation.

I was mindful during this phase of the study, that although social workers and advisors would be supporting potential participants, adults in a gatekeeping role can conflate their general safeguarding responsibility with specific decision-making about their perceptions of whether participation could be harmful. Although talking about children and associated risk, Hood, Kelley and Mayall (1996) highlighted both the need for support with consent and the potential barrier of a social worker's perceived duty to protect. This internal assessment can override the opportunity for young people to become involved in research (Collings, Grace, and Llewellyn, 2016), reflecting the dilemmas in practice highlighted in Chapter 4.

Once the participants were identified, consent and research information were revisited in pre-interview phone calls and texts, where I agreed with participants details about practical arrangements, what the interview would involve and additional opportunities to withdraw. Although seemingly repetitive, I was aware that the issue of informed consent is more than a

practical decision, whereby the participant weighs up their emotional response as well as their availability (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). Revisiting consent and research information also enabled me to mitigate against any undisclosed literacy issues (McLaughlin, 2012) and also attend to the 'behind-the-scenes' issues of power where consent feels obligatory (Lunabba, 2016). Recognised by Lunabba (2016) as enmeshed within the question of consent, adults can use their position to empower or restrict (2016, p. 95) and I recognised that young people might have been pressured into their involvement by well-intentioned gatekeepers. Finally, consent was revisited at the beginning of the interview where I talked through the consent form again, ensuring that participants understood each question. Participants were then given a copy of their signed form and the research information sheet.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

A further ethical consideration relates to protecting the participant's information. Piper and Simons (2004) suggest that researchers should not confuse anonymity with confidentiality and attend to each aspect to fully protect the participants. Confidentiality relates to the management of the participant's information, for example how and where it will be shared (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019). The parameters of confidentiality were set out during the initial telephone conversation and at the beginning of each interview and young people were informed about the need to share information in the event of disclosure about a child protection or adult safeguarding issue.

King, Horrocks and Brooks (2019) recognise that promising unequivocal confidentiality is not possible, as participant responses are a key component of sharing research outcomes. Nevertheless, measures can be taken to control the access to and sharing of information. On a practical level, recordings and transcripts were secured on the university's system, and signed consent forms with participant names were scanned, stored and shredded. Finally, all identifying information about each participant and local authority was omitted from the transcripts shared with my supervisory team and in this thesis.

With respect to issues of anonymity, protecting the identity of participants in research was planned to ensure ease of data management (Rubin and Babbie, 2014) but also recognising the impact on the young people where they could be identified by their foster carers or local authority worker. Whilst anonymity offers a layer of protection for the participant, Silverman (2011) noted that participants still need to be able to recognise themselves in the research to redress any alteration of their voice. With this in mind the advisory group, detailed earlier in

this chapter, developed a menu of names for the participants which they could choose from. Allen and Wiles (2015) recognise the significance attached to participants when selecting their own pseudonym, however the advisory group felt that the young people might feel under pressure at the beginning of the process to make this choice. Participants were therefore given the option to select their own pseudonyms for themselves, foster carers, workers or pets or choose from the list prepared by the advisory group.

Benefits to Young People

In addition to the consideration of risk, which is understandably at the forefront of any ethical discussion, there can be positive consequences of being involved in research. For example, Ruch (2014) highlighted the potential benefits in the researcher/researched relationship itself and in the context of social work research. Ruch (2014) added that both the participant and the researcher can gain from the relational aspects of the exchange, although these gains are subtle and intangible.

The important considerations of harm and benefit to young people involved in research also need to be seen in the context of the value of their contribution to developing practice. Drawing on the experiences of children and young people has become a more established research approach in a range of disciplines (Fleming and Boeck, 2012; O'Reilly, Ronzoni and Dogra, 2013; Horgan, 2017). Greater levels of involvement have been associated with the evolving construct of what childhood means, as previously discussed in Chapter 5 (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). Consequently, children and young people become seen as agentive, with a shift in epistemological thinking where a child's perspective is seen as an important and valid point of view (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008).

Data Analysis

The final section in this chapter focuses on the analysis of the young people's perspectives. The process of analysis is more than identifying themes that relate to participant quotes, it is part of an active relationship between data and the researcher (Lichtman, 2017). Breaking down data using coding and categorisation is seen as critical in qualitative research, as the source material does 'not speak for itself' (Denzin, 1994). Miles and Huberman's (1994) three staged process and Wolcott's (1994) reference to transforming data both follow the principle that material is read and coded, further emphasising the relationship described by Lichtman (2017).

A thematic approach was selected as it is a useful method for interpreting data and developing a deeper understanding of an issue (Braun and Clarke, 2013). As well as having a straightforward and practical application (Litchman, 2017), thematic approaches complement qualitative research by supporting an understanding of lived experience (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019). Braun and Clarke's method is 'theoretically-flexible' however they note that this does not mean thematic analysis (TA) is neutral as it requires researchers to think about the 'variety' of TA that aligns with their methodological framework (Braun and Clarke, 2019). To this end, using constructivist TA reflected my epistemological stance as it focuses on how participants have constructed their world rather than inductive or theoretical TA which starts with a bottom-up approach or is shaped by existing theory (Braun and Clark, 2013). A constructivist approach also acknowledges the 'knowingness' and interplay of the researcher's role in the analysis whereby the participant's experience is then understood by the researcher in the context of their multifaceted lenses. (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p. 594).

There were six stages in the interpretative process and although I am presenting this section in a linear way, in reality the process was untidier than this account suggests, as steps had to be repeated and revisited a number of times. Using Braun and Clarke's coding and analysis staged model (2013), each step is now summarised.

Stage 1: Transcription

I transcribed the interviews as, although resource intensive, this can be 'the first stage of the analysis' (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019). The transcription process took place after the final interview; however, I used my journal to reflect on what had been said and the questions asked previously before the start of every interview. Using Braun and Clark's (2013) notation system each interview was transcribed, resulting in two versions with the second omitting any detail relating to their care experience but unrelated to the research questions. The 'clean' transcript left out details about birth parents or names of services for example, as many of the young people were open about their lives and shared aspects of their experience that could identify them. The context of the discussion was not lost by having a redacted transcription, as it was always possible to refer to the original. During this early phase I referred to the notes I had made after each interview and during transcription and added ongoing thoughts or ideas to my reflective journal, underlining that data analysis is an ongoing process not an end product (Kumar, 2019).

Stage 2: Reading and familiarisation

At the beginning of the process, I printed off transcripts to read, but once restrictions were imposed due to the pandemic, I had no access to a printer and had to switch to using software to manage the data. The benefits of using computer assisted analytical software are the tools available to support coding and categorisation of material (Kumar, 2019). Software does not replace or act as a shortcut to analysis, as the researcher is still engaged with decisions and connections between ideas (Bazeley, 2007). I used *Taguette*, an open-source programme to move text and highlight ideas.

Familiarisation of the data was achieved through reading transcripts but also listening to the recordings without the task of simultaneous transcribing. In this phase researchers are encouraged to tune in to the data and highlight any early 'noticings', but also engage in critical questioning about meanings and sense making (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 205).

Stage 3: Coding – complete

Coding data into groups or labels moves the analysis process from 'description to interpretation' (Grbich, 2013, p. 259). At this stage Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that all of the data is coded according to the research question, using a single word or short phrase. An example of this stage of data coding is presented in Table 6.

Transcription Excerpt	Coding
my foster carers are really really nice people (.) like they are just like lovely and they (.) sat me down and like made me a nice dinner and stuff and said we just want you to know that no matter what like (.) you'll always have a space in our home (.) you are like a part of our family (.) you're our daughter so you can stay here – Liam	Discussion About Options <i>Staying Put</i> Feelings Pre 18 Feelings Post 18 - Reassurance The Carer's Perspective
you get all the drug people and (.) I know I shouldn't put it like (.) but is just don't sound safe living in a hostel (.) like leaving a care home (.) like living in a family unit and its like then you get put in a hostel like what is that (.) it's like you're not wanted like ((pause)) it's like a care home like Tracey Beaker (.) it was like just stay in your room you can't come (.) I didn't look round I just was like if you want me to move somewhere I'm telling you I'm not having this (.) – Beth	Discussion About Options Informing decision Feelings Post 18 - Fear

Table 10: Stage 3 – Excerpt of Coding – complete

Table 6 illustrates my early thinking about the relationships between the data and the research questions. For example, I started to see contrasts in the way that the participant's future options were discussed. Liam is presented with the option to stay as they are seen as part of the family, whereas Beth presents a negative picture of a specific housing project. The multiple codes are a common feature of early coding (Mason, 2018) and reflect my different thought processes at that time. The other element that became apparent during this stage was the impact of the extraction of specific text. Using a thematic approach can disaggregate the narrative of the participant and result in the reader missing the context of the person's overall account (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019). However, the story of the research is about how individual stories come together to shine a light on a subject (Rubin and Babbie, 2014) emphasising the need for the researcher to create a coherent and respectful narrative.

Stage 4 and 5: Searching for themes and reviewing themes

The next two stages are important in refining initial codes and developing a clearer sense of the relationships between codes and early themes (Grbich, 2013). During this phase I also revisited the original transcripts to review them separately from the initial coding to help me reflect on my thinking at the time. As I mentioned in the introduction, this phase of the analysis is iterative and repeating and revisiting ideas is part of the constructivist TA process (Braun and Clarke, 2013). During these stages, codes were renamed, and patterns identified that reflected meanings rather than frequency of occurrence. For example, the code identified in Table 6 as *discussion about options* changes to *information/misinformation* to reflect my changing interpretation of the factors young people drew on to make their decisions.

Stage 6: Defining and naming themes

The final analysis stage before writing is to pull together ideas into themes that are coherent and respond to the research questions but also are consistent with methodological design (Rubin and Babbie, 2014). There are different ways to present codes and themes, but I used a mind map programme called *Whimsical* to provide a visual depiction of my thinking. Figure 7 provides a section from the theme 'the proceduralisation of moving on'.

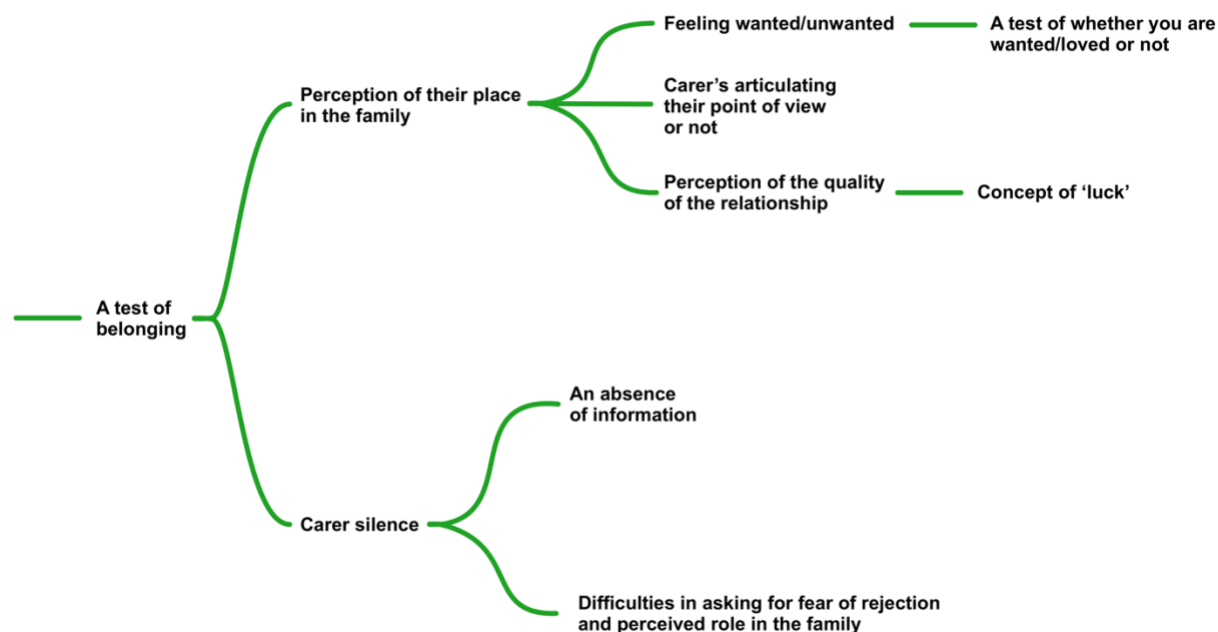


Figure 7: Section of mind map showing themes

In Figure 7 the grouping of codes relating to *Staying Put* have been broken down from the original coding seen in Table 6. The example in Figure 7 shows the progression of my thinking between the coding of coding mentions or language relating to *Staying Put* in Table 6, to a more analytical understanding of the young person's descriptions.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has detailed the research process and shown the thinking behind the decisions I made at each stage. Building on the discussion about the researcher's position, I have provided a rationale for undertaking an in-depth qualitative study. Qualitative research is about the story of a situation and the methodological discussion provides the ground rules for how that story is told (Silverman, 2011) and the next part of the thesis moves on to discuss the three themes generated from the data.

Part Three: Constructed Themes

The next three chapters present the themes constructed from the interviews with young people. Whilst the themes discussed are derived from the examination of young people's decisions regarding *Staying Put*, it became apparent that there were also more general reflections of the young people's care experience. Rather than disregard these issues, locating the *Staying Put* scheme alongside aspects of the care system developed a broader understanding of this transition point. Each identified theme related to a different element of experience from the period leading up to the young person's 18th birthday which also relate to the research questions set out in Chapter 1. Themes are subdivided, using the young people's quotes as subtheme headings, and the analysis of each issue is presented alongside extracts from the interviews with participants.

Chapter 7 discusses the theme of agency in the participant's historical decisions and their decision about *Staying Put* – relating to the research question about how much influence young people felt they had in making their decision. Chapter 8 refers to the question of the factors informing their decision-making and explores how sources of support, information and misinformation were experienced by the participants during this period. The last chapter in Part Three presents the intangible aspects of their experience, namely the multitude of feelings evoked during this period, which was the final question of my study. The responses identified in Chapter 9 relate to the transformation of their relationships through the application of policy in practice. Focus on the felt aspects of making this decision rather than the organisational factors, reflected the complexities of this transition in their care pathway.

As the aim of the study was to explore the experiences of young people making their decision about *Staying Put*, demographic and historic details were not routinely requested. During the interview, young people were asked about their current circumstances to help shape the questions, and in some cases young people shared details about their history and circumstances. To establish some sense of the participants, Table 7 indicates some basic information about each young person. Some information has been condensed in order to protect their identities. Discussion points have not been drawn from any patterns in the information presented in Table 7.

Young Person	Stayed Put (Y/N)	Current Situation	Age they left their carer(s)	Time in Placement
Beth	Y	Independent housing	18	<10 years
Cain	Y	Independent housing	18	4 years
Cally	Y	<i>Staying Put</i>	N/A	<10 years
Carrie	N	Supported accommodation	18	2 years
Eshal	N	Supported accommodation	17	5 years
Hannah	Y	No fixed address	20	3 years
Jonathan	Y	<i>Staying Put</i>	N/A	<10 years
Liam	Y	Temporary accommodation	20	4 years
Tyler	Y	Independent housing	18	2 years
Yannick	N	No fixed address	17	4 years

Table 11: Participant basic information

Table 7 identifies that two of the young people were in *Staying Put* arrangements at the time of the interview, however seven young people had previously stayed with their carers before moving to their current situation. Young people chose their pseudonym indicated in Table 7 from the list prepared by the advisory group, as discussed in Chapter 6. They did not all select gender or ethnically normative names, sometimes purposely due to concerns about being identified and other times inadvertently because they liked the name. As a result, the pronouns he/she have been replaced with they/their. In doing this a new identity is not assigned, rather a representative name denotes each participant. The young people were also given the option to choose pseudonyms for other people in their lives. Where they did this their names are included, otherwise descriptive terms like [foster carer] or [social worker] are inserted.

I was mindful about balancing the importance of reflecting how young people talked with the risk of caricaturing their voices through the spelling of the words they used. Removal of idiosyncratic language and terms can homogenise participants, but naturalised transcription can influence the reader as they may make assumptions about socio-economic or education

positions (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). I have chosen to present the young people's quotes as I heard them and have represented my own contributions in the same way. For clarity I have added some punctuation but left longer pauses indicated by (.) and inserted reference information using parentheses, for example [housing organisation].

Chapter 7: Situated Agency

The principal theme of this chapter is the question of the young people's agency within their care experience. In this context agency is understood as being the ability to take an active role in the function of their life (Wyness, 2000). As discussed in Chapter 5, the question of agency is complex and not something young people have or don't have, instead it is contingent on or bounded by the way that they are constructed by carers, professionals and processes and how they see themselves at particular points. That fluctuating sense of agency is reflected in this chapter, where the subthemes underline the situated nature of their involvement in decisions about their lives. In this chapter formal and informal decisions have been discussed interchangeably because of the way young people merged day-to-day issues with longer term concerns. Although I asked some general questions about what might appear smaller matters, the young people consistently connected all decisions, regardless of their nature. Figure 8 shows how the theme of this chapter is divided into three subthemes.



Figure 8: Theme 1 - Situated Agency

The first subtheme, 'I have my own mind', is about the participant's experiences of making decisions throughout their care pathway — showing how agency is situated based on types of decisions, laying the foundation to their decision-making about *Staying Put*. This is followed by 'it's for paperwork not for real' which is an exploration of the forums for decision-making, primarily the importance placed on the statutory review meeting — illustrating how agency is situated within a designated space. The final subtheme relates to the decision about *Staying Put*, which highlights the nuanced and complex nature of making decisions

about significant events and returns to the issue of their agency and how decisions are viewed by the young people.

‘I have my own mind’

Chapter 4 discussed the inconsistent levels of participation young people have whilst in the care system, and this variability is reflected in the views of young people in my study. Each young person provided examples that illustrated different degrees of involvement or exclusion in decisions and the differences in support to participate. Participants described a distinction between foster carers, social workers and personal advisors in how they facilitated involvement in decisions. For example, Liam described feeling fully in control of their life and attributed this to the support from their carer. Conversely, they described less favourable experiences with their social workers:

Liam: My carers are great they really respect me (.) I felt like I was in control of everything that was going on ... social workers (.) don't get me started (.) felt like no one cares and no one's bothered about asking me.

In contrast to Liam's feelings of control, Beth described feelings of exclusion despite having similar experiences to Liam. Beth felt involved by foster carers and with respect to social workers said:

Beth: I've never had a say my whole life.

For Liam and Beth their descriptions highlight a complex relationship between simultaneous feelings of exclusion and control. Participative actions by one party either offset the other or determined their overall experience. The separation in perception between foster carer and social worker was illustrated by both Beth and Eshal:

- Sally: Could'ya tell me a bit about your experience of being involved in making decisions?
- Beth: My carer was good at like getting us to say what we wanted (.) the social worker wouldn't, but they'd listen to my carer, so I just told her [foster carer] like what I wanted and then it was ok.
- Eshal: ... they [foster carers] always sat me down and talked to me like urm we was the same (.) like we were equal in like the holidays or like once they asked me what colour the new doors should be (.)
- Sally: What about your social workers?
- Eshal: Well not always urm the one I have now is good [name of personal advisor] (.) she's the best one I've had she is good at asking me and helping and that (.) the two I had before were like, sometimes talk to me and ask what I think but most of the time they didn't ask me unless they had to.
- Sally: Could you tell me what y'mean?
- Eshal: Well like when it was in front of people, like my carer or in the meeting.

Even if their social worker or personal advisor was seen positively, the young people consistently highlighted contrasting experiences between foster carers and social workers in involving them in decisions. This division was also apparent in the way young people talked about social care services. For example, Carrie described their historical experience of decision-making in a negative way and commented on the impact this had on their views of social work services:

- Carrie: I didn't really ever feel I had choices which is why I think I became so anti social services.

However, later, Carrie described their carers as integral to their support network, highlighting the disjunction between the two parts of social care services:

Carrie: Thankfully I've people to talk to like my carer.

Further distinction was made between the role of personal advisor and social worker, with the majority of young people expressing their appreciation for the way that an advisor supported and involved them in decisions. For example, Jonathan and Beth recognised the change in approach between the two roles, and Johnathan described the personal advisor as being different due to their separate location in the organisation:

Jonathan: I have a PA and now my rapport with her is amazing and we get on like we are friends and urm and I think that was really like needed ...

Sally: What d'you think the differences are about?

Jonathan: It's the organisation it's the collaboration between the two organisations because I think they [personal advisors] are separate departments.

Beth: But now it's fine it's like they [social workers] tell you do this do that and it shouldn't be like ... it is not like they know you (.) it's ok now I've got a PA.

Dissimilarities between different professionals underline the heterogenous nature of support young people received. Compartmentalising professionals or parts of a system suggest that even when positive experiences of participation in decisions are recognised, the lack of consistency in approach tended to define an overall sense of involvement. Feeling excluded despite also feeling involved at different levels and at different points in their experience seemed to indicate diverging practices between individuals, roles and young people. This chequered experience indicates that a worker's approach carries weight in the young

person's assessment of how much say they feel they have had. Regardless of whether or not the young person has genuinely participated in decisions that affect them, approaches taken by the worker or foster carer appear to bridge the distinction between being symbolically and fully involved. Being open and listening, as Johnathan noted 'like a friend', may well help the young person feel less emotionally alienated from the process.

Irrespective of the difference in experiences with workers and carers, young people highlighted a range of feelings about taking an active role in decisions concerning them. When asked how much say they had in decision-making, Tyler did not have a positive experience:

Tyler: I'd have a like thought, but then it would come to my social worker to say yes, or like what they thought about stuff (.) not just a here and now thing, it wasn't really my kinda say.

Tyler's description of having a view presented to a social worker for a final say, was used to describe decisions across a range of issues. Examples included whether or not they could dye their hair to more complex matters like seeing family members. For Tyler the feeling of passivity in any type of decision-making was present throughout their care experience and feeling excluded by social workers was a repeated pattern. For Tyler the acceptance of not being involved had to be weighed up with preserving the relationship with the social worker:

Tyler: You sorta get like used to it (.) I liked [name of social worker] so I kept quiet (.) you don't want like them to like think that you are difficult (.) they might leave.

Sally: Can I check what you're saying? I've understood that you mean you might go along with the social worker even if it wasn't what you wanted?

Tyler: Yes, it was easier in the long run.

Jonathan's experience was similar, outlining ongoing feelings of being marginalised in things that were important to them:

Sally: Could y'tell me a bit about how you feel you were involved in decisions about your life?

Jonathan: I don't think I was ... yeah you are not listened to (.) your considerations are not taken into account, um yes, I've had some helpful social workers with the amount I've had (.) but mostly your opinions are really sort of dulled and muted as such (.) your um voice isn't heard.

Cally also described how carers or social workers often made decisions on their behalf. Whilst Cally described this as a frustrating experience, they explained that these decisions often reflected the choices they would have made if they had been asked:

Cally: I reckon they think I've literally gone along [with them], but erm that's nothing like it (.) if I'd wanted something different that's what would've happened.

In one example Cally referred to living with a family member, where the social worker announced the decision once it had been made. Cally felt that the social worker would have the impression that they were fully in control of the situation whereas Cally's view was that their compliance was on their terms:

Sally: Can I check what you're saying is that you've made choices, but it hasn't seemed like your decision because other people have said what's happening?

Cally: That's it, I have never been asked really, but they think they're in control.

Cally's sense of control appears to be borne out of a coincidental agreement about a series of decisions made. Whilst the lack of involvement was experienced as frustrating and unhelpful, Cally believed that they could alter a decision if it contradicted their own idea. Having an internal trump card to challenge decisions made about them seemed to compensate for the lack of overt participation with workers and carers. Feeling denied in making or participating in decision-making processes appeared to leave young people with the impression that either their point of view was unimportant or that they were not permitted to share their perspective. Their experiences suggested a pattern of exclusion from participating in the majority of decisions they described. Although it was unclear if this applied to every type of decision, their descriptions of minor and more significant decisions appeared to co-occur. Conflating questions about day-to-day issues such as meal choices with visits to birth families, indicated that whilst there might be different levels of consequence, the feelings about being shut out from having a say had a cumulative impact of being out of control.

Being in control or recognised as being agentive was seen as an essential part of their care experience, however young people indicated that their voices were routinely stifled when it came to making decisions about their lives. In some cases, young people identified the act of being asked for their point of view, however remained unconvinced that they had a genuine stake in the final outcome. This feeling was exemplified by Jonathan's description that once voiced, their views became 'dulled and muted'. Whilst young people might have been asked to express a view, airing their opinion did not guarantee their participation in the decision.

Issues of control were echoed further in a number of the interviews when decision-making was discussed. In Beth's situation they felt that the social worker's involvement compromised their autonomy. In one example where Beth referred to friendships and romantic relationships, the intervention of a social worker was seen as controlling and unnecessary due to the oversight of the carer:

Beth: It's like how can you come out and control it, how can you all control me when I have a foster carer (.) she's the one. They don't get it.

Beth's understanding was that they were accountable to the foster carer and not the social worker, and they seemed to question why there were two authority figures in their life. Hannah and Jonathan also talked about the lines of authority between the social workers and their carers:

Hannah: What I didn't get was that my carer was brilliant and laid the law down when needed (.) but like even she would be worried about which way the social worker'd go. It's like they were the boss of us all with me at the bottom.

Jonathan: It was always carer first then they would have to check with my social worker (.) I didn't know who was in charge (.) it wasn't me that for sure (.) but it wasn't my foster carers neither.

The points made by Beth, Hannah and Jonathan indicate that the young person understood that they are only one party in the decision-making process. They appeared to recognise a hierarchy within their network, where they felt at the 'bottom' and least able to determine decision outcomes. Their responses also seem to suggest that their carers were excluded from decision-making which they felt was unjust and in conflict with the idea of a family placement. Jonathan also wondered how this would impact on other young people:

Jonathan: If the carers don't stand up to them [social workers] and we can't (.) then (.) what hope is there if you are like quiet or only just moved in.

Overwhelmingly social workers were seen as obstructive to participant's feelings of autonomy and involvement. Conversely foster carers were generally portrayed as being facilitative and able to advocate their views. Examples of feeling heard or involved often seemed reliant on their carer to either speak on their behalf or support them to share their view. Being active in decision-making processes did appear to be contingent on the carer's ability or willingness to facilitate their involvement, however young people indicated that this was not a failsafe situation. Although seen as a positive way to participate in decision-making processes, young people were aware of potential shortcomings in this dynamic. Some young people questioned or recognised the complexity of their carers' relationships

with social care professionals. Their responses indicated a perception that foster carers were also marginalised or excluded, or in some cases wary of repercussions to their relationship with social workers. In these discussions, young people appeared to be questioning both their agency and the agency of their foster carers. The interplay between young person, carer and social worker when making decisions, indicated a hierarchy of decision maker, where the young person and the carer's view were circumscribed by professionals. It was evident that whilst all parties were, to some degree, part of the decision-making process, not all participants had an equivalent say in deciding the outcome. Without the authorising behaviour of a social worker, matters of agency, control and involvement noted by young people, were uncertain.

Where the majority of young people felt they had little say in the choices about events in their life, Cain's carers and social workers appeared to provide a different balance. Cain felt that both their social workers and carers supported their decision-making and commented on a perceived advantage over other young people in care:

Cain: I never felt that I was made to do anything (.) they [social worker] would just sit down and listen (.) and I really felt it like they cared about what I wanted and what I said ((pause)) and my foster mum and dad are the same (.) they are brilliant (.) I know it's not the same for all kids in care.

In Cain's experience the hierarchy described by other young people was not apparent. Cain seemed to recognise that there was potential for this dynamic, and speculated why it was different for their carers:

Cain: There's no way my foster parents would take any shit from them [social worker].

Sally: What d'you mean?

Cain: Well like they are just so experienced and most of the people [social workers] that turn up aren't(.) they are like grateful (.) grateful that they know what they're doing (.) my last social worker before (.) didn't have a clue and the minute they started laying the law down

(.) my foster mum was like no that's not going to happen (.) it was alright after that.

Whether or not young people had carers to advocate for them, generally young people seemed to feel outside of decision-making. In some cases, this was understood as common to the care system, whereas others suggested that they were continually trying to assert their views. During the interviews young people appeared to be searching for explanations for their exclusion, and in some instances asking questions during the discussion:

Cally: Why didn't they?

Sally: Why didn't they ask you?

Cally: Yeah ...

Cally decided to talk to their personal advisor and foster carers after the interview, as the conversation had prompted questions about aspects of their care experience. Jonathan also appeared to have reflected on their experience and concluded that:

Jonathan: Urm I've had it where social workers don't ask me something about what's going to happen even though I have my own mind (.) that's what I'm talking about they don't think we are capable.

Questions about capability raised by Jonathan were reflected in other accounts, where young people assumed that social workers had determined not to ask or follow up their point of view.

Eshal: Suppose that they [social workers] think I'm thick (.) that's it (.) that's why they never asked me.

Carrie: They [social worker] took one look at me and thought (.) no not gonna bother asking that one.

Being excluded appeared to be associated with impressions of disrespect and inferiority, and not being asked, seen as a marker of unworthiness. On the basis of their accounts, young people seemed to present an internal conflict between knowing what they wanted to say and an incapacity to express their point of view. Wrangling with this situation was accompanied by a sense of indignation and resignation about not having the opportunity to speak out. Despite the opinions expressed about social workers, young people still expressed frustration about their worker's approach and desire for them to change. This may well be because they position their social worker as an advocate or enabler, and consequently measure what they want their worker to be against their lived experience.

Young people's expectations of social workers tended to stem from shared knowledge from other young people or foster carers. Expectations such as being involved and respected may well seem nebulous, however as described in Chapter 5, all social work practice is imbued with the rhetoric of rights and participation. Professional social work practice guidance, as well as relevant legislation, talks about the need for social workers to take the wishes and feelings of young people into account. Even if this is not the experience of young people, the language of involvement is likely to have filtered into everyday conversations between young people and their workers. Consequently, young people, on some level, expect to be involved. The discrepancies identified by the young people about what they felt should happen and what did happen in practice may well be exacerbated by having this knowledge.

'It's for paperwork not for real'

When talking about decision-making, young people described the environments in which their choices were being discussed. In some circumstances young people talked about informal discussions with carers and other professionals where they felt that their views were welcomed and valued. For example, Liam talked about sitting with carers over a meal to talk through different options or ideas:

Liam: When there was something to like go through, we'd all be together working it out.

However, the majority of young people referred to their statutory review meeting as *the* place where decisions were made or discussed. As outlined in the Glossary, this meeting, chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer also known as a review manager, is a regular forum where young people come together with professionals to review their plans. Participants consistently referred to the meeting as the primary site of decisions and for sharing information about their lives. Young people indicated that the meeting became a focal point for significant moments in their life, rather than a forum to acknowledge events or decisions made elsewhere. Beth saw this as the only opportunity to engage in discussions about the future:

Beth: I only saw them [social worker and other professionals] at the review so I had to take my chance.

For other young people the meeting was also seen as important but did not feel like an appropriate venue for dialogue. For Cally, raising issues at the meeting was unhelpful:

Cally: If it was something big they'd tell it there [the review meeting], erm not wait 'til it was nice and quiet and we had space (.) no (.) literally air the shit in front of any old person ((pause)) ... don't tell me things at a meeting (.) I can't listen, erm I mean what the hell would you do? erm literally asking me in front of Jenna, [foster carer] and dad (.) what choice do I have? (.) it's this or nothing.

Hannah also described discomfort at talking about personal issues at their meeting:

Hannah: There was this woman who worked at the school for [name of service] and she used to turn up and I'd think why is she there? (.) I don't want to say stuff in front of her.

Hannah went on to talk about the lack of choice in who attended the meeting. They saw this as emblematic of an ongoing pattern of their exclusion by social care. Hannah also reflected on an absence of involvement in the discussion itself, despite wanting to contribute:

Hannah: I don't feel like there was a lot of say in that it was kinda like we turn up (.) everyone talks around us and there we sat there (.) I nodded occasionally.

Other young people also viewed the meetings with scepticism and, in some cases, chose not to attend. Jonathan recognised that it was significant in gathering relevant people together, but felt that their own involvement in this decision was superficial:

Jonathan: The room was packed with people even though I told them I didn't like it (.) so I was asked but then when it came to it, it was forgotten.

Yannick's view was although the meeting felt awkward, it was important to attend:

Yannick: those meetings mate (.) they are the pits ... I hated them (.) but there was no way I'd not go to it like, I weren't gonna let them think I had nothing to hide (.) I wanted to have my say.

Young people tended to cite the statutory review meeting as the singular opportunity for their participation. The consistent association between articulating their views and the meeting, suggested that they saw it as an official delineated space for decision-making.

Characterising a meeting in this way meant that some young people felt that other opportunities to be involved were unavailable to them. As a result, it appeared that young people felt both compelled to attend but also fearful of expectations on them within this forum. A young person's ability to express a view within the meeting may have felt compromised by the presence of different professionals, family members and carers. This suggests that young people were having to assess which information to volunteer depending

on who was present. Having to make this calculation whilst simultaneously contributing to a discussion could explain why the meeting felt overwhelming. Even if the young person was keen to have their say, speaking out whilst weighing up any potential consequences may prevent their contribution to the discussion.

As young people shared how difficult they found participating in the meeting, they looked to the professionals to support them. Review managers were often marked as important to the young people. Beth had a positive relationship with their review manager and appreciated their knowledge of their family situation and saw them as an even handed professional who was a trusted advocate:

Beth: She was great (.) I had her from the start ... she knew what was right and what wasn't (.) she could look stuff up (.) about what we needed (.) thank god because the social worker didn't.

Although Cally described a positive relationship with their review manager, they were not seen as an advocate in this meeting:

Cally: I like her but (.) she's just like the rest of them, erm talked and talked and talked but not thinking about me ... didn't ask, didn't wanna hear it.

The review manager represented a consistent person who held an understanding of their lives. However, they were not seen as responsible for the difficulties they expected in contributing to the meeting. Young people appeared to place this responsibility squarely with the social worker. Hannah gave an example of a meeting where a visit with their sister was discussed:

Hannah: He knew I wanted to see her (.) but he sat there and said nothing about what we'd said ... I looked at him and thought (.) what's the point of you?

Hannah felt unable to talk about this visit due to the presence of their birth parents but expected the social worker to represent the issue they had previously discussed. Eshal and Liam also understood the role of their worker to be able to help them either before or during the meetings:

Eshal: I had no idea what I was walking into (.) she [the social worker] never said anything about what it'd be like (.) you'd think she'd warn me.

Liam: It's like they forget you're there (.) I expected her to stand up for me and see that I wasn't able to be honest (.) what's her job in the review if it isn't to help me?

The same expectations of support were not extended to their foster carers. In some cases, the participants understood carers to be in a position similar to theirs:

Beth: I felt sorry for her (.) this was in her own home, and she had all them telling her what to do.

Yannick: Val [foster carer] wouldn't take no shit from them but like she kept quiet to keep the peace.

Using a formal meeting to discuss milestones was generally accepted by the participants, however methods of participation and information sharing in front of multiple attendees were seen as problematic. Recognising their own difficulties in taking part in the meetings, young people seemed confused about the lack of intervention or support by their social worker above any other professional in attendance. This dereliction was not understood and the indisposition to facilitate their involvement was explained as workers being uncaring, incompetent or lacking insight into their experience. Having different expectations of the foster carers about their role in supporting their involvement indicates the way carers are positioned. The distinction drawn by young people seems to suggest that hierarchy of authority discussed in the previous section.

Other concerns were raised about the experiences of making decisions in a meeting setting. Yannick suggested that difficult discussions were held at the review meeting as a buffer for the social worker:

Yannick: It was like a well off set up (.) bring it on [raise an issue] then run to the hills (.) that was like how it was with the social workers (.) It was like she seemed to be scared so it was like safety in numbers for her at the review.

There also seemed to be confusion about why this was the only forum for decision-making and the appropriateness as a setting for important conversations. Young people all referred to their meeting as a space where professionals presented significant questions or new information, often without introduction or context. Tyler and Cally described the use of the meeting in this way as an ongoing pattern:

Tyler: It was sorta like expect the unexpected (.) like you'd turn up and a whole new problem would like be put on you (.) like why do it here?

Cally: Bet it come up at me review (.) everything else did (.)

Sometimes young people had notice of an issue being raised at the meeting, however this did not seem to help the young person prepare or be involved in the discussion. On the whole Liam did not attend their meetings, but recalled a specific situation where they wanted to be represented and chose to attend:

Liam: It was like a serious one that I had to be at (.) that was like quite a big deal I didn't say anything for the whole time (.) sat there like looking at my hands rather than take part in the discussion (.) how are you like meant to answer a question when everyone's staring at you?

Viewing the meeting as a demarcated space for their involvement may indicate how young people and their supporting professionals see or frame decision-making. The issues that young people described were generally intricate matters involving planning and decisions that had emotional as well as practical implications. Their accounts seem to evidence that complex issues were often simplified to bitesize pieces of information which were then shared in meetings. In principle, this could truncate unwieldy and often sensitive choices in a more manageable way. However, in doing so it seems that using the review to parachute in difficult ideas or subjects may mean that young people's need and ability to discuss and consider options is limited due to the format of and reliance on the meeting. Liam's experience of talking and receiving information at a meeting suggested that a statutory review meeting is not a suitable vehicle to share new information nor facilitate participation in important decisions. In addition, the consequence of not feeling able to participate may well lead to young people feeling that their inability to speak out is about their competence. Young people appeared to feel exposed and unclear about the parameters of the discussion. The language they used to describe their meetings seemed to evidence personal feelings of ineptitude or uncertainty.

Within this section, young people's accounts have demonstrated both the importance they have placed on the statutory review meeting, but also their feelings about its suitability as a place for decision-making. Many of the young people including Jonathan and Cain questioned why the meeting operated in this way, and concluded that it was not for their benefit:

Jonathan: It's like we're being asked because we have to be (.) it's not about us really ... it's for paperwork not for real.

Cain: You have to ask yourself why are they doing this?

Sally: D'you mean (.) the review?

Cain: Yeah (.) who would put a teenager in a room full of social workers unless there is something in it for them (.) it's all a show they don't mean any of it.

The statutory review meeting as a decision-making space did not appear to reflect the level of involvement young people felt they needed. In the context of their care experience the review meeting seemed to represent a theatre where decision-making was played out rather than a participative or facilitating environment. Regardless of the issue discussed, participants referred to a veneer of involvement by being at the meeting, suggesting that attendance gave the impression of engagement in any decisions made. How the meeting was presented by young people suggested an element of compliance with a system they disputed. They appeared distrustful of the authenticity of the meeting and saw the format of publicly posed questions or information being for the benefit of the organisation rather than a way to seek their views. In summary, the young people's relationship with the review meeting seemed conflicted due to the perception of curtailed opportunity and feelings that once at the meeting, decision-making was performative and not a meaningful activity.

'There's no turning back'

The next section centres around decision-making about *Staying Put*. Throughout this thesis the plan to remain with foster carers has been presented as a decision to reflect the terminology within local authority policies and the guidance issued by the Fostering Network, set out in Chapter 1, where emphasis is placed on involvement and choice. The young people in my study also recognised that it was a choice to make and highlighted the importance of their role. For example, Beth said that young people:

Beth: Need some help making that decision but not be told.

The question of *Staying Put* as a decision was questioned by some of the young people. In some instances, this was because they did not recognise the need to make a decision as they had made a mutual choice with their carers based on a longstanding understanding. For example, Hannah's carers talked about *Staying Put* throughout their time in placement:

Hannah: I think it was almost a given like at 17 (.) because I had such a good relationship with my carer, that everyone assumed that I was going to stay there, and I'd already spoken about it with my carer.

Liam had a similar experience, explaining that the foster carers raised the scheme early on in their placement:

Liam: It was always on the table.

For both Hannah and Liam their hopes of staying were aligned with their foster carer's thinking, and consequently alternative options were not considered. For other young people, the issue of choice was questioned for other reasons. In Yannick and Eshal's case the premise of *Staying Put* being a decision was disputed:

Yannick: Well to be fair you said like a decision, it weren't no decision it was like, it's gonna happen.

Eshal: Like I said it came out of the blue (.) I knew it was odd as my social worker came when she didn't need to, she said that she'd found me somewhere to go when I was ready and to let her know when that was going to be.

Yannick and Eshal's experience of being told they would not be staying echoed Cally's recollection of being told that they would be remaining with their carers. Unlike Hannah and Liam, they did not feel part of the process or reassured by being told what to do:

Cally: I had no idea what to do so I went along with it.

The question of *Staying Put* being a meaningful decision was important to the young people. Some expressed feelings of resignation that this decision was like many others they had experienced, whereas others felt that there was some level of involvement in what they wanted to do. Beth's experience of feeling involved was not always positive, but they described their decision to stay with the foster carers as surprisingly inclusive:

Sally: So, from what you've said, the decision to stay with your carer did feel like your decision?

Beth: Yeah, for once it was.

Beth went on to talk about the significance of making this decision, and was relieved that they were able to determine what they would do after their 18th birthday:

Beth: That was like the decision about the next few years of my life, it was completely different (.) I had to think that through.

The weight of this decision was also felt by Yannick, who felt frustrated by being unable to have a say, despite feeling that it was significant:

Yannick: What do you say when you're being asked (.) so what do you want to do with the rest of your life? I dunno because no one asked me.

Cain and Jonathan also shared the view, that deciding to stay was far reaching:

Cain: It was such a relief (.) urm I suppose because it was like the rest of my life stuff (.) I was ok with it though (.) I knew that my foster parents were right behind me.

Jonathan: It's a big decision.

The relief of making the decision reflected an uncertainty resulting from this period in their lives. Despite knowing that they would be staying with their carers Liam was concerned about the ramifications of their decision:

Liam: I remember I was like, really freaked out.

Beth suggested that the apprehension brought about by making this decision was due to the timing of the choice:

Beth: It was like well dramatic (.) about a month before my 18th and you have to make the decision (.) because if you decide that your gonna move out then they have to find you accommodation somewhere.

Later in the interview Beth reflected on the uniqueness of this period and described the decision at this point in their life:

Beth: It's like once you have said, that's it, no turning back.

On the basis of the young people interviewed for my study, the choice to stay with their foster carers felt life changing. Regardless of whether or not young people remained with their carer, there was consensus that the implications were long lasting and that it was an irreversible decision. Although their descriptions of this period relayed feelings of fear and trepidation, young people appeared to accept that this was part of their care experience. Some young people related this decision to coming into care or other significant events in their lives. The accepting attitude of young people suggests a tolerance threshold for tumult and uncertainty as a result of their care experience. As set out in Chapter 4, the care system does not always provide a stable and nurturing environment for children and young people with many experiencing multiple changes and transitions. Although *Staying Put* was introduced to provide continuity, the experience of young people indicated that this is not without issues. Delaying the move from a foster carer is a supportive policy, however the implications are that making this decision can be as challenging as it was at 16 and how it might be at 21. Among those young people who had stayed put, their responses suggested that delay may not suspend feelings of anxiety about the transition from care.

The impression held by young people about the gravity of their choice seemed to account for the pressure they felt, and the anxiety experienced when unclear about what would happen. Given the importance they placed on *Staying Put*, it appeared to accentuate the participants' need to express their point of view, which did not always seem possible in the period leading up to their 18th birthday. The different descriptions of the *Staying Put* decision suggest a level of ambiguity in both how the decision was framed and whether it was posed as a decision at all. For some young people this was appropriate as it reflected the nature of their relationships with carers and their ongoing feelings of autonomy. In these situations, the views of young people and foster carers were congruent and young people considered that they were part of an ongoing discussion about their place in the family.

In other instances, young people did not experience *Staying Put* as a choice. Where there was no decision to be made, young people described either being told what would happen or that *Staying Put* was not mentioned. Those young people who could not clearly identify *Staying Put* as a decision expressed confusion about why this was the case. The participant's references to the decision to stay put indicated a perplexing picture, where there appeared to be an indistinct presentation of options. In addition to the confusion about options it was also unclear how social workers established what young people wanted to do. Despite young people recognising that this decision is not straightforward, they appeared willing to try to engage with the complexity and different considerations in a more explicit

way but did not appear to be given this opportunity. Their desire to participate also highlighted the emotional and subjective nature of decision-making suggesting that it is not a rational or calculating process, as it might appear to social workers and managers. Feeling unaware of their options as well as feeling unable to participate in the decision suggests that there are issues in how *Staying Put* is presented by social workers to young people. The lack of clarity and opaque presentation of the options may indicate the social worker's hesitancy in approaching such a complex decision with the young person.

Throughout this chapter the young person's agency appears to have been dependent on various contextual factors. The situated nature of their ability to make decisions underlines the tensions between participatory sentiments in policy and their lived experiences. The next chapter continues to recognise issues of dissonance, this time between the young person and their surrounding support network.

Chapter 8: Problematic Misalignment

This chapter focuses on the theme of problematic misalignment. The sense of misalignment between young people and their support systems is echoed in relationships, expectations, information and understanding. The wide variances in support, information and experiences with professionals seem to feature at key moments in the young people's lives and indicate the factors that have informed their decision-making. Figure 9 shows how the theme of this chapter has been divided into subthemes.

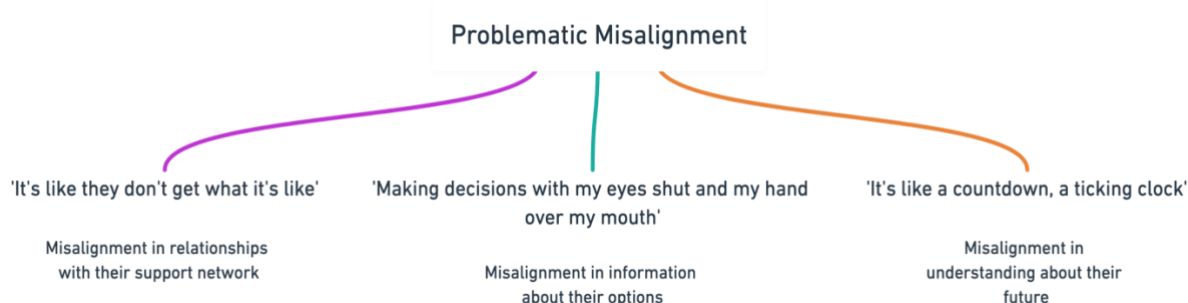


Figure 9: Theme 2 - Problematic Misalignment

The first subtheme in this chapter, notes the central role of the allocated social worker and the tensions in their relationships with young people leading up to and including the period before their 18th birthday. This discussion is followed by an exploration of young people's accounts of receiving advice and the complexity of information sharing in advance of their decision about *Staying Put*. The chapter concludes with a subtheme about the impact of feeling at odds with the social work system due to the paucity of information young people felt they had, specifically, the way young people viewed the future.

'It's like they don't get what it's like for us'

Referring to the period leading up to the young person's 18th birthday, participants talked about the importance of relationships within their support network. They highlighted the role these relationships played in providing information, and who they talked to when trying to make decisions about their future. Some young people talked to foster carers or the carer's social worker:

Cain: My carer's social worker talked to me about it [next steps].

Hannah: It was very much my carer, and her family.

Some young people did not feel that their carers or workers would be able to help them and sought advice from their friends and birth families:

Liam: My friends, not my family.

Jonathan: I could only talk to my mates.

In Yanick, Eshal's and Carrie's situation, *Staying Put* was not raised as a choice for them, and options about their future were only briefly introduced. All felt a level of uncertainty about who to talk with at this time:

Yannick: Val and Tone [foster carers] didn't say anything and like [social worker] didn't say nothing.

Sally: Was there anyone else you could talk to?

Yannick: There was this woman at school I talked to, but I still didn't want talk to her really (.) not to do with her, just me, what would she know?

Sally: Did anyone talk to you about this?

Eshal: No that was what I was thinking about telling you ... nothing from the social worker, me carers her social worker ... it was like no mention of nothing until I was nearly moved out.

Carrie: Thankfully I have people to talk to like my old carer, and my mum has been helpful but without them I would be screwed. I think I just felt like it was this way for everyone with a social worker (.) but I know that this isn't the case now. It's not great.

In Carrie's response they expressed relief at having identified their own sources of support but felt let down by their social worker. Overall, young people wanted to turn to their social worker, as they believed that a social worker is someone that should help them. Liam described their thinking about social workers before becoming *looked after*. Liam presented this point as their ideal situation:

Liam: They should be like, if there's anything you feel worried about just ask because social workers are meant to be like the family, aren't they?

Whilst, in some cases, a social worker's role in providing information fell below the expectations of the young people, for other young people these expectations were met. Tyler felt they could talk to their social worker:

Sally: Where'd you go to for support at this time?

Tyler: It was through social workers (.) my social worker mainly.

Throughout each interview young people often described their feelings about social workers. Overall participants tended to be critical about their involvement. However, these views seemed to stem from negative experiences rather than an inherent problem with the role. When discussing who young people wanted to talk to and where they wanted information to

come from, overwhelmingly their responses indicated that their social worker would be their preferred choice. On the basis of the interviews young people asserted that the social worker should be pivotal in supporting them by sharing information, but also in facilitating their thinking processes. In Chapter 7, participants talked about their expectations of their social worker in relation to support for involvement in decision-making and other aspects of their care experience. However, when talking about their decisions about *Staying Put* and/or next steps young people felt that social workers fell short of being the main source of information about available options. There were different views as to why social workers did not live up to this expectation or could not fulfil a supportive role for them. Some young people had longstanding negative views of social workers which influenced their thinking:

Liam: I've had some pretty shitty social workers, that's why I like didn't go to her.

Liam's decision was based on previous interactions with workers, whereas Beth's relationship with social workers was more complex. Beth described a combination of historical associations with the experience of being removed from their birth family's care, and the experience of having multiple workers:

Beth: Sometimes I feel like I can't talk to them because I feel like when they put me in care ... I don't like them (.) urm they kept changing it made it hard to tell one from the other.

A lack of consistency in their worker was also cited as an explanation for not seeking their support. Jonathan felt strongly that the turnover of social workers eroded their ability to build relationships:

Jonathan: I've had a lot of them, probably in the 40s ... sometimes I wonder who to go to because my social worker changed then I would get a temporary one then I don't know who they are because I haven't had a chance to like introduce myself then because I am introduced to a new one.

Sally: Sounds like a lot of change.

Jonathan: Yeah, urm it's difficult because trust is a massive thing especially for us [children in care] ... I would build a rapport with them and then the new one would come along, there were so many changes and shuffles round internally (.) there was a lot of issues going on and I didn't know who to go to.

As well as finding it difficult to maintain relationships due to the frequency changes in worker, young people described social workers as being unreliable in their interactions. Participants gave examples across their care experience, that made them question the dependability of their worker:

Liam: It's not like they weren't nice (.) it's like they were nice, but it was like they were kind of useless, like I'd be like I wanna do something how do I go about it (.) and they'd be like oh I'll go back to my line manager, and I'll ask them ... they never did come back and so you are left without an answer.

Hannah: I almost felt like if I had anything to ask, I'd probably go to her first [foster carer's social worker] rather than my actual social worker (.) just because they [their social worker] always seemed, oh I'm not really sure about this I need to ask someone

Carrie: My social workers were absolutely useless (.) the whole time, never did what they said they would.

Factors of uncertainty, turnover and mistrust, were sometimes coupled with a perception that social workers did not care about their situation or want to get to know them. Some young people consequently perceived social workers as unable to empathise with their circumstances:

Jonathan: It's like they don't get what it's like for us [children in care]. I wonder how they would cope with it all. Why don't they care?

Mistrust in the system may also be the consequence of a high turnover in staff, highlighted by many of the young people in my study. As detailed in Chapter 3, the issue of multiple social workers is common to contemporary practice and the impact on young people is well documented. Young people in my study appeared resigned to the frequency of changes in their worker and this acceptance of how things were for them appeared to accentuate their sense of isolation when making their decision about *Staying Put*. The sense that social workers seldom stuck around long enough to know them or care what happened to them was evident in a number of their responses, for example in Liam and Cally:

Liam: You just get used to it, it's lucky that I know what I want and that my carers are so brilliant.

Cally: They [social workers] do their thing and I'm left doing mine (.) it's always been that way (.) I doubt they even worry about it [referring to Carrie leaving care].

In all the accounts there appeared to be a reliance on the social worker to provide them with the building blocks for decisions about their transition from the foster care placement. However, the social worker did not seem to be able to fulfil this role, leaving young people with gaps in what they felt they needed. As discussed in Chapter 7, young people described how foster carers were sometimes able to compensate in the event that the social worker was unable to support them, for example, in day-to-day decision-making experiences. However unlike in other aspects of their care experience, foster carers did not seem to be able or willing to fulfil this role when deciding what to do next, leaving young people without the anchoring presence they wanted and needed. Young people did not suggest that their carers should be able to make up for the shortcomings of social workers in providing them with the necessary information and support. Moreover, many of their comments suggested that foster carers shared their feelings of dissatisfaction in this respect. The fact that the

young person and foster carer shared a common understanding of this issue further highlighted the misalignment in understanding between them and the social worker.

Other participants suggested that a social worker's range of responsibilities obstructed their ability to work effectively. Young people gave examples of meetings that felt like an imposition on the social worker's time. Cally was understanding of their social worker's situation, as their worker had shared feelings of being overworked and pressured to meet deadlines. Consequently, Cally found it difficult to raise issues with them. They concluded that the reason the social worker did not ask questions or spend time with them, was because any new problem contributed to the social worker's workload:

Cally: She [the social worker] never seemed to have time to stay erm she'd be like, this needs doing erm what you doing about this? telling me she hasn't done her paperwork (.) telling me she had too much to do ((pause)) I think if it had been different, I might've like needed her more (laughs) erm can't complain though (.) before her I had loads of social workers.

Sally: How d'you feel when she says things to you about her work?

Cally: Well it's annoying as I wanted to ask her things (.) like you should (.) erm I think she didn't ask me cause she didn't have time (.) this happened once when she asked me about my dad (.) I cried a bit because it's hard [removed section about the situation] you could tell she regretted it straight off (.) looking at her watch (.) trying to get me to change the subject (.) I don't blame her erm its depressing isn't it?

Similarly, Cain and Yannick were sympathetic towards their workers, as they had also been told about the social worker's volume of work:

Cain: I know they have a lot of paperwork so maybe they don't have time to find out [about what Cain thought about leaving care].

Yannick: She just had loads of kids to visit and didn't really know much about foster [care].

Whilst all participants recognised the role of the social worker in supporting them, when asked about the key sources of advice and support, relationships with social workers were sometimes seen as complicated to manage. Consequently, young people became mindful of the presentation of the worker when weighing up how to approach them. Some participants felt they had to navigate the relationship with the social worker in order to avoid conflict. Hannah described their experience of thinking about how to ask questions about their care:

Hannah: It's an odd relationship, well like they know you and you can like build up to (.) knowing about them and what they might get funny about (.) you know like, there are certain things that they take kinda personally.

Eshal and Carrie also reflected on their thoughts about working with a social worker and suggested a frictional tone to their relationships:

Eshal: I just felt that it was not worth the hassle of getting them on side (.) they would do what they wanted anyway.

Carrie: It was always a battle with her.

Not all of the young people described difficulties in their relationships with social workers. Cain, Eshal and Yannick had more positive views about some of their workers and, in Cain's situation, felt that they had built the foundations of a positive relationship:

Cain: My social workers were good at involving me with things, we get on alright.

Eshal: We got on ok.

Yannick: To be fair the last one was like alright.

There may be a number of reasons why a social worker is not able to meet the expectations of young people making a decision about their future. Participants speculated about why they felt their relationship with their worker was an issue, at this point in their care pathway. The identified barriers to their relationships were varied with some being personal to the young person and other explanations common to all young people in my study. Ideas ranged from lack of care to the number of social workers in their lives. Where young people realised the extent of the social worker's workload, their empathy for the worker's plight, may well have deterred them from asking questions or placing further demands on their time. By establishing a picture of excessive work or exposing signs of preoccupation, social workers may imply that they are unavailable, putting off a young person when they may already feel daunted by their situation.

As noted previously in this chapter, young people were often told that their worker would need to consult their manager for the answer to questions they posed. Whilst young people accepted that this was reasonable in some situations, they seemed to question the frequency of this response especially as they noted that the worker would often fail to come back with an answer. Consistently deferring decisions to managers or other colleagues seemed to leave young people with questions about their social worker's ability to do their job. The perception that they had no knowledge and needed to seek help further seemed to convey that their worker was incapable or unable to help them make their decisions. As well as impacting on the relationship itself due to a lack of confidence felt by young people, the presentation of the social worker may perpetuate an overall doubt in the profession.

'Making decisions with my eyes shut and my hand over my mouth'

In discussions about *Staying Put* and their lives beyond their 18th birthday, young people talked about the information they received about this period in their lives. The next section highlights their understanding of what was on offer to them at this time, beginning with *Staying Put* then moving onto the other possibilities for their next steps.

Some young people associated the *Staying Put* scheme with paperwork they had been given, rather than an understanding of what it entailed. Broader discussion about *Staying Put* varied across the participants, with some young people unaware of the option to remain with their carers. Carrie was one of the young people who found out about *Staying Put* through their participation in this research:

Carrie: I hadn't heard of *Staying Put* until you told me about it.

Other young people were aware of *Staying Put*, but unclear about the parameters of the arrangement and their involvement in it:

Liam: I think I am in the *Staying Put* scheme, I'm not sure.

In the time leading up to their 18th birthdays, social workers and foster carers introduced and explained *Staying Put* to varying degrees. Some young people seemed aware of what it entailed and how it related to their day-to-day lives. In Cain's situation the foster carer's social worker took a lead role:

Sally: Had you heard the term *Staying Put*?

Cain: Yeah, my carer's social worker talked to me about it (.) and we went through the paperwork and all that.

Cain's foster carers suggested that they would talk about *Staying Put* with their own social worker because they were not confident that Cain's social worker understood what needed to happen:

Sally: What about your social worker?

Cain: My social worker didn't know about *Staying Put*.

Other young people felt that their social worker did know about *Staying Put*, however found the information they provided incoherent which left them with questions about what it meant for them. Tyler and Beth's account are examples of this unclear position:

Tyler: I just think it seemed a bit random, like food, without food and then it was like oh if you earn a certain amount, they can take more money then (.) now if you don't have a job (.) There was kinda so much on the money and not (.) on anything else.

Sally: Can you remember anything else they told you about what it would be like?

Tyler: I can't really like remember but I don't think they said anything else (.) I think it was focused on other stuff like the paperwork.

Sally: Did you understand what *Staying Put* was about?

Beth: No way (.) I had to comply with like household rules but to be honest there was a lot I didn't get.

Other young people were also given information but had the impression that they were not getting the full picture. Liam felt that the social worker needed to be clearer:

Liam: I think they should be a lot more um a lot clearer about the options, they kind've tell you a bit about *Staying Put* but like not loads.

Jonathan's view was that the social worker could not provide more information as they appeared not to understand *Staying Put*. They had specific queries about the written information sent out in a document they had been given:

Jonathan: I was given a plan and it had a list of money all set out then a new leaflet came, and it left me with no money after I paid what it said, my foster parents did not understand, and I did not understand my foster carers were quite unsure (.) they weren't given any information about it either.

As Jonathan wanted to make sense of the proposed arrangements, they sought clarification from their social worker, but were left feeling frustrated:

Jonathan: There was no guidance from the social worker no guidance from the review manager (.) it was here's a leaflet you think about it (.) no one went through it no one knew about it (.) it was a bit of a nightmare.

Later on in the interview, Jonathan described their recollection of discussions with the social worker further, setting out their perception and hypothesis of what it might be like if they were in less secure circumstances:

Jonathan: With the social worker it was like (.) oh we don't know, or I will have to ask (.) it was all too late. I wasn't having discussions about all this until after I was 18 (.) for some it might be too late. then you are out on your own living god knows where.

Beth shared Jonathan's frustrations and also questioned the social worker's comprehension of *Staying Put*:

Beth: There was a full on stack of papers (.) and all that stuff (.) and it was like if you break any of those rules you get 28 days to leave (.) or you can hand your 28 day notice in to leave (.) so basically you mess up or you do something wrong my carer can give me a 28 day

notice to find somewhere else ... this is all she had on *Staying Put* ((pause)) she knew nothing about it and didn't seem to want to ask me about it.

Hannah and Carrie shared the view that the social worker was ill equipped to support them in making this decision, furthermore Hannah also identified how information was delayed and delegated to other workers:

Hannah: There was always a lot of oh oh oh I don't really know ... it was a case of when you get your PA [personal advisor] they'll be able to tell you everything (.) you need to know about *Staying Put* ... we had a contract with like a rent agreement and that was all organised by the PA after I turned 18.

Carrie: Well she just knew nothing (.) but also did nothing (.) it was like it was nothing to do with her and all she wanted to do was get away as fast as she could.

The majority of the young people commented on the apparent lack of knowledge they felt social workers had about *Staying Put* and any alternative post 18 options. From their responses it appeared that social workers were either unsure how to talk about the subject or did not have a full enough grasp of the information young people needed. Young people presented social workers as ill-informed or incompetent as they seemed unable to respond to basic questions about *Staying Put* or related matters. It is not for this study to speculate about individual workers, however the experiences described by young people indicate a discrepancy between the knowledge of the social worker and personal advisor highlighting a misalignment in support at key moments.

The turnover in personnel described by young people could also account for gaps in understanding as workers would be in a constant state of renewal rather than consolidation. Whatever the explanation for the apparent lack of understanding, young people felt inadequately supported and did not always have the worker they needed for their situation. The impact of gaps in support or information on the young person's decision will be addressed later in this chapter, however the presentation of social workers spoke of misalignments in their relationships with social workers that went deeper than their failure to communicate fully about *Staying Put*.

Beth: They've [the social worker] never got me before and so I wasn't surprised that they didn't turn up when I wanted them.

Yannick: I've heard so much about how bad it can be [relationship with the social worker] that I'd always prepare myself for the worse when a new one came along (.) they one at the end was like better but still didn't really get it.

Although relationships with social workers were difficult at times, young people still looked to them for guidance. Interviews with young people in my study suggest a selective approach to information sharing by social workers and foster carers about *Staying Put* and other transition decisions. In discussions about possible options, participants described experiences of receiving fragments of information when talking about what to do next. In the case of *Staying Put*, emphasis seemed to be placed on specific aspects of the arrangement, for example finances, paperwork and in Beth's case, the conditions of termination. Young people felt that the bigger picture was missing from these conversations and even when young people stayed with carers they appeared to be unsure about what this meant or how it would end. In these situations, it might result in delaying a transition for young people, but feelings of uncertainty are only deferred until a later date.

Some young people were presented with local authority leaflets about *Staying Put*, however suggested that these documents were impenetrable, leaving them in a state of ignorance. In some circumstances having an approximate understanding of something was acceptable. For example, in Hannah's situation they appeared to feel secure in other aspects of their placement and accepted that the carer would support them in any situation. However, for other young people, having a fragmented picture of *Staying Put* tended to raise anxieties and cause tensions within established relationships with foster carers. The perceived vagueness of the social worker seemed to indicate to young people that either they didn't know about *Staying Put* or other options or that they had purposefully chosen not to share information with them. Young people appeared to think that once *Staying Put* or other choices were agreed or suggested, social workers or foster carers had no further need to talk about details.

As well as *Staying Put*, young people talked about other accommodation options they had been given. Some felt fully informed and understood the implications for each choice they made:

Cain: When [name of social worker] took me to show me where other kids in care live, I thought that would be what it was like, I got it.

As previously noted, some young people were not given the option to remain with their carers and were reliant on other people to help them identify what to do next. Carrie described the presentation of information given about their next steps and referred to their choice as a difficult ultimatum:

Carrie: Leading up to my 18th birthday I knew that I had the choice of the [name of supported housing project] or [name of supported housing project] and I said what would happen if I didn't choose either of those and said no to both and my social worker said you would be making yourself voluntarily homeless.

Carrie felt that the two options suggested were unsuitable based on distance from their established support network and knowledge of other people's experience in the proposed setting. They went on to say that they wanted to make this decision and hoped that they would be able to do some research with their social worker and agree their final selection. However, Carrie's experience did not proceed in this way:

Carrie: I was looking into semi-independent [accommodation] um so I was like wanting to know where all the places are, how much money it would cost (.) I wanted to find out for myself if that was going to be it [moving from the carers] (.) I didn't want them to come back to say well this is a place, and you are going tomorrow.

Sally: So what happened?

Carrie: It was straight out looking at places without my input (.)

In some circumstances young people were provided with information about what their options were. Tyler explained that the social worker presented them with a clear choice:

Tyler: It was like *Staying Put* or hostel.

However, Tyler was also interested in accommodation from the local Council, however felt that their social worker was unsure about the process:

Tyler: They give you a leaflet about like [removed name of housing department) but you have to bid and go through it (.) it could be years before you get something (.) social workers didn't know anything it was all a mess really (.) I think I got lost and they were like (.) I don't know how it works.

Liam's plan was to remain with their carers, and they did recall being given some information, however felt that it was inadequate and would have welcomed a more comprehensive picture:

Sally: Did you get given any of the other options?

Liam: Yeah but not to the extent that it would actually help me.

Other young people talked about their discussions during this time and felt that there was a patchwork of information. Tyler referred to a vagueness in how and when information was shared:

Tyler: It was probably talked about quite a bit, but it wasn't like really serious it was just like little bits in the conversation (.) that's kinda the problem (.) no one really said anything (.) not even at meetings.

Tyler speculated that the absence of information could have been because they were planning to stay with their carers:

Tyler: I don't think anyone said much (.) I don't think it was discussed much as the thing really (.) erm perhaps because there was no point in talking about another option?

The young people's accounts described so far, detail variances in what they were told about potential accommodation or future options. However, other young people reflected a different approach, where their social worker or foster carer gave them information alongside their personal opinion of the service discussed. Cally talked about the way their social worker shared some information about a supported living scheme:

Sally: Where you aware of other options for you?

Cally: Erm the only thing the social worker said was about going to [name of service] ((pause)) you wouldn't wanna go though she said it was a shit hole (.) I think that was to put me off.

Cally seemed aware that the social worker had an agenda in this situation, however Beth and Eshal did not speculate about the language used to describe difference services:

Beth: I was refusing hostels (.) and I was not going to risk myself I either wanted to be there or (.) be in my own place (.) not sharing no it's not safe (.) like I'd heard like stories about people taking stuff.

Sally: Who do you mean?

Beth: The social workers, [name of foster carer] told me about it, I got options of hostels eh (.) shared accommodation (.) and like the hostels, they were like ones where there's like loads of care leavers and all that stuff.

Sally: What sort of stuff?

Beth: You get all the drug people and (.) I know I shouldn't put it like (.) but it's just a halfway house and don't sound safe living in them.

Eshal: The one [supported accommodation] near me is an absolute dump.

Sally: Did you go and visit it before?

Eshal: No, my carer told me.

Beth and Eshal's perception of other types of accommodation stemmed from conversations with their immediate support network. Tyler also heard rumours from other young people in foster care placements and assumed their thinking had been shaped by their experience or their carer's experience. When they asked their social worker to help them make sense of what they had heard, the social worker reinforced the perceptions of other people:

Tyler: It was like she confirmed all my worst fears about the place (.) not sure she said she'd been to them all, but she was like (.) they are not nice and like not for you, different sorts of people.

In addition to feeling that information was shared in a piecemeal way, young people also highlighted some of the messages from social workers and carers about different options they were considering. It appeared that information provided by social workers and in some cases foster carers was presented according to the outcome wanted by the social worker or foster carer. In circumstances where young people were discussing *Staying Put*, other types of accommodation appeared to be used to offer contrast to remaining with foster carers, rather than possible alternatives. Rather than being presented in neutral way, alternatives were maligned, or factors exaggerated to the extent that young people became fearful of moving to these settings or the negative images perpetuated stories they already had been

given. Supported accommodation appeared to be framed by use of language like 'hostel' or 'halfway house' and in some cases more explicitly as 'dumps' or 'shit holes' and in doing so curated an image of each particular option. Some young people appeared to recognise that their social workers were using these terms to influence their thinking. However, for other young people they did not seem to question the information they had been presented with and appeared to have made their choices with these ideas in mind.

Believing that this was a decision they should make, some young people were frustrated by the lack of involvement and the level of information they had been given. Yannick described their surprise at not being given a choice:

Yannick: There was no like do you wanna do this, or do you wanna do this ...
I thought like the social worker would come and be like (.) do you
wanna live here or like do you wanna live here. It was like I was
invisible.

Carrie summed up the feelings of many of the participants:

Carrie: It felt like I was making these huge decisions with my eyes shut and
like my hand over my mouth most of the time (.) it's like asking
someone to like make like a random guess about what to do next
(urm) to be honest it was like on some freaky game show deciding
who to marry without knowing them.

As well as accounts of patchy information sharing, some young people described an absence of any options or information. Jonathan questioned why their social worker did not talk with them, despite not knowing what the plans would be:

Jonathan: My foster parents were keen to keep me until I was about 20ish I
had that support (.) but I don't think they told social services so why
wasn't I shown other options come to think of it?

In Eshal's situation, they were not given information or a choice and felt the plan was imposed without discussion:

Eshal: Like I said it came out of the blue (.) I knew it was odd as my social worker came when she didn't need to, she said that she'd found me somewhere to go when I was ready and to let her know when that was going to be.

There appeared to be several problems with how relevant information was selected and communicated, with some young people saying that they been presented with no relevant information at all. In some circumstances this appeared to be in guise of an agreed decision by the young person, where the outcome was what they wanted. For these young people there tended to be an acceptance that things would work out. Social workers and foster carers seemed to present a picture to the young person that the transition to *Staying Put* or supported accommodation would happen in an organic way. However, some young people indicated that they felt swept along by the adults around them, rather than knowing what was happening or feeling they could ask questions. Although they might have been comfortable with the outcome, their responses seem to evidence that the absence of information or opportunities to ask questions left them feeling uneasy and suspicious of the perceived collusion between carer and social worker.

For other young people the absence of information appeared to be more problematic. In these situations, young people described experiences of foster carers and social workers telling them what would happen without any discussion, often presenting an outcome that they did not want. These accounts suggest that young people were making their transition from their placement in a context of silence, where options, questions or recognition of their feelings appear to be missing from their experience. Alongside a lack of involvement, young people described an environment where they felt invisible. Living in an environment where there was no preparation or discussion with their carers and workers appeared to instil feelings of insignificance and unease. Where young people were not able to stay with the carers, there seemed to be a greater level of silence. However, young people seemed to want to know what was going on even if the information was difficult to hear as illustrated by Jonathan, Eshal and Carrie:

Jonathan: I want to know it all, it can't be worse than everything else I've dealt with.

Eshal: Why don't they just tell us how it is, I just want to know so I can make my own mind up.

Carrie: It's worse not knowing (.) the reality is we end up finding out the hard way. It would be better if they'd just laid it all out, so I could've prepared.

A lack of information could result in young people holding back from a decision or contribute to an overall apprehension about their day-to-day circumstances. However, the impact of curated, missing or distorted information highlighted in the previous section could extend beyond this transition point for young people. Previously noted in this chapter, some participants highlighted the exaggerated or emotive language used by social workers and foster carers to describe possible alternatives to *Staying Put*. Presenting housing services and supported accommodation in derogatory terms may leave young people with specific ideas about living in these services, whether or not these opinions were founded on experience or rumour. In projecting this image, professionals seemed to either create or reinforce that these services are inferior and unpleasant. Furthermore, people living within these settings were troubled, unwanted or involved in criminality. Regardless of the intentions of these conversations, the impact appeared to be that young people were even more fearful of their future, as they expected and accepted that they might eventually live in the services they had been warned about. Consequently, associations with these services may well lead them to feeling that they too were unwanted or had failed in some way. On the basis of the young people's accounts of living in supported accommodation they seemed to have already internalised some of these ideas, talking in terms of failure and rejection. Without the neutral presentation of information, social workers and foster carers may inadvertently leave young people with additional anxieties about future choices or circumstances.

'It's like a countdown, a ticking clock'

Making the decision to stay put raised questions about moving out and on into adulthood. So far in this chapter young people's experience of knowledge and sources of knowledge have been discussed. The final subtheme in this chapter explores the impact 'not knowing' seemed to have on the way young people saw their future. Some of their perceptions had

been shaped by information given by social workers or foster carers and in some instances from the media. All participants felt that there was a misalignment between what they thought they should know and the gaps in their understanding about specific subjects or events related to being in care. Some of their gaps in understanding started when they first entered the care system.

Beth: You don't know why you're there in the first place (.) like no one really tells you (.) before I went into foster I was freaking out about the food they'd give me (.) no one said nothing.

Other young people described their feelings of an underlying uncertainty when living with their foster carers. Tyler and Yannick both experienced a sense of anticipation about being asked to leave, in both cases their understanding was that they could be asked to leave at any time:

Tyler: I guess it's like I'd been like preparing for it the whole time.

Sally: What d'you mean?

Tyler: Well like from the minute you come in [to a foster care placement] you like know your like days are numbered (.) it's as simple as that (.) like everyone is like ready for us to get out of the other end (.)...It's like a race to like (.) get us to the end.

Yannick: I was like waiting for them to say you're out from the moment I stepped over the doormat ... I went to Val's [foster carer] at about 12 and that's where I was (.) but the whole time it was like waiting for the end (.) not end but like I would think they'd kick me out over like fuck ups ... to be fair they didn't but that's not the point (.) I felt like it.

A number of the young people felt unease in the period leading up to their 18th birthday. Beth, Yannick and Jonathan all felt unsettled by the discussions about moving, and felt in the dark about what was ahead of them:

Beth: No one really talked about it so I didn't know (.) I think I said I don't want to move (.) that's what's really bad about it because it's like a countdown, a ticking clock do you know what I mean ... what I had in my mind is on my 18th birthday I was gonna be kicked out onto the street (.) that's how it felt to me as I'd not got a place.

Yannick: So when like it came to like leaving school and that, I was bricking it ... like that's not gonna work if I have to live on my own.

Jonathan: I think you are not told about anything generally, but I think you are as you get older but not much (.) well I was let's say when I was 16 the workers started to talk about leaving and it's like this is a bookmark and so before it's not mentioned then after it is maybe they think don't worry about it you have got time.

Some young people talked about asking questions to try to make sense of what they were experiencing. For example, Eshal was unsure about what would happen when he turned 18 and used the statutory review meeting to raise this issue:

Eshal: It was like a mix of will I go home or will I be with my carers forever (.) as it turned out It was neither ... I remember asking about it at a review once and the review manager said that we didn't have to decide yet (.) in the end they just didn't say nothing after that it was like walking on eggshells.

Cally and Liam also expressed trepidation about the future and explained how they felt before any mention of *Staying Put* or solid plans for their next steps. In Liam's situation they had started to make contingency plans for where they could stay, and felt capable of making these arrangements:

Cally: I remember being really scared about being on me own and erm what was gonna happen.

Liam: Yeah, I remember I was like really freaked out ... I just thought I'd end up going back [to birth family] ... to be honest I probably would have [returned to birth family] I don't think the fear was about not having somewhere else to live (.) because I don't think I was worried I would be homeless ... it's just that I didn't feel that safe ... it was like if they don't care about me so what's the point (.) d'you know what I mean (.) I just won't ask (.) I've managed to do everything else on my own why can't I do this.

Like Liam, Jonathan described their contingency plans if they had to leave their foster care placement. They were sceptical about things working out as they hoped:

Jonathan: I was unsure (.) I think urm it was quite an ambition to stay but I thought it wouldn't happen as the social services, they build you up but they don't really talk about it (.) it is a different story when it comes to the reality ... you are never told what the end will look like.

Beth also felt strongly that they would have to make their own plans and chose to put up a front with the social worker and foster carers to suggest to them that they were ok. However, Beth's front did not reflect their thinking:

Beth: I had this front that I wanted to move out and I put on this front that I was yeah I was independent I can do it I can do it wasn't meaning what I was saying (.) and I did want to stay with her ... I was too scared ... but to me it felt like to countdown to when you are leaving if that's I can put it like (.) that's what my fear was on my 18th birthday (.) so like that's why I was all like I'm off I'm out.

Feelings of insecurity and the anticipation of leaving the placement appeared to be present in many of the young people's lives. Furthermore, the issue of leaving a placement was not confined to this transition point as young people talked about the end of the placement even when they felt settled or connected to their carer. Apprehension about being asked or told to

leave was highlighted by a number of young people, vividly described by Beth as 'a ticking clock'. The sense of foreboding that appeared to be a characteristic of their placements, seemed to be presented as a conventional part of the care experience and indicated that they continually felt that their care experience was on a precipice. The responses from young people in my study suggest an accepted inevitability that their placement will end, and end abruptly, without their agreement or knowledge. Although the feelings of inevitability did not seem to impact on the positive way young people talked about their foster carers, they did seem to make a connection with these ideas when considering their decision to stay put. Referring to their decision, young people seemed to reconnect with their sense of uncertainty about when the end of the placement would occur and having low expectations appeared to act as a protective buffer.

Not all young people described this period in the same way. Some talked about their apprehensions in the context of any move into adulthood and felt clear about what would happen and their future plans. Hannah's experience of feeling informed by their carers was reflected in their response:

Hannah: I thought I'm just going to ride it out a little longer (.) um cause yeah there was like didn't have anything to worry about ... I mean I feel like there was no pressure to you know move out and find a house or you know anything like that.

Cain also felt prepared and comfortable with the decisions they were making. They described positive experiences of working with carers and social workers to think about the future:

Cain: Oh yeah ready (.) but I was a bit worried at first but I knew I could do it (.) [name of social worker] told me what to expect (.) I was like settled and knew I could go back if I messed up.

Cain and Hannah's experience seemed to indicate the outcome of a supportive environment. Both young people's accounts suggest that they felt informed and secure in the decisions they were making. Whether it was the social worker, foster carer or both, each

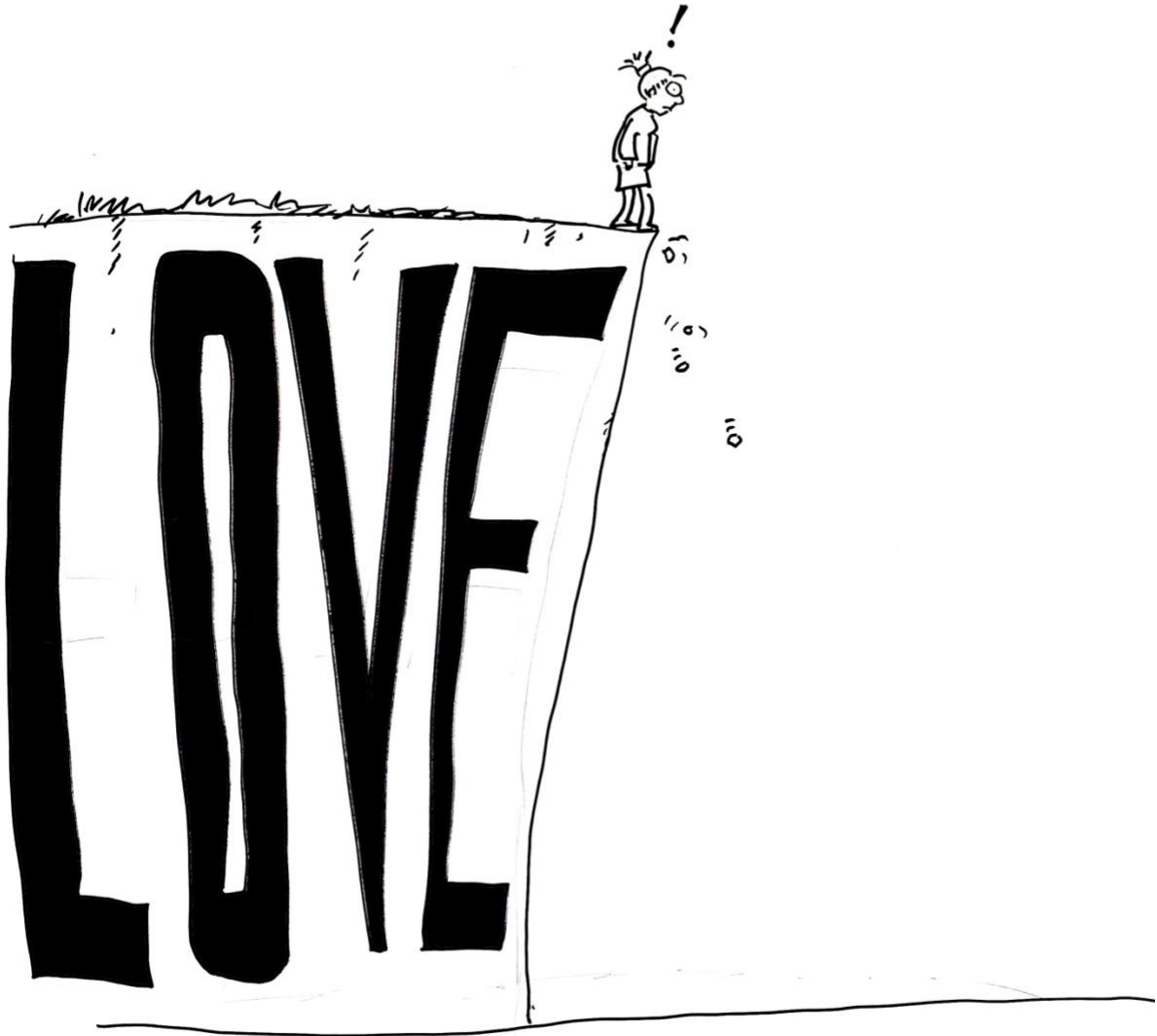
felt that they understood what would happen. Even where there was some uncertainty about the details, both felt they knew enough to progress their plans or feel relaxed about what lay ahead. Feeling involved or informed may explain why neither Cain nor Hannah described feelings of concern about leaving or having to leave unexpectedly at this transition point or other times in their placement.

Alongside their predictions about their future with their foster carers, other young people appeared to be confused and conflicted about what the future would be like for them. As well as the expected uncertainty that any young person would have at this time, young people in my study appeared to have little idea about the care system and the way it would function in their lives. Specifically young people did not seem to know what to expect from their social worker, what support would look like, and other key parts of the process post 18. Without an understanding of what they could expect, it seemed to increase their anxieties about the options they might take.

Having such a hazy understanding of the future may also have impacted on their decision about *Staying Put*. For example, some young people talked about their readiness to leave their carers at 18 but also their uncertainty about how they would manage a more independent life. Without information that could allay some of their feelings of unease, it could be that decisions were made based on fear of leaving rather than a desire to stay. In summary the lack of knowledge about what they could expect from services seemed to create an environment of apprehension throughout their care experience and beyond their transition from their placements.

The misalignment of support, understanding and information described in this chapter highlights the gaps that existed for young people at this time in their care journey. In the next chapter their feelings in response to the subject of leaving care and *Staying Put* are set out, further emphasising how difficult this transition can be for young people and that *Staying Put* is not a techno-rational decision-making procedure.

A test of belonging
"What is the limit to that love?"



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Chapter 9: The Proceduralisation of Moving On

The theme of this chapter is the disjuncture between the lived experiences of young people and their perceptions of responses by social workers and foster carers, highlighting how the process can dominate a human experience. Participants detailed how social workers and foster carers framed or misunderstood their feelings during this transitional period by focussing on technical processes. The impact of this disjuncture appeared to contribute to their overall sense of social work and their place within their support networks. Figure 10 shows the subdivision of the theme.

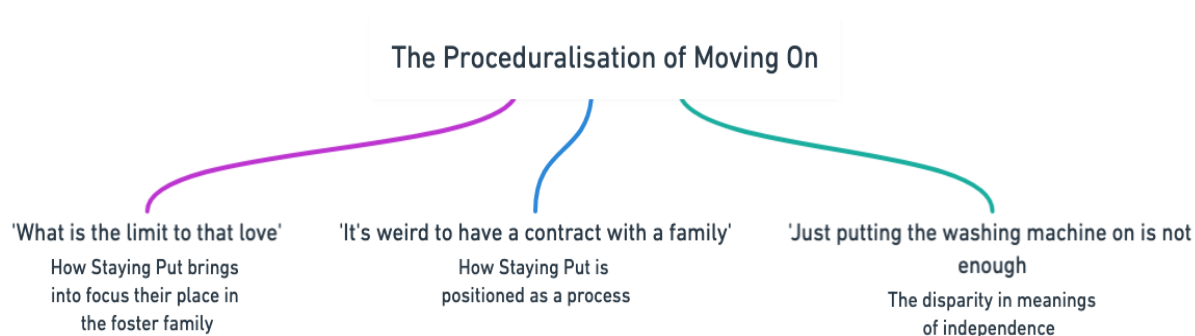


Figure 10: Theme 3 - The Proceduralisation of Moving On

The first subtheme in this chapter relates to the way young people understood why *Staying Put* was possible for them, and how *Staying Put* seemed emblematic of their position in the family. Young people expressed these feelings in ways that might not have been apparent to their social workers or carers at the time but reflect the dual understandings and significance of *Staying Put* shared by them and the adults supporting them. The second subtheme relates to another disjuncture when the bureaucratic procedure of transition from foster care placement to arrangement is explored. The final subtheme in this chapter sets out the disparity in meanings of independence and their preparation for *being* independent, highlighting the disconnect between the process of leaving care and the young people's experiences.

'What is the limit to that love'

The first section relates to the narrative of continuity and familial bonds referred to in Chapter 8. All of the young people in my study had lived with their foster carers for two years

or more, with some being with a family for more than ten years. Longevity in placement appeared to be valued and all of the young people described feelings of affection and care for their foster carers and a recognition of feeling part of a supportive unit. For example, Cain said:

Cain: Honestly, straight up they are the best (.) they would stick by me even if I went off the rails (.) I know that (.) they are diamond.

Liam, Hannah, Eshal and Cally also shared positive experiences of being in their foster care placement, regardless of whether they stayed put:

Liam: My foster carers were the first, the only family I've ever had that have really really just cared about me and (.) like loved me and just cared about being there for me.

Hannah: The relationship with me and my carer was like brilliant.

Eshal: We didn't row or nothing, about going out (.) nothing (.) like my friends at school that were like always saying how bad things were (.) but I was like smug and saying how good it was.

Cally: I love Jenna and Freddy boy [foster carers] (.) even if I've never met them I would want them to be there for me (.) they have literally saved me from some right shit and I know they will help me when it's bad.

As well as affection for the carers, young people described how they saw themselves or their carers saw them in relation to the foster family. Demonstrating their sense of belonging and acceptance, terms like 'family' and 'foster parent' were commonly used by all of the young people, suggesting that their relationships felt solid and established. For example, Liam, Carrie and Cain all referred to their relationships using familial terms:

Liam: They were like, you are like, a part of our family (.) you're our daughter.

Carrie: They are absolutely my second family, yeah they are so great.

Cain: My foster parents were right behind me.

Explaining their positive relationships, most of the young people attributed their placement experiences to luck, and related longevity in placement, placement stability and supportive foster carers to good fortune. For example, Hannah described an initial reaction when moving to their placement:

Hannah: It was very like lucky like (.) I've got these people.

Carrie and Cain shared this thinking and reflected on the contrast with previous placements or living at home:

Carrie: I feel lucky to have ended up with them (.) I'm grateful to the universe for getting me there.

Cain: I feel lucky, that, though it was bad at home, I have like the best life now.

As well as their own thoughts about being lucky in who they lived with, some young people were told that they were lucky by social workers or other professionals. These comments were not disputed by young people, instead they appeared to reinforce existing feelings. For example, Beth said:

Beth: My social worker said we was lucky to have her as a carer.

Then later on in the interview:

Beth: Maybe I was luckier than I thought, my social worker was right about that.

The combination of affection for their foster carers, being accepted and sense of good fortune about their individual placements appeared to be important for the young people to share during the interviews. Each young person's narrative echoed the familial foundation that they felt they had prior to and in most cases since their 18th birthday. Their own experiences were often used in contrast to friends or peers or when reflecting on previous placement experiences. For example, when asked about her last foster care placement Carrie noted the difference between the two most recent placements, recalling:

Carrie: Wasn't so good (.) we'd never really talked, we never really got on, we had to watch what she wanted, and when it was my turn she would do something else (.) I would watch it on my own (.) so it was like you do one thing and she would do another (.) like there was no like family atmosphere.

Whereas the placement prior to Carrie's 18th birthday:

Carrie: The loveliest people that I could have chanced upon (.) and I still talk to them a lot.

The sense of relief for Carrie moving to a foster care placement that felt supportive was evident in the interview and highlighted the disparity in their feelings of belonging between the two foster care placements. The young people's accounts of holding an established

place within the foster family reflects the intentions of family placements highlighted in Chapter 1. All of the participants indicated that they felt integrated into the carer's lives and even where they had established relationships with birth families, the foster carers seemed to represent a secure foundation. Even if they attributed this security to luck, they appeared to feel safe within their relationships as they were coming up to their 18th birthday. Hearing the young people express their sense of belonging became relevant when the issue of *Staying Put* was raised.

Regardless of the base young people felt they had, the question of *Staying Put* appeared to expose feelings of uncertainty in their relationships and their position within the foster carer family. Some young people questioned whether or not they would be able to stay, even if they wanted to. Liam described a strong bond and loving relationship with their foster carers, however still questioned whether or not this would result in them staying beyond their 18th birthday:

Liam: I was just thinking, what is the limit to that love (.) you know.

Liam's question suggested an awareness of the foster carer's commitment beyond their 18th birthday that was outside of their role as a foster carer. Uncertainty also appeared to characterise Cally and Tyler's recollection of feelings during this period, in particular Cally questioned whether the foster carer agreed to *Staying Put* out of obligation:

Cally: I think I thought she wanted me to stay, but I wasn't sure ... I was like d'you think Jenna [foster carer] only asked me so I wouldn't live with my dad?

Tyler: I think they wanted (.) like me to stay and that I was part of the family and yeah (.) that they didn't want me to like go out on the streets, but I didn't know ... There was a lot of talk about being independent, so even though I erm wanted to erm stay, it felt like they wanted me to move on.

When young people found out they could remain with their foster carers, they conveyed feelings of relief. In some cases, young people also seemed to be reassured that they had not misjudged their relationships with their foster carers. Beth, for example, explained how emotional this discussion became:

Beth: I started crying because I admitted what I wanted [to stay with the foster carers] and she cried too because she wanted it.

When talking about *Staying Put*, the young people returned to the concept of luck — expressing that they felt fortunate to have the opportunity. As well as feeling lucky some young people also felt that this indicated their carers positivity about them and whether they were wanted in the foster family. Beth's thoughts about *Staying Put* were summed up when asked for any final comments:

Beth: *Staying Put* is like being lucky. If I didn't have a close connection with my carer they would just say no I don't want you.

Liam's account also reflected how the significance of their foster carer's agreement to *Staying Put*:

Liam: The biggest thing for me was the fact that they wanted me, like that was my new importance, like they did not have to have me.

Conversely those young people who did not stay with their foster carers saw their outcome as an indication that their foster carers thought less positively about them. Eshal's carers and social worker did not talk about *Staying Put* and Eshal described how the social worker visited to talk about moving out:

Sally: Can you remember what you thought about this?

Eshal: Yeah I can (.) it felt like shit, it felt like a fucking punch in the guts. I was like, is this what [name of foster carer] wants? All I could think was that they want me out and haven't told me, it was shit.

Eshal was unclear about the reasons for the carer's decision but felt it was something to do with them, rather than having any other explanation:

Eshal: What I didn't understand was what had changed to make them not want me, they just didn't say nothing ... I didn't want to move out but that's the way it goes.

Carrie and Yannick interpreted their carer's silence about *Staying Put* as a personal rejection:

Carrie: I think that they didn't mention it to me probably meant that they didn't want me, but I don't know why (.) it might be a good reason.

Yannick: I was gutted to leave (.) it wasn't until after that I found out other people like stay at their carers (.) so I guessed that they didn't want me to.

All the young people referred to ideas of belonging and being *wanted* in their comments about *Staying Put*. They seemed to interpret the decision by the carers to continue with *Staying Put* as an indication of their place in the family. Where young people stayed, the descriptions were affirming, comforting and reflected the sense of belonging referred to earlier in this section. Remaining with their carers indicated commitment and confirmed to the young person that their understanding of their foster family was aligned with their foster carers.

Those young people who did not stay put appeared to create a negative internal narrative about their carer's decision. They seemed to understand the decision as a personal rejection which contradicted their perception of their relationships within the foster family. Even in those circumstances where the young people knew about the scheme, the silence about *Staying Put* appeared rejecting. From the interviews it seemed that explanations and discussions were absent, perpetuating a vacuum, where young people were left to make sense of the carer's thinking and lack of openness. Whether or not young people remained with their carers, the question of staying seemed to be significant to the representation of what they felt was their family. Young people appeared to regard *Staying Put* as a marker of belonging within their foster care placement.

'It's weird to have a contract with a family'

Regardless of whether or not young people stayed put, they all noted a shift in the dynamics between them and their foster carers during discussions about *Staying Put*. In some cases, this was a subtle change which was seen as administrative and inconsequential. For example, Hannah described the change as a:

Hannah: Very seamless transition, because there wasn't really a transition (.) which I suppose is the whole point of it ... almost feels like it wasn't a monumental period of my life (.) I suppose that's a good thing (.) it felt more of a big thing for the social worker.

Later in the interview Hannah noted the differences about being subject to a *Staying Put* arrangement:

Hannah: I had my PA sit me down and go through it with me (.) um it was all pretty standard I was told how much I needed to pay ... so it was like, all ok this makes sense this is fine (.) I was fine with it.

Although Hannah did not have detailed discussions about *Staying Put* before turning 18, the carers and personal advisor appeared to have taken a low-key approach to the discussions before and after the decision was made. However, the exchange of money and signing a

contract still impacted on roles within the family which Hannah appeared to view as part of growing up and a natural progression for them as a family:

Hannah: My carer was always like, you could be 30 and still living here and I wouldn't mind as long as you are paying your way.

Making a contribution to the household appeared straightforward and unremarkable for Hannah, demonstrating a positive example of how this period of the care pathway could be. For other young people the transition from regulated foster care placement to *Staying Put* arrangement was less smooth. Tyler reflected on feeling confused by the introduction of a contract to their relationship:

Tyler: Like signing the contract (.) to say that I could still live there (.) like, I'd been living with them for two and a half years like (.) you would think like it would just be ((pause)) erm I dunno smoother than having to sign this piece of paper about like rent and stuff (.) it's weird to have a contract with a family.

Sally: Weird?

Tyler: Yeah like money was the thing that made it difficult like (.) just they are like family and now it's like they are not (.)

Sally: Could you tell me a bit more about what you mean?

Tyler: I don't think it changed like at the time like (.) but it changed after it happened (.) it was like odd to talk about money when they hadn't talked like about it before (.) but yeah maybe I just like went along with it.

All the young people mentioned how the arrangements about money were written into a contract between them and their carers. It seemed that the contract was not fully understood and appeared to be dismissed by the young people as a social work matter, rather than anything they should engage in. Cally presented the contract as a mysterious document that was the concern of the social worker:

Cally: [The social worker] went on and on and on about it (.) no idea what I signed just signed it, erm no idea what happened to it neither, not looked at it since ((laughs)) the social worker was obsessed with it, erm maybe she's got it.

The arrangements about payment were also a source of bemusement for Jonathan who disliked the way social workers and review managers concentrated on financial transactions:

Jonathan: It felt like the focus was on the money not the whys and wherefores.

Jonathan appeared to resent the discussion, rather than the idea of making a contribution from benefits or earnings. Turning 18 was a marker of independence, but the fiscal nature of *Staying Put* based discussions were a cause of tension between Jonathan, the foster carers and the social worker, as Jonathan felt that none of the parties understood the process:

Jonathan: I have been in care my whole life and with my carers for so long ... I wasn't sure if I'd be kicked out because I don't know what is going on (.) am I paying them to like me?

In Beth's situation there was also confusion about the purpose of the contract and contributing a payment. Beth's perception was that payment was the determining factor for whether or not the carers agreed to *Staying Put*. As Beth's carers were registered with an independent fostering agency, discussion centred on the loss of income as a result of Beth's placement transferring to an arrangement. The responses suggest that Beth felt both responsible for the carer's loss of earnings and was mindful of the anxiety that this

introduced into their relationship. Referring to that time and an awareness of the carer's circumstances:

Beth: Well it was bad for her because she does a good job (.) urm how was she supposed to pay the bills for me (.) it was hard because it made me feel bad (.) it was making it a difficult decision for her to keep me (.) I didn't want her to be poor because of me.

Beth's decision was contingent on the resolution of the carer's financial situation, which reportedly happened late on in these discussions. Beth shared that these deliberations were not detrimental to family relationships. However, they did prompt questions about the carer's feelings:

Beth: It makes it weird like we were ok but now I keep thinking (.) what if they didn't get the money, would they still care about me?

Introducing a transactional component to their family suggested a change in how most of the participants saw themselves or their foster carers. Where previously there had been a family unit common to their peers, the monetisation of their circumstances led to questions about the nature of their relationships and discomfort about the cost of being *looked after*. Highlighting the payment for their care appeared to underline the difference in their circumstances and accentuate the impermanence of their place in the household. The change of status did not appear to diminish their relationships, but the emphasis on difference in their living arrangements, specifically the payment details, suggests a conflict with the inclusive normative narrative of both foster care and *Staying Put*. Creating the illusion of independence within the household directly relates to the legislative and taxation issues, however, the young people's experiences suggest that the arrangement introduced a renewed sense of outsidership and an unwelcome milestone in their lives.

The transition from foster care placement to *Staying Put* arrangement appeared to be significant in the nature of family relationships, however the young people who stayed with their carers felt their social workers did not reflect this change. Their observations that discussions focused on the process of signing a contract underlined a disconnect in

understanding between the young person and their social worker of this change. Where the social worker seemed to see the contract as a symbol of the transition the young people saw the contract as an inconvenience, an affront or irrelevant to what they were experiencing. Even those who understood the role of a payment or expressed no objection, situated the contract with the social worker and did not suggest any ownership of the document. In some cases, the contract was aligned with other poorly received documents or processes such as the Pathway Plan, statutory review meeting minutes or general paperwork, suggesting a continuum of feeling that documents or meetings are peripheral to the event or period itself. Children and young people signing or reading a form or attending a meeting, is promoted as participative and empowering practice as noted in Chapter 7, however the views of young people in my study suggest that their involvement in these processes did not signify feelings of ownership.

‘Just putting the washing machine on, is not enough’

The final subtheme in this chapter relates to different interpretations about what it means to be independent. Questions of independence arose in conjunction with discussions about *Staying Put* where young people were thinking beyond the time of their current situation. The discussion about readying themselves for life beyond their 18th birthday highlighted the way that young people see themselves and how they understood the future away from their carers. Like the previous two sections in this chapter, the responses from the participants suggested a parallel perspective of what it means to be independent, reflecting a process rather than emotional understanding of independence. The young people had varied experiences of support in developing what they referred to as independence skills. Some felt that their carers had proactively encouraged them to learn how to cook, clean and manage money; others reflected on how little they knew before moving on. Cain and Jonathan’s experiences refer to an ongoing approach taken by their carers:

Cain: I didn’t know it at the time but all the little things they did like making me cook when we were on holiday, going into banks or shops and making me ask for things, urm talking about bills and telling me how much things cost.

Jonathan: They have done so much (.) financially they have supported me urm they got me insurance for my bike (.) little things here and there taking me places., cooking (.) I think I have something in me but

they have encouraged it (.) sometimes they would pull back the reins but I look back now and think it was helpful (.) they taught me life skills like filling in tax reports and cooking (.) washing (.) things like that (.) maintenance (.) you know I am the DIY of my house now.

Carrie also described a comprehensive list of tasks that the carers had gone through with them before leaving:

Carrie: It's things like how to drain or bleed a radiator and how to defrost the freezer how to change a plug um where you can go for support and things um and it was um very helpful figuring out what was what (.) where I can go if I need help with money or advice.

Other young people described a more piecemeal approach, where specific tasks were the focus of the foster carer's support. This was reflected by Yannick's experience:

Yannick: Here's how to use the washing machine here's how to heat up micro meals.

Being taught how to use of a washing machine was common to all the young people in the study, where becoming independent tended to be associated with doing their own laundry. Whilst a useful and important part of their development Beth recognised this as helpful, but felt that this knowledge felt confined to the carer's home:

Beth: She did teach me how to use a washing machine (.) but I knew how to use her washing machine (.) but not my new one (.) but she told me that life skill.

Support for some young people was often perceived as last minute and only because they were moving on. For example, Eshal and Carrie talked about the last few weeks before leaving their placements:

Eshal: In the last few weeks my carers started to tell me about the washing machine and stuff like that.

Carrie: Yeah It got a bit comfortable then it was suddenly oh shit you are 18 soon we had better get sorted (.) she [foster carer] helped me open a bank account (.) and so um yeah that was a bit of life skills stuff she did with me (.) money side of things (.) they were helpful in the time that I had.

Despite foster carers helping young people with some practical skills, many of the young people felt ill prepared when living alone suggesting that there is no universally agreed, definitive checklist of practical skills needed to live independently – it is an ongoing process. This was exemplified by Eshal's response when asked about living in supported accommodation:

Sally: Did you feel ready to live at [name of supported accommodation service]?

Eshal: No way, I knew shit about nothing (.) I didn't even know how to put my duvet cover on.

As well as household jobs, some of the young people expressed their ongoing concerns about dealing with money when they first moved out and in their present situations. Tyler felt they had been supported to develop some basic skills, but had insufficient understanding to manage day-to-day issues:

Tyler: I don't think there was really anything done (.) like money that's one thing (.) I like know how to pay rent ... I don't feel prepared as (.) I don't know how to pay bills and I don't know what I'm doing ((pause)) I don't think anyone's ever told me how ((pause)).

Yannick and Beth also expressed a lack of confidence and understanding about money:

Yannick: I like have worked it, but like the money I earn is like [gesture of small] (.) like I didn't know how to do it (.) like how to like manage.

Beth: She [foster carer] talked to me about money (.) but the thing is I didn't have bills with her, so it was a shock when I came here (.) I moved here and I did not have a clue about all the bills, how things were costed, council tax everything.

Later in the interview Beth described the consequence of being unaware of organising bills:

Beth: I ended up paying two years in advance (.) but like no one told me, I didn't know about council tax (.) I also didn't know about water bills and then I thought TV license was a like (.) I didn't know it was monthly (.) and then all these bills came and I'm like why have I never heard about this?

The carers were the focus of all discussions about preparation for living away from the placement. When asked about the role social workers took in supporting them with 'independence' skills, there was feeling that social workers were either uninterested or ill equipped to support them. Despite social workers being responsible for facilitating the pathway planning process described in the Glossary, the young people in the study indicated that social workers had a peripheral role in supporting them to become self-sufficient. Carrie was among those young people that had a negative view of their worker in this regard:

Carrie: My social worker was absolutely useless (.) the whole time.

Sally: What d'you mean?

Carrie: Well she just knew nothing (.) but also did nothing (.) it was like it was nothing to do with her and all she wanted to do was get away as fast as she could.

Carrie also reflected on the social worker's understanding of whether they were ready to move on:

Carrie: I was thinking about this the other day (.) how would she know? (.) she never asked me (.) she was supposed to do a plan but didn't (.) for all she knew I knew nothing there was no support at all from her.

Learning how to use a washing machine and paying bills, was only part of the experience of moving from their foster care placement. Some of the young people talked about the lack of preparation for the emotional aspects of living alone. Tyler recalled the emphasis on the practical nature of support from the foster carers:

Tyler: Like all we got told was, we erm need to cook and do our washing (.) can't remember anything else (.) not feelings about it or nothing like that.

Sally: What d'you mean?

Tyler: Like it's hard to be here, no one tells you that.

Eshal also highlighted the change in living alone and the contrast of being in a placement:

Eshal: It was so different when it happened.

Sally: In what way?

Eshal: Well I was on my own for one (.) I have never been on my own, I have the light on at night because I am scared of the dark (.) when

we went on holiday one time I ended up in with my carers because I didn't like being in the room on me own.

Yannick described the unexpected element of moving out:

Yannick: Like, I knew jack shit about living on my own (.) I don't like it (.) it's boring and I haven't got any dosh (.) like I know Val like showed me some things, but like (.) that's not how it is for real is it?

Sally: D'you mean not having money to do things?

Yannick: Not just that, like it's the hours without talking (.) it freaks me out sometimes.

In each interview, independence was presented by the participants as if it were a clearly defined moment or concept. Young people talked about practical household tasks that either they could or could not do, which they aligned with being independent. The ability to pay bills or cook meals felt important to their presentation of being a capable adult. Their understanding appeared to centre around discussions had with foster carers and other professionals, who emphasised these elements. However, when asked what they thought being independent means, they talked about more complex emotions like confidence and feelings of self-efficacy. Jonathan's response to what it means to be independent captured a more nuanced explanation:

Jonathan: It's a lot of selflessness (.) and sort of accountability and responsibility that you take on in life.

Sally: That sounds like more than the practical things you mentioned.

Jonathan: Yes (.) just putting the washing machine on is not enough.

Hearing Jonathan and some of the other young people talk about independence appeared at odds with their experiences of support from carers and social workers. When assessing their own feelings of readiness for living alone, the mismatch between operating household appliances and feeling comfortable with being self-sufficient seemed to evidence a gap in preparation and understanding of what it means to be independent. Furthermore, young people who had moved out seemed to recognise that they felt unprepared but also the system had let them down by not knowing that they needed more support. The discussions between young person and carer or social worker about being independent generally appeared reductive. Practical skills were seen as valuable in developing a sense of self-reliance and confidence, but it seemed that these skills were being addressed in isolation and ignored complex feelings about transition and emotion. Rather than receive support to think about a rounded view of independent living a need to confront their anxieties were translated into functional exchanges about tangible skills. This may indicate a purposeful approach by social care professionals in order to simplify a nuanced issue or a gap in understanding about the realities of living alone.

The accounts of young people in this chapter have illustrated how policy intentions can become translated to the extent that their original intention is compromised. In the next part of my thesis, the ideas presented in this, and the previous two chapters are discussed in the context of the wider literature.

Part Four: Interpretation and Next Steps

The concluding part of my thesis brings together the identified themes from the interviews and returns to the original aims of the study. Part Four begins with a discussion chapter situating the themes from the interviews with the available research and practice context. Additionally, where relevant, Foucault's ideas of power, discourse and subject are applied to some of the elements raised by young people, to further an understanding of this point in their care pathway. Part Four continues with Chapter 11, which summarises the final reflections on the research process and limitations of the study. The concluding chapter presents a final summary including the contributions made and recommendations for practice.

Chapter 10: Discussion

Chapter Introduction

The key understanding taken from my study is that young people perceive their decision to stay put or leave as another part of the complicated care system in which they operate. This discussion chapter returns to the original question of my research, which set out to better understand the experiences of young people's decision-making about *Staying Put*. Although this chapter questions the notion of *Staying Put* as a decision, framing it as such helped to give insight into previous patterns and sites of decision-making in the young people's care experience. Following on from Part Three, the discussion draws on the themes identified, and explores what these ideas mean in the context of existing literature and practice outlined in Part One. The areas to be discussed include the experience of decision-making across the care pathway, the role social workers play as providers of information and the impact of *Staying Put* in the context of leaving care. This chapter considers how my study reflects, differs or builds on the knowledge about both decision-making and leaving care drawn from young people's experiences. Elements of the discussion are also examined through the lens of the theoretical concepts and discourses outlined in Part One, including Foucault's concepts of power, discourse and subject. As noted in Chapter 5, the intention of using Foucault's work was to reconsider existing understandings and 'examine the less visible ways' power relations operate (Hartung, 2017, p. xii) in areas of practice where there is an established field of research. This approach enabled me to use Foucault's work alongside other concepts and fields of research, rather than develop new understanding or interpretations of his work.

Decisions in the Margin

One of my research questions was to understand how much influence young people felt they had in making their decision about *Staying Put*. Through the interviews my study raised some general points about the experience of decision-making during the care pathway, which contribute to the literature about young people's experiences of involvement in decisions about their lives. Using Foucault's work to frame their decisions as being situated or bounded by discourse and discursive practices enabled me to consider what decision-making means for young people leaving care. The young person's choice to leave or remain with their foster carers, could be understood in the context of their previous involvement in

decisions. Although there are particular circumstances unique to *Staying Put* discussed later in this chapter, the historical encounters described by young people seemed to set the foundations to making this decision. Young people in my study were in care during a period where the discourse of participation threaded through practice guidance and legislation. However, my study suggests that the benefits of an inclusive agenda were not routinely available to all young people. Participants wanted to be involved in decisions to make their care experience more manageable and comprehensible. Their desire to take part or lead decisions was not to pursue hedonistic or unrealistic choices nor an attempt to eliminate professional intervention. Coming with modest aims of inclusion they were confused about the rationale for leaving them out. References to wanting help or advice from their social worker, co-occurred with their decision-making intentions.

The heterogenous experiences of decision-making by children and young people in care are not unique to this study. Like the majority of research reviewed in Chapter 4, participants perceived their role in making decisions as elusive, with pockets of more helpful experiences (Leeson 2007; Bessell 2011; Goodyer, 2014; Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, and Pastor, 2017). Referring to their history in making decisions across a range of concerns, participants in my study shared similar issues with children and young people in existing research. In early experiences of coming into care and finding their feet with birth families and new carers, participants' views resonated with those young people in Cashmore's (2011) study about care proceedings and Hébert, Lanctôt and Turcott's (2016) work about changing placements. Consistently, young people wanted a say in what happened and needed to be aware of what the next steps would be but felt excluded and uninformed. The confusion felt about being excluded was coupled with uncertainty about their current situation and fear of what would come in the future. My study reinforces the understanding from existing literature (Nybell, 2013; Munford and Sander's, 2015), that patterns of being excluded in early decisions or issues can continue through a young person's care pathway.

When things went well, in multiple studies social worker attributes were seen as facilitative suggesting that an honest and approachable worker could help overcome or circumnavigate other barriers in the system (Cossar and Long, 2008; Munford and Saunders, 2015; Roesch-Marsh, Gillies and Green, 2017; Pert, Diaz and Thomas, 2017; Schofield, Larsson and Ward, 2017). Conversely, in my study I found that whilst many of the young people *liked* their social workers, they still felt their social workers left them outside of decisions that mattered to them, especially when coming up to their 18th birthday. Feeling marginalised in this way occurred even if young people felt able to talk to their social worker, suggesting that

a positive relationship with a social worker was insufficient in supporting feelings of involvement. Some young people in my study pointed to individual foster carers, social workers or review managers as helpful in sharing their views, but their support was often compromised by either their lack of knowledge about an issue or the authority to enact the decision. There was a sense that professional knowledge about the care system was inconsistent, and deferral to another authority or body for information or final say moved the decisions physically and emotionally away from the young person. Removing the decision 'from the room' indicated that decisions were separate to young people and their involvement. Instead matters relating to their day-to-day lives became part of an organisational process rather than a relational discussion. Young people in my study indicated they wanted to be taken seriously and be involved but the ongoing pattern of distant decision-making made this hard to achieve. The absence of opportunities to practice and scaffold their skills in making decisions and feel respected, echoes Cashmore's (2011) conclusion in her study about family law decisions. The practice that was needed to ensure that decision-making became habit forming, was missing from their routine experiences with social workers.

Participative practice does appear to be compromised by the operational pressures on social workers, and barriers to involvement identified by social workers in other research were borne out by young people in my study (McLeod, 2006; Barnes, 2012; Diaz, Pert and Thomas, 2019). Spelling out how many changes of social worker they had, young people seemed to accept the number and rapidity of change was part of every child's care journey. A lack of consistency, either through the worker leaving or having a temporary agency worker, presented young people in my study with a difficult choice. Investing any effort into their relationship was often seen as a waste of time due to the likelihood of their worker moving on, however as evident throughout their experiences, they both needed and wanted a social worker's help in making decisions. My study builds on earlier work, identifying how changes in social worker impacts on a young person's ability to make or take part in decisions due to the lack of a trusted and consistent worker to support them (Gaskell, 2010; Oliver 2010; Ridley, et al., 2016).

Where social workers identified limited time to develop a relationship with a child (McLeod, 2006; Barnes, 2012; Diaz, Pert and Thomas, 2019), my study found that hearing about these pressures were equally harmful to relationship building with young people. Whilst the social worker's intentions or understanding of sharing their issues with young people falls outside of my research, young people reflected on their worker's circumstances. A social

worker sharing feelings about work pressures may feel like an honest response, however my study suggests that sharing the impact of their work had two possible outcomes. First, their admission seemed to imply that the participants were less important than other work and second, knowledge about their social worker's circumstances deterred young people from sharing their own worries. Creating a distinction between work that happens *out there* and what social workers did with young people directly, indicated to participants that there was a hierarchy of importance — pitching any work that occurs elsewhere as more important or preoccupying, developing a different understanding of social worker/service user relationships. The problem of exposure to the social worker's issues reflects research in the field of nursing, specifically the construction of *busyness* where nurses felt they had little time to spend with patients because of their workload which primarily focused on organisational, and task orientated aspects of their role (Terry and Coffey, 2019). In turn, patients felt that nursing staff seemed unavailable and any request for help would get in the way (Terry and Coffey, 2019). My study does not imply those social workers were fabricating their workload, nor that they were purposefully blocking opportunities to spend time with children and young people. However, my study does suggest that knowing about social work *busyness* impacted on a young person's ability to open up to their social worker at key moments. Having to weigh up their own need to talk, with their sympathy towards the social worker, meant that young people were considering the weight of their worker's issues and nebulous sense of their social worker's workload, as well as their own needs. Consequently, this series of internal negotiations sometimes got in the way of being able to ask for help or talk things through. In these exchanges, Foucault's concept of relational aspects of power appeared to operate to reinforce the subjectivity of the young person by positioning the social worker's situation as the primary issue. Through the sharing of information about their workload and personal pressures, the social worker is sharing detail that suggests an intimacy in their relationship with the young person due to the personal nature of the topic. Instead of bringing the social worker and young person closer however, the disclosure creates greater distance by strengthening the idea that the professional's situation is the principal concern.

Decision-Making as a Set Piece

When responding to questions about general decision-making, the young people commonly identified the statutory review meeting as a focal point for decisions, which was important when thinking about the influence young people had in decision-making. The review meeting is specifically mentioned in the Department for Education (n.d.) guidance for young people,

which states 'if you're leaving care, you'll have a 'statutory review meeting' to discuss your future, including what support you'll need'. The interrelationship between decision-making and this meeting was made by every young person in my study, suggesting it was both important and unique in its opportunity to have a say. Rather than view decision-making as part of their everyday lives, young people presented the review meeting as the permitted space to find out what was happening for them and to contribute their views. Young people saw the point of the meeting but questioned their ability to take part and also the lack of means to make the meeting more accessible to them. Echoing the participants in my study, existing research found that young people consistently struggle to contribute to these meetings (Munro, 2001; Thomas, 2015; Diaz, Pert and Thomas, 2018). Whilst the guidance for the review meeting explicitly states that young people's views are not 'determinate' (DfES, p. 38, 2010), their contribution must be central to any planning. If this meeting is understood as a discursive field, the way that reviews have become another exclusionary setting further highlights relational expressions of power in the care system.

There are a number of ways in which young people's feelings of exclusion from this meeting can be understood, firstly the framing of participation in the meeting itself. Young people routinely attended their meetings, completed pre-meeting paperwork and in some instances asked questions or made contributions. However, they generally felt that their perspectives were neither heard nor respected. Consequently, young people did not feel that they had taken part in planning or decisions during the meeting. In other studies, the presence of children or young people in a meeting or discussion was significant to the social worker, as they perceived a child's participation to be more likely if they were there (Vis, Holton and Thomas, 2012; Diaz, Pert and Thomas, 2019; Porter, 2020). My study underlines that there are differing interpretations between social workers and young people about the meeting experience, and a different understanding of whether attendance equated to participation. By thinking about Foucault's concept of discursive practices the role of the meeting can be seen in a different light. Due to the nature of the meeting young people may chose not to participate in decision-making as they may feel that their contribution is neither valued nor heard. By being present at the meeting, young people become constructed as *participating subjects* by and within discourses. In other words, they convey feelings or thoughts from the subject positions available to them from within specific discursive practices that are constructed by social workers and social work practice.

Holding multiple understandings of participation highlights how statutory review meetings can be understood as a discursive field. Foucault's concept of discursive practices, which

combines corporality and language, offers a way of unpicking how young people experienced this meeting. Organisational activities such as the review meeting 'create the role of service user and social worker' through disciplinary techniques (Chambon, p. 68, 1999). This means that both social workers and young people operate within patterns of practice that are defined and reinforced through their use, in this case, the review meeting was seen as pivotal to young people and their ability to make decisions. The emphasis on the review indicates that the meeting had been demarcated as the decision-making space by their worker, carer and organisation. By positioning the meeting in this way, young people would be sensitised to confining their perspectives to the review in the same way that social workers would see it as *the* vehicle for their involvement. Privileging the meeting in this way, builds the impression that it is critical to be involved but also lessens the possibility that there are other forums to talk and listen.

Despite this elevated status, the meeting format for young people's involvement was recognised as being problematic by participants in my study. Much like young people in other research, participants said that the environment felt alien and out of step with their everyday lives (Roesch-Marsh, Gillies and Green, 2017; Diaz, Pert and Thomas, 2018). In other studies, social workers and review managers were also aware of difficulties in contributing to a review meeting, noting that even when they felt that a young person had been well supported it was difficult to 'create a space' for them (Roesch-Marsh, Gillies and Green, p. 910, 2017). Given that both young people and professionals can see these issues, the explanation for their continuation in the same format needs further examination. As the meeting was often identified as being the main site of decisions, the review meeting may take on a wider role in identifying whether or not a young person is capable of making meaningful contributions to significant issues in their lives. As a result, the young person's influence in decision-making becomes limited.

Transposing recognisable and established adult working practice into a young person's environment reflects the previously made point in Chapter 5 highlighting the discourse of participation and decision-making corresponding with an adult identity. Children or young people adhering to the practices of the meeting may be understood as having an ability to function in adult environments, whereas a lack of involvement may be perceived as immature or underdeveloped. This interpretation is problematic for young people making decisions about *Staying Put* who may not have had successful historical experiences in participating in their review meetings. If the review is designated as a site for assessing decision-making capabilities, struggling to take part may impact on their ability to be

recognised as capable. Young people in my study reported ongoing concerns about the meeting format, or their role in the discussion, which sometimes led to self-examination about their ability to take part — leading to questions about their own skills and worth. The impact of feeling excluded from decisions about their lives was consistent with the experiences of other children and young people in care. Internalised ideas of incompetency, feeling disregarded and disrespected and varying levels of confidence were common to studies by Gaskell (2010), Nybell (2013), Goodyer (2014) and Mateos et al. (2017). Rather than organisations and professionals adapting to recognise the issues young people face when part of a meeting structure, it appears that young people are expected to demonstrate their participative capabilities through their involvement in the meeting. It could be argued that maintaining the status quo reinforces the idea that participation in the meeting is synonymous with discourses that construct human beings as independent, autonomous and self-determining (Kjørholt, 2002). Although as noted in Chapter 4, constructs of independence are problematic and do not allow for the nuances of gradual transition (Storø, 2018). Moreover, it seems that young people's participation is judged differently to adults, who equally might find meeting spaces difficult due to their own confidence or authority, but not to the point it leads to them being outside of the process.

Prevailing methods of conducting and participating in meetings based on 'anonymous, historical rules' (Foucault, 1972. p. 117), creates an environment that makes it difficult for young people to disrupt. The review meeting space has become known through operational practice, policies and research. The technologies used, such as agenda setting, minute taking, participant reports or feedback are in place to ensure the review meeting maintains the conduct of the young person and is compatible with any aims of the organisation (Rose, 1999). In turn, these factors operate to repeat, reflect and reinforce differing power relations within the meeting, and in the wider organisation. Young people in my study chose to either take part or absent themselves from the meeting, recognising that there was capacity to react to the strategies in place (Schirato, Danaher and Webb, 2012). Regardless of their involvement, the meeting makes it possible to collect and constitute knowledge of the young person, making them seen and known through this forum (Parton, 1999).

Foucault's understanding of how knowledge is developed through power relations (Chambon, 1999) is a useful lens to consider how young people become known within the meeting structure. The young people shared doubts about the accuracy of knowledge about them and questioned the perceived lack of insight or empathy shown by their supporting professionals. Issues or concerns they had about aspects of their care experience, were

seen to be overlooked in favour of their social worker or carer's concerns. In Parton's (1999) early analysis of risk, he suggested that meetings are strategies to assess and manage risks within a situation, which could explain why there is a gap between the young person's needs and the alternative agenda they felt was in place. Within the meeting, problems or issues that young people had, may have become defined, presented and prioritised within the framework of the organisation. Consequently, this creates potential for decisions and discussions to be framed and managed within the meeting, so that time and space to explore the issue becomes limited by alternative agendas. The young people talked about how difficult they found it when new information or decisions were presented, suggesting that complex problems or ideas had become reduced to an agenda item within the review meeting process — resulting in limited scope for participation in any discussion. Furthermore, by focusing on resolvable aspects of an issue in the confines of the meeting, the problem can be seen and recorded as having been agreed. Also importantly, if present, the young person is seen to be part of the resolution. This disconnect highlighted by young people in my study suggests, the operation of discursive practices have defined the meeting as a visibly participative forum, illuminating how power can be produced in and around the meeting (Chambon, 2003). The meeting function underlines Foucault's understanding of power as relational. Through modes of discipline any attendee of the meeting could hold a powerful position as it is the mechanisms themselves rather than the person through which power is exercised (Foucault, 1979).

Veil of Participation

So far, this chapter has focussed on the conditions and understandings of how young people generally felt excluded from decision-making during their care experience and relating to their decision about *Staying Put*. The accumulation of participative policies and intentions have not translated into young people feeling a sense of control or agency in decision-making. Foucault's understanding of power offers a way to examine this discrepancy. Problematising common terms such as *participation* and *decision-making* enables focus on how practice can create or reproduce power relations between young people and social work professionals (Chambon, 1999). Examining these terms can move focus from individual experiences to 'language, interaction and processes' between young people and their supporting adults and organisations (Levin, 2007, p. 31). In previous chapters, the terms *participation* and *decision-making* are used interchangeably with other synonyms of involvement — reflecting other work in this field. The next section argues that the discourse of participation, and the fluid use of terminology, obfuscates the role of young people in

decision-making and influences how young people are framed in binary terms — as active or passive participants in the process.

Discourses formed through ‘social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations’ (Weedon, 1997, p. 104) produce meanings and interpretations of participation and decision-making specific to their time. In Chapter 5, an understanding of participation and children’s decision-making was set out. Participation was identified as a marker of good citizenship and functioning adulthood (Kjørholt, 2002) and a means to express children’s rights. Meanings of participation in social work practice centre on egalitarian notions of involvement and empowerment, where expertise is not a precursor, and insight is a shared endeavour (Hugman, 1991; Beresford, 2017). Participation’s amorphous conceptualisation detailed in the commentary in Chapter 5, was reflected in the experiences of the young people who appeared to struggle to identify what their participation looked like. Attending their review meeting, talking with social workers and carers, and form filling were all cited as ways they participated. However, in these exchanges young people described experiences of exclusion, omission and being silenced. This suggests that being present at these junctures, or taking part in meetings, young people became constructed as participating subjects by default. How their participation started or ended was not clear to them, nor was the impact of their contribution.

In contrast to the uncertainty of participation, decision-making was seen by young people in a more defined way. They commonly associated a decision with a particular circumstance or event rather than a meeting or a discussion, evident in how they saw the decision-making about *Staying Put*. Wider discourses of techno-rational decision-making interlink with ideas of control, agency and responsibility, which Rose and Miller (2010) associated with the neoliberal ideas of the entrepreneurial self. Being entrepreneurial in this sense marks individuals as autonomous, agentive and ‘controlling their destinies’ (Rose and Miller, 2010, p. 296). For social workers, their decision-making is also imbued with ideas of responsibility and ‘the art and science of professional judgement’ (Taylor, 2017, p. 2). Social work decisions have become significant sites of professional identification — where the discursive formations of expertise, judgement and professionalism produce the identity of the practitioner and the profession. Social workers become subject through local and national scrutiny of decision-making practice, affording them a professional standing (Gilbert and Powell, 2010).

Given that making decisions is enmeshed with the social work role, extending this responsibility to children and young people requires the social worker to recognise decision-making in a different context. In relation to this study, the extension of responsibility is to young people deciding to leave or to stay with their carers. Where a social worker has been educated and assessed as being expert in decision-making — permitting them authority to express their views — children and young people have not. A combination of a child's novice position and their perceived need for protection (Shemmings, 2000) highlight the distinction in identity between the social worker and the child or young person with whom they work, where the social worker is understood as skilled to make a decision and a child/young person is not. In this sense, children and young people are 'the ultimate other', where their decisions may be seen as naïve and needing the legitimisation of those who hold expertise (Cannella, p. 36, 2000). For young people making decisions about where they will live after they have turned 18, social workers may not feel confident in permitting young people to make the decision without their input.

Through the two distinct discourses of involvement young people appear to be positioned as a participant or a decision maker. Based on the young people's responses, participation seemed to be used as a veil either covering or revealing their involvement in decisions. Where young people felt that the social worker was confident in them or there was a consensus between young person, carer and worker, the social worker extended the role of decision maker to include the young person. In this instance, the veil or use of participation becomes less evident and the language of decision-making is more present. Where there were no articulated options, or the issues were perceived as too complex or contentious, young people's involvement seemed to be limited. In these situations, the veil of participation is lowered, and decisions are less explicitly discussed. This was apparent when the young people talked about their decision to stay put. The clearer cut the situation the more explicitly they could identify their involvement. Conversely where the young person was told what to do, they were unclear about their involvement. When searching for possible examples of involvement they referred to meetings and discussions – emblems of participative discourse.

Using the discourse of participation to mean decision-making depending on the circumstance, may well persuade the young person into thinking that they are, or have the ability to make an independent choice. The performative aspects of participation such as attending meetings and completing paperwork infer that decision-making is on the table when this might not be the case. Where young people choose not to take part in organisational activities, knowledge becomes established that the young person has opted

out and can be explained or excused without critically considering why this is the case. The ambivalent perspective of agency can get lost between the discussion of participation and decision-making, which can only be 'determined by examining specific instances' (Gallagher, 2019, p. 198).

Although my study does not claim that social workers purposefully use the veil of participation to manage a young person's involvement, the young people interviewed were able to recognise definite experiences of exclusion. The indication being that participation has become merged with decision-making, which distracts from their valid and essential differences, namely that participation is intended to add useful insight and engagement to the act of decision-making. With shared clarity, professionals could employ consistent and versatile practice methods leading to a young person who feels supported and has clear and realistic expectations, leading to an increase in involvement with their decision-making about *Staying Put*.

Curated information

The next three sections focus on what my study can contribute to the field of research about *Staying Put*. *Staying Put* was designed to better replicate the transition experiences of young people in the wider population. Longer and less chronologically based transitions from care have been identified as a positive move for young people previously experiencing the 'cliff edge' model of support (Cameron et al., 2018). All the young people in this study wanted the option to stay, underlining that this scheme is important for young people leaving care. However, wanting to stay was accompanied by a poor understanding of what *Staying Put* would mean for them and their foster carers, relevant when thinking about the factors that informed their decision-making.

In Chapter 8, the young people's accounts of facing incomplete information were noted. Their perceptions formed about their social worker's or carer's lack of awareness ranged from incompetence, or uncaring, to accepted confusion. Lacking information about their options reflects other leaving care research, where young people also felt in the dark when making plans to move on (Ayre et al., 2016) and confirming their need for well-trained carers and workers who could help them (Harder et al., 2020). Based on the young people's experiences, the lack of clarity about *Staying Put* was not exclusive to the social worker, as review managers and foster carers were also seemingly unsure about the mechanics of the scheme. A lack of foundational information and understanding hindered the young people who were reliant on workers and carers to help them make sense of this decision and future

arrangements once the decision had been made. The young people in my study were understanding about the gaps in their carer's understanding. However, this understanding was not extended to their individual social worker who was expected to know the details of *Staying Put*. The need for their social worker to understand *Staying Put* appeared critical to supporting their decision but also an indicator of the potential of the relationship between social worker and young person. Some of the young people speculated that their social worker's ignorance about *Staying Put* was typical of their response to leaving care issues but also symptomatic of the poor knowledge base in the wider profession. The lack of knowledge across the social workers discussed in my study, highlights concerns raised in other research about the change in practice focus. The lack of attention to the detail or impact of *Staying Put* reflects deeper concerns about the erosion of professional expertise and relational activity. Rather than equipping themselves with the knowledge relevant to young people they work with, social workers may be preoccupied with productivity and risk management (Butler and Drakeford, 2005).

Although the remit of my study was not specifically about the social work role, the views of the young people about differences they experienced between their social worker and personal advisor are relevant when thinking about factors that inform decision-making. Role differentiation could be important when thinking about why social workers appeared to misunderstand *Staying Put*, making them ill-informed when advising young people. Changes to organisational structures and staff turnover detailed in Chapter 3 highlighted the transient and disparate nature of social work services. As a result, issue specific knowledge is divided between social workers and other professions, but then further siloed by the creation of specialisms within an organisation (Frost, 2017). The location of expertise about leaving care and specifically *Staying Put* may well indicate the operation of professional discourses in social work organisations. Discursive practices such as person specifications, service descriptions and departmental boundaries contribute to the formation of the individual social worker's subjectivity (Gilbert and Powell, 2010). In this instance, social workers and personal advisors are distinct by their name and professional responsibilities, but also the chronological age of the people they work with — social workers pre 18 and personal advisors post 18. Role expertise therefore becomes clearly demarcated, and task and function-based specialisms consequently define but also distinguish between the two positions. Distinct modes of objectification (Foucault, 1982) associated with each role, discourage social workers to bridge the gap between theirs and the personal advisor role, as there is a risk of diluting their identity (Kettle and Daly, 2018). Social workers may well

perceive that all information relating to life post the young person's 18th birthday is outside of their domain, indicating that the compartmentalised services could be problematic to young people trying to move across these islands of information.

Lacking detail about *Staying Put* was one issue relating to the use of information, and as detailed in Chapter 8 the presentation of options about alternative housing or services was questioned by young people. One aspect of how information was curated could relate to the previous point about silos of expertise, however using Foucault's conceptualisation of power offers another perspective. Recognised earlier in this chapter, young people's ability or inability to take part in decisions were understood through discourses about being in or leaving care. Established research about the adversities faced when leaving care, previous experiences and legal frameworks, all contribute to constructions of young people as troubled or burdened. Consequently, these constructions form 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1975, p. 30) about the young person's vulnerabilities. In turn, concerns about vulnerabilities translate into approaches by social workers and carers who become protective towards the young people they work with. This stance may well indicate a use of power that is not operating maliciously or as an 'anti-authority struggle' (Foucault, 1982, p. 780). Instead, information or options may well have been purposefully omitted to safeguard the young people from the impact of decision-making and the rigors and burden of the decision. Curating information in this way indicates the productive exercise of power (O'Farrell, 2006) where social workers and foster carers, could have purposely chosen not to talk about the young person's transition for fear of upsetting them. That is not to say that taking a protective approach is justifiable, as the basis of this approach is an assumption of incapacity, reflecting wider persisting ideas of childhood discussed in Chapter 5.

The inadvertent consequences of *Staying Put*

Interpretations by young people of *Staying Put* extended beyond the practical matter of remaining with their carers and highlight the feelings young people had at the time of their decision, responding to the third question for my study. There were two distinct elements stemming from the young people's accounts of the time leading up to their 18th birthday: the impact of *Staying Put* on family dynamics and the relationship between staying and their feelings of worthiness and belonging which develop the existing understanding of *Staying Put*. Changes to their relationships with foster carers came about due to discussions about practicalities in converting their placement into an arrangement. The introduction of a payment was identified as a source of discomfort for foster carers by Action for Children, and

their report recognised that payment arrangements could risk ‘disrupting the dynamic’ (2020, p. 30). My study confirms that their concerns are founded, and young people can experience these disrupted dynamics due to the unexpected financially driven discussions which left them feeling unsettled.

Aside from the issue of confusion about benefits and payments raised by young people, the role of the contract and payment system seemed to introduce an unnecessary schism in the relationship between the young people and their foster carers, at what was already an uncertain time. As already noted in Chapter 9, the introduction of a contract, contributed to a repositioning of their familial relationships with foster carers. Social workers tended to circumnavigate emotional aspects of *Staying Put*, instead attention was given to transactional concerns to emphasise the distinction between care and post care. Here, Foucault’s theorisations of subjectivity provide a useful tool to examine this situation.

Dominant discourses about families and their role in social cohesion have filtered into social work policy concerning the promotion of foster care over residential care as the preferred placement option for children and young people (Garrett, 2018c; Cronin, 2019). Foster care and family placements built around ideas of reproducing family life have become intertwined with young people’s desires to feel *normal* outside of their birth family (Biehal, 2014). Where adoption was not appropriate, concepts of permanence for children in long term foster care have also gained traction and *Staying Put* reflects ideas of longer-term bonds by formally extending foster care relationships. The success of normalising foster care was evident from young people in my study. Detailed in Chapter 9 participants all expressed a strong familial identity within their foster carer relationships, which jarred with the new language of arrangement, payment and contract. My study indicates that the intentions of elongating the transition may be undermined by the transformation of the *family* into a transactional arrangement.

Foucault’s concept of discursive practice helps to highlight the impact of reconstructing and redefining a distinction between the foster care placement and *Staying Put* arrangement. Changing the discourse of their relationships by using different terminology, processes and rules function as a means to redefine the young person’s subjectivity (Foucault, 1975). Therefore, the repositioning of the young person as a lodger or tenant changes how relationships are viewed from inside the family, but also by social workers and the wider organisation. The young person is no longer living within a foster family, instead their arrangements are aligned to neutral housing spaces arguably making it easier to monetise

and manage. Additionally, the change of tone and approach may well ease endings and transitions before or at the young person's 21st birthday. Rather than moving on from a family, young people would be leaving a service or transaction making the ending more palatable for all involved.

Questions about identity within the family were at the heart of the second perception of *Staying Put*. As detailed in Chapter 9, young people talked of the context of luck and associated *Staying Put*, with good fortune and an acknowledgement of their place in the family. In the broader leaving care research, feelings of rejection or abandonment by social workers and carers related to perceptions of care as a contractual obligation (Rogers, 2011; Hiles et al., 2013), and after they had turned 18 the obligation to care for them ended. My study expands on these earlier findings by recognising that internalised feelings of rejection were common to those who did not remain with their carers. The discourse of *Staying Put* includes the realignment of ideas about the family as discussed in the previous section, but also successful continuation of a relationship. Where young people were denied the opportunity to stay, their explanations were personal and tapped into language of rejection or being unwanted. Carers who ended placements in other research, were held responsible and young people framed this end as 'betrayal' (Schmitz and Tyler, 2015). However, in my study young people tended not to hold their carer responsible for the end of the placement, instead they reflected on their own traits and behaviours in the absence of any other explanation. The accounts of young people feeling their place in the foster family is questioned also aligns with Biehal's (2014) concept of 'provisional belonging' (p. 964) where children were uncertain about their position in the foster family. Their decision-making about *Staying Put* shows how 'provisional belonging' of young people in the foster family was brought to the fore through discussions about their sense of place. In my study the 'provisional' element was introduced through the possibility of *Staying Put*, resulting in young people having a precarious sense of where they fitted within the foster family. Although young people felt responsible for not *Staying Put*, Action for Children (2020) found that the financial situation of the carers was more likely to be the barrier, rather than any feelings about the young person.

Understandings of foster care are suffused with notions of philanthropy (Kirton, et al., 2007; Barth, 2011) due to carers being approved rather than employed. Consequently, there is often a confused view of the professional standing of carers and the issue of fees when caring for children and young people. Research suggests that carers are motivated by contributing to society and enjoyment in being with children (Baer and Diehl, 2020), and

money is more likely to be a facilitator than a motivator (The Fostering Network, 2013). Therefore, when financial matters limit the carer's ability to agree to *Staying Put*, it may result in explanations being avoided for fear of being misinterpreted by the young person. Perhaps to protect young people from being seen as a financial burden, foster carers and social workers find it easier to leave the reason for not *Staying Put* unexplained. However, my study suggests that the absence of explanation plants seeds of doubt about the young person's role and status as a member of the foster family.

Leaving Care

The final section in this chapter summarises some key points about leaving care and *Staying Put* more generally which contribute to existing research in the field, starting with the use of independence as a destination. The feeling of becoming or being independent was routinely part of language used to describe leaving care by all the young people in my study. The goal of independence was seen as a distant, albeit worrying, part of life outside the foster care placement, for young people who were *Staying Put*. For those who had moved on, the reality was often described as difficult and lonely, as reflected in other research (Duncalf, 2010; Rogers, 2011; Hiles et al., 2013; Adley and Jupp Kina, 2014; Baker, 2017; Liabo et al., 2017). When applied to young people leaving care, independence is often discussed simultaneously with adulthood. For example, in the strategy *Keep on Caring* (DfE, 2016) phrases like living independently, financial stability and emotional security all interrelate to describe a self-reliant life after care. Stein's (2012) observation that independence-based approaches that foster self-reliance can be contrasted with *interdependent* models that advocate the prioritisation of inter-personal skills. In Storø's, (2018) theoretical paper he suggests the paradigm of independence has dominated recent leaving care practice, which appears to be evident in the two participating local authorities.

When talking about readiness to leave care, participants consistently associated independence with practical tasks, referring to the use of washing machines or cooking meals, often in conjunction with specific informal training sessions or conversations with foster carers. Achieving proficiency in these associated symbols of independence could be read as indicators of readiness, as they contribute to the idea that the young person can meet their own basic needs. Using household skills as markers of independence arguably restricts broader thinking about leaving care and employing self-reliance as a planning tool appears to curtail what social workers or foster carers could do to better prepare young people. These individualised approaches relate to Foucault's thinking about 'government of

the self by the self' (Gilbert and Powell, 2009, p. 7). Creating a self-managing subject is a cornerstone of governmentality, where the individual is able to conduct themselves without explicit direction (Oksala, 2013). Preparation for leaving care appears to align with these ideas of self-sufficiency but applying goal-oriented conceptualisations of independence are problematic. For young people leaving care greater understanding of their experiences and feelings often become compressed without regard to the reality of their situation (Storø, 2018).

Although young people identified a need to learn the practical aspects of day-to-day living, they also felt that there were other gaps in their preparation, adding to existing work about preparation for leaving care. Young people suggested that their emotional needs and connections were not prioritised (Adley and Jupp Kina, 2014; Dima and Pinkerton, 2016) how emotionally ill prepared they had felt (Baker, 2017), how they would have welcomed better emotional support (Harris, 2009; Rogers, 2011; Baker, 2017) and how they wanted more time to prepare (Hiles et al., 2014). Building on other studies it seems that young people continue to experience inconsistent or inadequate support to leave their care placement and continued representations of independence hamper progress in policy development. Arguably shifting the paradigm of leaving care from independence to interdependence could encourage a move away from models of practice that sever ties with sources of support, to a model that focuses on the social ecology of the young person (Dima and Pinkerton, 2016).

The final section in this chapter returns to *Staying Put*. As the emphasis was on the views of young people rather than the operational aspects of the scheme, structural barriers or facilitators, and carer and worker perspectives were not explored; a gap which presents future opportunities for further research, set out in Chapter 12. The premise of *Staying Put* appeared to be valued by the young people, borne out by their aspiration to remain with their carers, reflecting earlier views in the original evaluation report (Munro et al., 2012). The policy to stay put formalised informal individual arrangements between carers and young people and reflected a change in policy that aimed to align care experiences with those of the wider population (van Breda et al., 2020). Exploring *Staying Put* through the views of young people enables closer examination of the policy beyond the technical change to practice (Parton, 1999). In this case, thinking about what the government intended through the introduction of *Staying Put*, namely the option to delay transition from care, what social change was anticipated but also how the process, actions and gathering of information makes *Staying Put* known.

Discourse about *Staying Put* is under-developed as there is little research about young people's experiences or organisational responses. Whilst my study begins to develop an understanding, there are already early concerns about the efficacy of *Staying Put* in delivering widespread change to leaving care experiences, evident in the numbers of young people extending their placement (Action for Children, 2020; DfE, 2020). The young people's accounts suggest that *Staying Put* may not fulfil the remit of changing practice through the introduction of a later transition. Young people were still highlighting similar issues to participants in other research as discussed earlier in this chapter. Arguably this is as a result of the financial and resource implications identified in Chapter 3 and in the recent report by Action for Children (2020). Although the policy acts as a signifier that young people leaving care should not be cast out of their placement at 18, the infrastructure does not necessarily support this. Recognising the biopolitical role policy plays in managing the population, the relational impacts of remaining with their carer appear to be passed over for the transactional concerns, underlined by the reliance of the contract as a vehicle to discuss and resolve *Staying Put*.

Staying Put may struggle to change the culture of early transition in its current form because of the language and nature of the policy. Young people in a *Staying Put* arrangement are neither in care nor have they left it, instead they occupy a space in between. Language is developing to identify this space. Terms like extended care, *Staying Put* and *Staying Close* all refer to schemes or spaces which are separate from the existing discourses of the *looked after* system. As noted in Chapter 1, the language used to describe *Staying Put* purposely distinguishes young people in foster care from young people in an arrangement and expectations are that foster carers no longer provide the same level of support as they had previously. In practice this distinction might not be apparent to the young person in the way their carer supports them, however the services and support provided by the local authority will differ. Therefore, young people occupy a position that is generally disassociated from the usual care system, which is characterised by financial, emotional and parental support and responsibility. Consequently, leaving care means you are outside of the system but *Staying Put* does not mean you are on the inside.

The application of *Staying Put* in these two local authorities indicates that the policy also has the potential to create a transition within a transition. Young people explained how they felt being left in an indeterminate state whilst waiting or anticipating whether or not they could stay, described as a limbo state in other research (Hiles et al., 2014). Rather than reduce anxiety leading up to their 18th birthday, the young people appeared to be introduced to a

different form of worry about their family relationships within their placement and their potential next steps.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has identified the relationships between my study and other leaving care and decision-making research. Generally, the experiences of young people in my study did not differ to participants in other work relating to leaving care and decision-making. Given the time span of research included in this chapter, a dispiriting picture of continued shortcomings appear to exist for some young people in and leaving care. In the use of a Foucauldian lens, I have attempted to shine a different light on some of these issues with the intention that alternative perspectives could provide further ways to engage with the problem. Before thinking about ways to address practice, the next chapter explores some of my reflections about the research and recognises some of the limitations of my study.

Chapter 11: Reflections and Limitations

Chapter Introduction

Following on from the discussion in Chapter 10, this chapter looks back at the research experience and details some of my thinking about the research process, starting with some general reflections about the experience and concluding with some limitations to the approach I took.

Undertaking doctoral study is primarily about furthering an understanding about a given subject, however the process is more than an output of learning (Weatherall, 2018, p. 100). Fook (2019) promotes the use of critical reflection in practice research, to help think through questions about interpretations during the research journey. This first section highlights some of my personal reflections during my doctoral research. As my study has been spread over a period of years it would not be feasible to include a complete account of my thinking during this time. Therefore, I have chosen two strands of thinking to present in this section: my professional identity and the research experience. Both elements represent areas of my thinking throughout the research process.

Researcher, Social Worker or Educator?

During my doctorate I moved from working in a local authority to a full-time position at a university. This transition raised questions for me about my professional identity as a social worker due to moving away from everyday practice. Whilst I recognise that social work identity is contested and has plural understandings (Mackay, and Zufferey, 2015), undertaking doctoral study added an extra dimension and allowed me to critically appraise my roles as a social worker and a social work educator from another perspective. Initially I questioned my authenticity as social worker, educator or researcher as I felt like a social work cuckoo in a higher education nest.

Whilst Webb (2017), argues that professional identity is not a fixed position and changes in response to experiences and settings, some writers have suggested that undertaking doctoral research is about changing from one identity to another (Brydon and Fleming, 2011) and that there are periods of liminal space — where a person is between two separate roles (Adorno, Cronley and Scott Smith, 2015). Often questions about *being* academic stem from insecurities about whether someone has the emotional or intellectual capacity to do a doctorate (Thomson and Kamler, 2016). Although I have felt these insecurities, my

uncertainties centred on concerns about a dilution of my social work self, which has been an integral part of my identity for more than 20 years.

Early in the process I grappled with the rotating triad of social worker, lecturer and researcher as if each would offer a distinct voice when making decisions about a task or thought process. As I progressed, I recognised that my social work experience impressed on every aspect of the research. Using reflective journals, supervision and organising a peer study group echoed measures I would use to problem solve in practice. Further reading highlighted that, other social workers involved in research also transposed social work approaches into their research experience often replicating methods employed in practice (Adorno, Cronley and Scott Smith, 2015). I came to appreciate that becoming a researcher did not exclude my social work or lecturer self. Instead, this process galvanised my social work identity through the re-examination of practice issues and conceptual ideas. Rather than dismantling previous professional identities and reforming with a single sense of self, the doctoral journey has helped me reconcile three aspects of my professional role. As mentioned in Chapter 6, being a social worker does not mean that interviews or analysing information are easier, but I did draw on my previous experiences to help prepare young people and provide support when they became distressed during the interviews. Also, I was aware that the use of my social work identity was significant in gaining access to different gatekeepers as I was able to draw on shared language and understanding of systems. Talking and thinking about social work so intensely has pushed me to think about my own actions as a social worker, manager and now as a lecturer shaping other's practice. Although I still experience previously mentioned insecurities, I have a stronger sense of my identity as a social worker who teaches and carries out research.

Writing Myself into the Research

Part of a developing research identity as a doctoral student is writing (Thomson and Kamler, 2016). I was mindful that I needed to adhere to the conventions of writing a thesis but wanted my approach to align with my ontological and epistemological positions. I started the process by writing in the third person following conventional thinking about academic contributions. In part this was based on my personal experience of academic writing and general advice, but also because of my apprehensions of *owning* the thesis. Soon into the process, I quickly felt a dissonance between me as the writer and what I had written. Creating an air of objectivity is associated with positivist approaches, where removing the researcher is important to identifying the true answer (Given, 2008). This technique has also been criticised for erasing particular voices from academic writing as assumptions are made

about a white male narrative if the writer is unseen (Thomson and Kamler, 2016). Using a third-person standpoint felt that my part in the construction of how I had understood young people's perspectives was hidden, and therefore not an honest representation of how information was interpreted. Using a first-person pronoun in my thesis was not to privilege my position, but to assert that my voice is one of many in the thesis (Weatherall, 2018).

Making the *subjective* explicit in the thesis was more than referring to myself in the first person. For example, in the process of data analysis, when reading and thinking about the young people's experiences I recognised in early iterations of my analysis that I was focused on elements that would more easily be incorporated into changes of process or teaching materials. Working in a reflexive way meant drawing attention to the 'knowledge making process' by thinking about my use of self in the analysis stage (Fook, 2019, p. 63). Being active in recognising my subjectivity, I was able to revisit the analysis with awareness of areas I might be drawn to when generating initial themes (Braun and Clarke, 2019), for example becoming focussed on points made about social worker behaviour or traits.

The Gates Behind the Gatekeepers

Following on from some personal reflections, the next section relates to my thinking about two stages of the research: the intractable route to talk with young people directly and the impact of the interviews.

As a professional doctorate is closely linked with practice, I initially had a nominated link person within the local authority to facilitate contact with teams and ultimately young people. Soon into the study, the person left and what followed was a period of frustrating albeit understandable delays. Given my links with both local authorities, I took for granted that my knowledge of the organisation would help me navigate systems to identify the right people in a timely way. I had anticipated unanswered emails and phone calls, as research is not the primary task for local authorities (Munro, Holmes and Ward, 2005). Instead, as reflected in Hayes' experience (2005) negotiating with gatekeepers proved to be much slower and more time consuming as noted in Chapter 6. Each local authority underwent significant organisational change, meaning that established links or contacts became redundant as people moved role. Once agreed, both local authorities were encouraging and welcoming to my request and the 'pay-off' described by Corra and Willer (2002), involved sharing the research once it had concluded. There was no expectation of influence over the questions or management of dissemination experienced in some insider research (Mitchell, 2006),

possibly due to a level of trust about how I would carry out the research, or ambivalence due to other issues to manage.

There were two years between the original ethics approval and local authority consent, then a further four months until my first interview. As senior managers were so supportive, the delays led me to question what obstacles other than issues of time (Gilbertson, and Barber, 2002) could be at play. I was prepared for some barriers and took time to meet, email and talk with people to allay concerns, explain information and to give reassurances about the approach I was taking. However, I had not thought through the multiple layers of gatekeeping I needed to navigate depicted in Figure 6, Chapter 6. What I was not aware of until after I had started the interviews was the interactions between the foster carer and young person. I underestimated the hidden aspects to the consent process that played out without my involvement. By focusing my attention on the two formal ethics processes and the young person, I missed the feelings of foster carers about their role in the process. The issue in accessing young participants is a familiar feature of social research (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Botterell, 2015), where concerns about involving vulnerable participants in research is seen as an 'unnecessary intrusion' (Munro, Holmes and Ward, 2005, p. 1027). Nevertheless, I had anticipated that as the young people were over 18, it would be their decision to take part once their worker had talked to them, as I was working from a rights-based stance.

Although the workers did not share this information with me until after the interviews concluded, I became aware of how much effort they had made to answer questions and offer reassurances to carers. Weighing up my involvement was considered at all points in the gatekeeping process, but for carers their consideration was more personal to the possible impact on their relationships and home circumstances. By failing to acknowledge the concerns of carers, I might have been perceived as naïve or ill-informed about the issues young people were facing. This experience emphasised that negotiating consent is neither linear nor a neutral interaction, and secondary levels of thinking and discussion take place outside of the researcher's domain. These understandings will inform future research involving different elements to the gatekeeping process.

The benefits of Participation and Social Work Experience

Consideration about the potential vulnerability of participants was a constant through the duration of the study. Concerns generally centred on the potential resurfacing of previous trauma (Mendes, Snow and Baidawi, 2014), coercion to participate or being excluded

(Garcia-Quiroga and Agoglia, 2020). Research can benefit involved children and young people, and shared skills and experiences should be acknowledged (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). Yet, these elements were not required in ethics applications, as processes tended to focus on deficits and risk management (Carey, 2019). My apprehension to get ethics applications right, probably steered my thinking away from any positive factors, which I was confronted with during the interviews. Although I did not explicitly ask the young people about benefits they saw in taking part, all of the young people I spoke with expressed their desire to 'make a difference' (Cally) or to 'get this out there' (Jonathan). Whilst there was some scepticism about the ability of my research to make changes — 'will they listen?' (Cally), all participants were keen to be involved. Their response contrasted with their supporting adults who were more hesitant and highlighted how important it is to think about gains within the research process as well as pitfalls when talking with gatekeepers.

The final aspect I want to reflect on relates to the researcher's role during the interview. Preparing for interviews involved attention to boundaries and how to present as a researcher to support the young person to feel comfortable and be able to respond or withdraw. Being focused on the transactional elements of the interview did not fully account for the relationship built with the young person. Talking with young people about sensitive issues, I was aware that regardless of the positive nature of our conversation, I would be another transient encounter in their lives. Due to the nature of the personal information, they shared I deliberately drew on my social work skills to help the young person reflect on what they were telling me and move on from more painful details, for example, using reflective and circular questions outside of the interview guide. Initially I was concerned that this approach muddled my role as a researcher, but I recalled Liabo, Ingold and Robert's (2018, p. 5) suggestion that ethical guidelines 'provide tools rather than rules' about how the interview is conducted. I was confident that being kind and helpful during the interview was important to leave the young person feeling comfortable about what they shared. I have subsequently thought about more supportive ways to interview young people so that they are not left with feelings of loss or isolation with their issues. Some advocate that participatory research is a preferred model as it gives a voice to the participant (Lushey and Munro, 2014), however peer to peer models take more time and I am interested in whether there are alternatives that do not require young people committing time to longer term projects that also cannot sustain relationships. This is something I will continue to think about in future research.

Research Limitations

Entangled Involvement

In my thesis, I have referred to the benefits of having an insider perspective and established relationships with each local authority. The possibility of collusion or missed nuance is higher where the researcher is familiar with the research field (Costley and Fulton, 2019), but also concerns that the researcher will identify issues that are not raised through the data (Chammas, 2020). These elements have been addressed in Chapter 6 as my insider position changed and was relatively distant. In my reflection I noted the multiple stages and potential barriers to identifying participants and wonder if my involvement with each organisation was significant. Undertaking a doctorate alongside other responsibilities meant that there was a pragmatic approach to the process, but my gratitude for the support of the local authority, and lack of time, may have prevented me from being more directive regarding timescales. Perhaps carrying out my research in a different local authority would have lessened the negative impact of familiarity, where I felt concerned about being overly demanding and the local authority possibly assuming I would accept any delays in response.

Selection of Participants

I was mindful that the young people involved in the study were selected by the social work teams as young people needed to be nominated by their worker as there was no agreed way to contact young people directly. I have acknowledged earlier in this chapter that the social worker and personal advisor's involvement was very welcome in preparing the ground, especially with foster carers. Nevertheless, in making their selection social workers and personal advisors would have used an unwritten set of criteria for the young people they put forward. It could be that they purposely chose young people who had an axe to grind or who they felt had an interesting perspective. That being said, the numbers of young people *Staying Put* within each local authority was relatively low and therefore it would have been hard for the teams to be less selective. Furthermore, the range of experiences across the selected participants did enable me to address my research aims.

Methods

One of the limitations of my study, was the restricted time to involve young people more in the development of the research. Involving the advisory group was one element of the process where I was able to work with them to support a more inclusive approach. Despite the measures I took, and the attempts made to be open and supportive, the terms of their involvement were shaped by me, whereas peer research would have enabled a different

experience where young people might have felt more ownership of their contribution. Although my actions and intentions were to ensure that young people were central to the research, I was still the person steering and interpreting the issues discussed.

Applying a Foucauldian Lens

My intention to use Foucault's work was in the spirit of other writers such as Chambon et al. (1999) and Winter and Cree (2016) who were looking to explore previously understood practice issues using a different critical lens. As described in Part One, much of the literature about leaving care and decision-making reflect similar messages from and about young people's experiences, and using Foucault's conceptual ideas enabled an opportunity to re-examine the 'taken for granted' (Chambon, 1999). However as highlighted in Chapter 5, using his work is not straightforward, not least because of the complexity of his ideas. Foucault's work has enabled me to think about routine elements of social work in a particular way, which has led to different understandings of practices like the statutory review meeting. Although, the elements of Foucault's work chosen for this study were not useful to examine all aspects of the young people's experiences, it does present opportunities to apply different concepts in future research; for example his work on surveillance or normalisation.

Chapter 12: Conclusion

Chapter Introduction

In this final chapter, I summarise the thesis and return to the original research questions set out in Chapter 1. Further to the summary, I refer to the original research questions and relate my learning to each research question. The next section details the contribution my study has made to existing knowledge in the field and is followed by my recommendations developed from the research. In addition, I have included suggestions provided by some of the young people at the end of their interview to honour their requests to present their ideas to a wider audience.

Summary

My study set out to explore the experiences of young people's decision-making about *Staying Put* and specifically:

- The extent of the influence young people felt they had in making this decision.
- The factors that informed their thinking and how those factors played out.
- Their thoughts and feelings about making this decision.

At the time of writing there had been very few studies about *Staying Put*, a policy designed to extend the foster care placement until the young person's 21st birthday. *Staying Put* and other extended care opportunities are in their relative infancy but are seen as a progressive step to counter the ongoing concerns about premature and difficult transitions from care (van Breda, 2020). I did not set out to uncover problems about *Staying Put*, but overwhelmingly young people described a care system dominated by process and inconsistencies. The young people I met during this study did have some levels of vulnerability, but they also had strengths, resilience, determination and an appetite to tell social workers about their lives through the interviews. Their ability to cope with the many changes of worker, difficult meetings or awkward systems were attributed to their relationships with foster carers and some personal advisors, which were consistently described as positive, encouraging and committed.

The research was designed to focus on *Staying Put*, and decision-making as a component part. Through the examination of decision-making, I explored the young people's perceptions of *Staying Put* leading up to their 18th birthday. Combining the topic of leaving care with the young person's right to make and participate in decisions, enabled me to think about both the application of a national policy and the young person's experience of executing their right to participate in decisions. To support my thinking, I drew on Foucault's theorisation of power, discourse and subject alongside literature that posits young people's agency as a constructed concept. Foucault's work did not provide a blueprint from which solutions could be drawn, instead his ideas set out in Chapter 5 and applied in Chapter 10 highlighted how areas of his work are valuable when examining established discourses in complex areas of social work practice. Applying his thinking prompted questions about the nature of participation, and how his work recognises that decisions are bounded by established discourses (Hartung, 2017), but also how social work and social workers operate within the wider social care system. The distinction between a Foucauldian study and my study using a Foucauldian lens, is addressing what happens next. Foucault was not concerned with providing answers to difficult problems, as 'they never remain fixed' (Dean, 2010, p. 13). To progress practice, I argue that a constant circular debate is not appropriate in social work research, where service users have contributed their time, often with a view that they can make a difference to systems they have used. The interviews with 10 young people from two different local authorities, provided rich data about their time leading up to their 18th birthday and contribute to existing understandings of leaving care related issues.

Learning from this Study

The experiences of young people's decision to stay put or leave their placement

Overall, my study has identified that young people have varied experiences when making their decision to stay put. Their individual circumstances were characteristically diverse – different ages and experiences in foster care – however some features of their interactions were consistent. All the young people had positive relationships with their foster carers. Whether or not they could, all wanted to stay, and some wished they could return having moved out. Based on my study, the fostering system was successful in providing the young people with a home rather than a placement, highlighting that familial connections can be created through foster care. I also identified that the sense of family stability and continuity can be disrupted by the decision to stay, due to the friction between administrative process and their lived experience.

The influence a young person had in making this decision

The decision faced by young people was complicated in that it was not always a decision for them to make. The discrepancy between the young person's desire to stay and the eventual outcome highlighted that for some young people their influence was limited or non-existent. Although guidance suggests young people have a joint or primary role in the decision, the phrase 'joint decision' may convey more agency than exists in practice (The Fostering Network, 2017, p. 5). Experiences of young people whose intentions matched their foster carers were still mixed in terms of their contribution to the final say. My research also highlighted how young people's role in decision-making was bounded and fluctuated throughout their care experiences and this variance was repeated in their decision to stay put. Decisions tended to be made by other adults and then presented for assent in meetings, and participation in decisions was generally limited. Young people sometimes exercised their rights through their refusal to attend or silence to absent themselves from official decision-making processes. Arguably systems that they absent themselves from, were constructed to manage involvement rather than enable it – underlining established power relations.

The factors that inform and influence this decision

The influence of information and relationships featured in the thinking of young people making their decision. An underlying theme was the dual interpretations, definitions and responses to and about aspects of leaving care. For example, information given to young people appeared incomplete, and concepts of appropriate accommodation or options were defined by social workers or carers depending on the course of events. For example, some young people who did not stay put, felt social workers positively promoted inappropriate housing options, as the worker had no choice but to find them somewhere to go. Meanwhile other young people who did stay put, were presented with the same housing in a derogatory way. Young people generally felt they were making decisions without an understanding or a full picture of all possible living arrangements. Other factors included their anxieties about being ready, sometimes based on thinking they had not been given the advice or guidance needed to live alone. The other contributing factor was the influence of relationships with social workers and carers, where an absence of a trusting connection with the social worker meant that they felt alone in making the decision and sometimes selected the option they were presented with. As they all had close bonds with their carers, those relationships also shaped their decisions to stay, meaning they did not want to leave at the age of 18.

Their thoughts and feelings about making this decision

The consideration of the *Staying Put* transition for young people appeared to be regarded as a test of the young person's relationship with their carers. Young people couched their discussion in terms of 'luck' and 'belonging' as an indicator of how they were viewed by their foster carers. Furthermore, the transition point changed the dynamics of their relationships by transforming their familial relationship into a transaction. In some cases, introducing money and contractual expectations alerted young people to the difference in their status within the household. Where previously they had felt part of a family unit, the change of language and written agreement alerted young people to that reality that this was a financial arrangement. The decision whether or not to stay also seemed to reflect the sense of preparedness for a change, whether that was about their own experiences and sense of self-efficacy or the foundation they felt they had to move on. There appeared to be a discrepancy between the limited range of discussions and skills provided, and what they thought they might need. This discrepancy indicates a different understanding of *independence*, with adults focusing on a small number of key tasks and young people talking about complex feelings and resources.

Contribution to Knowledge

Staying Put

A strength of my study is the notable addition of a young person's perspective about *Staying Put*, 9 years after the evaluation by Munro and colleagues (2012). Aside from some organisation led reports, there is limited research to date that foregrounds the young person's views about *Staying Put* or that explores the application of the policy more generally. My study provides some insights into the presentation of *Staying Put* by social workers and how young people have felt disconcerted by discussions about finances and preparation for the future. The aim of staying with a foster carer was to facilitate a gradual transition for young people, which is evident in my study, however the execution of the policy seems to introduce a discontinuity through the mechanisms used to establish the arrangement. As well as the prominence of the young people's perspective, my study also contributes to existing knowledge about extended care nationally and internationally, which currently does not have 'a wider research base' (Van Breda et al., 2020, p. 1). Adding to this smaller field of studies, my research could inform new applications of extended care schemes in countries developing different approaches.

Care and Leaving Care

Through the exploration of *Staying Put*, other issues relating to the wider care and leaving care system were raised which build on existing literature in each field. Specific to children in care, my study adds to existing literature about constructs of permanence and belonging in long term foster care, in particular Biehal's (2014) typology of belonging where young people making their decisions about *Staying Put* felt a sense of 'provisional belonging' (p. 964) due to the uncertainty about their position in the foster family.

The next contribution relates to the field of work about statutory review meetings. The focus by young people on statutory review meetings contributes to previous understandings of young people's experience of the meeting as a participative forum, where other children and young people have shared their difficulties about attending their review (Roesch-Marsh, Gillies and Green, 2017; Diaz, Pert and Thomas, 2018). The role of the statutory review meeting was perceived as an ineffective but designated forum and site of information sharing and decision-making.

In relation to the wider leaving care research field, my study provides additional knowledge to the understanding of transition. The experience of transition for those young people not *Staying Put* reflected other work highlighting problems with leaving care detailed in Chapter 4 (Pinkerton, 2011; Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017). My study provides an additional perspective about young people in longer term placements with consistent foster carers experiencing this change.

Policy and Practice

My study contributes to the understanding of misuse of jargon when working with children and young people (Creegan et al., 2006; Wright et al., 2006; TACT, 2019). The use and application of language and technical practices when making *Staying Put* operational were found to be alienating and removed from the everyday experiences of young people. The role of language also relates to more general issues about relationship building with children and young people. My research provides different perspectives about the sharing of personal information by social workers. The use of self-disclosure has been framed as an ethically complex issue for practitioners (Knight, 2012), and my study contributes further to the discussion by highlighting the impact of social worker disclosure on young people leaving care. Social workers sharing details about their work appeared to inhibit rather than open up communication with the young person.

Decision-Making

My study contributes to knowledge about the role of young people's decision-making as they are thinking about leaving care. Much of the leaving care research focuses on needs or outcomes rather than young people's rights (Munro, 2019) or decisions. The issues of limited information, opportunity and ability to make decisions have been well made by many previous writers in the field. Where my study differs is the specificity to leaving care and *Staying Put* and the difference in previously understood ideas of age being a barrier to participation concluded by several writers (Vis and Thomas, 2009; Križ & Skivenes, 2017; Alfandari, 2017; Woodman, Roche, and McArthur, 2018, Rap, Verkroost and Bruning, 2019). Focusing on power enabled me to highlight the complexities of children and young people's participation in institutional decision-making processes with social workers and foster carers. By bringing together the literature about participation and construction of childhood, with Foucault's theories of power, I provide different insights into young people's experiences of decision-making and how their role in decisions appear bounded by discourses about what constitutes participation. These insights underline the tensions between the prominence of participation in policy and the young person's lived experience. In particular I contribute to the field of participation studies through my understanding of how participation and decision-making are conflated depending on the situation (Leeson, 2007; Paulsen and Thomas, 2018).

Applying a Foucauldian lens

Criticisms have been made about an under theorisation of the experience of leaving care (Stein, 2006c) and although there is a wealth of research about young people's outcomes, some writers have advocated for application of theory to further understandings of the leaving care experience in context (Barratt, Appleton, and Pearson, 2020). Foucault's work has been used to theorise a wide range of social work practice issues, however, not extensively to leaving care. Therefore, my research adds to existing Foucauldian social work studies but also responds to Barratt, Appleton, and Pearson's (2020) call to extend the use of theory to understand young people's experiences. Thinking about *Staying Put* in the context of Foucault's theorising of power has offered a different interpretation of practice, one example being that the involvement of young people is more complex than duties to compel participation. Thinking about the research questions using a Foucauldian lens prompted important questions about power/knowledge and how it is exercised through institutions, discourses, policies, specifically *Staying Put*, which reproduces the subjectification of young people.

Messages for Practice

As my study is one of only a few that have explored *Staying Put*, the work I have presented is relevant to social workers, personal advisors, foster carers, social work organisations and policy makers. Drawing recommendations to conclude the thesis exemplifies the convention of a professional doctorate which maintains the relationship between research and practice (Fulton et al., 2013). As this research is not user led, my recommendations for practice sit alongside the ideas drawn directly from young people based on my analysis of the issues they presented. This positioning reflects my role in the construction of the data and does not set out to undermine the young people's perspective by mimicking the conventions of 'adult research' (Mann, Lilley and Kellett, 2014). The challenge of any recommendations is to highlight elements that are achievable and that reflect the conclusions of the research. My conclusion is that only suggesting measures that focus on training or small practice modifications feel inadequate. During this thesis I have set out over 20 years of policy and legislative changes and a wide range of research that have all reflected a similar narrative, resulting in small changes that accommodate shortcomings in the system. Existing research has evidenced that this incremental approach has only been partially successful, with young people still feeling ill prepared and unready for living alone. In repeating this pattern, I would not be reflecting what I have come to think through my research. Therefore, I am presenting a larger, more radical talking point followed by more specific measures that could make a difference in the absence of broader system change. The suggestions made by young people are also noted and where they coincide with my recommendations their name is indicated in brackets where we had similar suggestions. I have then included a separate section for the young people's ideas that were distinct from mine.

Talking Point: The end of *Staying Put*?

This concluding talking point stems from both the quote from Hannah (see page 1) and the young people's views about *Staying Put* detailed in Part Three. Although *Staying Put* has enabled young people to remain with their carers for longer, the application of *Staying Put* in practice appears to have masked rather than resolved this transition point. In order to change the culture of early transition from care, consideration could be given to a more radical idea, namely that young people automatically remain in their placement until they are 21, unless they want to leave at an earlier point. By replacing *Staying Put* with a care system that stretches into early adulthood, remaining in care would no longer be a matter of exception, and young people had more time to make this change. *Staying Put* was an attempt to align an intention to extend the transition period, but in practice having to find

ways around the language or existing legislation of care has contributed to a system with inbuilt disincentives and as identified in Part Three, difficulties for young people. In making this change, the concept of *Staying Put* would become redundant as young people would remain in their placement (home) with their foster carers until they felt ready to leave. Executing an opt out rather than opt in system would aim to lessen the anxieties of young people as they reach 18. Conversations about leaving care would then not need to take place during other periods of transition and young people would be able to make longer term plans for their education and/or employment with the stability of an ongoing place to live. Such a change would require modifications to the Children Act 1989, fostering regulations and alterations to benefits systems as well as commitment to fund services for an additional period. There are implications for the wider fostering service as an increase in young people remaining with their carers reduces the number of placements for other children. In the current financial and practice climate this fundamental change may seem unrealistic or unachievable, however this study has questioned established ways of thinking about *Staying Put*, through the young people's perspectives. Young people did not articulate this suggestion in the way I have presented it here, however their sense of injustice and confusion underlined by Hannah's expectation to stay until they are ready to move on, underpins my thinking. This call for such a radical step is in not a criticism of those who campaigned for *Staying Put* to exist, nor is it to deny the value of the policy intentions.

Recommendation 1: Preparation for Conversations

Social workers need to think more about the nature and frequency of their conversations with young people. I recommend that a simple reflective model could encourage social workers to think more critically about their approach when raising or discussing difficult issues and decisions. As there are a number of already established conceptual tools relating to the participation of children and young people, I have devised a model that builds on rather than replaces existing work. The framework I have selected is Lundy's (2007) *everyday spaces model of participation* detailed in Chapter 4: Figure 4. This is a rights-based model used across projects that promote individual and group participation. Whilst Lundy's model raises some useful questions and prompts about participation, my adaptation relates to the social worker's role in planning conversations and incorporating space to talk and ask questions outside of formal meetings. Combining tools to think about both the child/young person and the social worker, might support better communication about decisions, contentious or complex issues and also highlight any gaps in the social worker's

understanding in advance. The proposed tool, I have called a reflective conversation plan, is intended to support social workers and is set out in Figure 11.

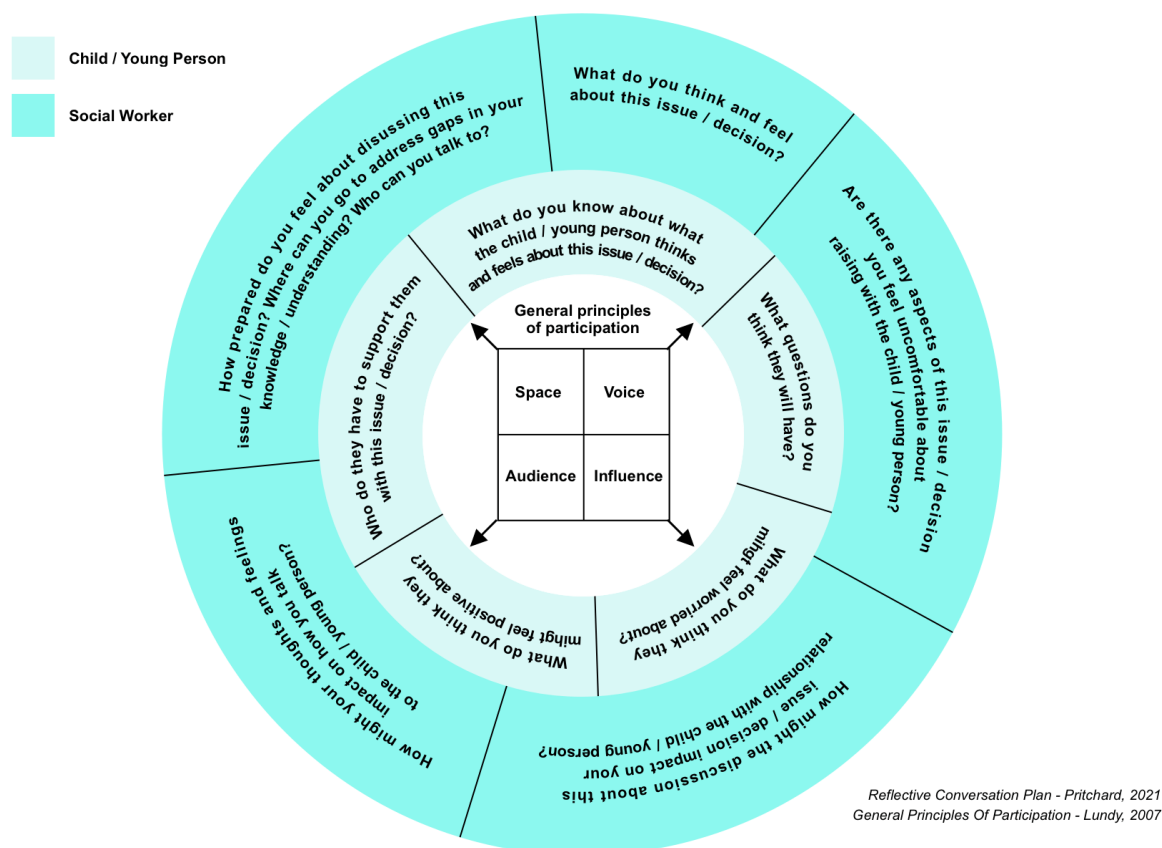


Figure 11: Reflective Conversation Plan

The tool is designed to support the social worker to focus on their own thinking and what they know about the child/young person's point of view:

- Social workers, personal advisors and foster carers should be encouraged through supervision or training to be more transparent and open in their conversations with young people about the future (Liam, Jonathan, Tyler, Cally, Carrie, Eshal, Beth).

Recommendation 2: Talking about *Staying Put*

The option of *Staying Put* was raised at several points during the young people's care pathway. In Chapter 8 young people described early conversations, no conversations, or late introductions to the details. The following practice changes are recommended:

- Young people need to be made aware of *Staying Put* early in the foster care placement as this could offer reassurances that they do not have to leave at 18. Where possible before they are 16 to enable young people to make longer term decision about their education (Jonathan).
- For transparency, young people need to be made aware that it is not just their decision.
- Where applicable, young people need to be informed why they are not able to stay, in a supportive way. Delaying or avoiding this explanation can be detrimental to the young person's relationship with their foster carer(s) but also could lead to misunderstandings and internalised thinking about why they have to leave the placement.
- *Staying Put* terminology needs to be revised to reflect the human aspect of the relationship. Regardless of an organisation's systems, financial agreements, contracts or licenses need to be incidental to the arrangement rather than the focus.
- Social workers need to spend time individually with the young people and foster carers to establish their thoughts and feelings about *Staying Put* to help them understand the issues in the placement for all parties (Hannah).
- When training and recruiting foster carers, *Staying Put* needs to be presented as a positive option and the practical aspects of the arrangement need to be explained.

Recommendation 3: Knowledge about Staying Put and other options

In Chapter 8 young people talked about the lack of knowledge social workers had about *Staying Put* and alternative options post 18. As I have suggested, holding back information could have been purposeful, however another explanation could be gaps in understanding or awareness. Where a social worker has an established relationship, they are best placed to provide information to the young people and foster carers about *Staying Put* and other housing-based services because they will have insight into the young person's apprehensions and circumstances. Therefore:

- Social workers should ensure that they have prepared before meeting young people and foster carers to ensure that they have the relevant knowledge and information (Tyler, Liam, Jonathan, Hannah, Yannick, Beth, Cain).

- Social workers should provide all information in a neutral way to allow space for the young person to ask questions or think (Liam).
- Social workers should provide or facilitate opportunities for young people to visit or meet other young people living in *Staying Put* arrangements and housing services.
- Social workers need to be proactive in providing support to young people who are unsure about what to do by asking open questions and being available to talk informally outside of meeting structures (Tyler, Carrie, Cally, Yannick).

Recommendations from young people

During the interviews young people made the following suggestions that would have helped them when making their decision about *Staying Put*:

- Simplify and explain information given to young people about *Staying Put* – especially any agreement involving money (Tyler, Jonathan).
- Provide a specific six-week group or individual programme to explain the basics of *Staying Put*, housing services, independence skills and learning to cope when living alone. The sessions should be fun and interactive and help young people build confidence by talking about the things that worry them before leaving their foster carers. The aim of the programme is to help identify who to go to for initial help, meet other young people in the same situation, and talk about different options (Liam).
- Social workers need to be more positive about *Staying Put* and university (Liam, Hannah).
- Have fewer changes of social worker/personal advisor and no change of worker at 18 (Hannah).
- Social workers need to be warmer and more human in their interactions and get to know young people (Hannah, Cally, Beth).
- Better preparation for leaving care by social workers and foster carers (Eshal, Carrie, Beth).
- Social Workers should not announce things at meetings (Cally).

Suggestions for Further Research

The intended focus of my research was a young person's perspective on their experience of making their decision. However, as I have referenced, making decisions in social work is rarely a solitary exercise and whilst *Staying Put* remains there are some specific areas of practice that could be further explored.

Research Related to *Staying Put*

Exploring the experiences of young people from other local authorities could extend the understanding I have contributed through this research. As evident in other aspects of care, national policy and statutory duties do not translate into uniform application and other local authorities may have a different approach to *Staying Put* which impacts on the experience of young people.

With Social Workers/Personal Advisors

The actions of social workers were consistently referenced in Part Three and further research with social workers and personal advisors could develop further understanding about their role in leaving care and how they understand the relationships between them, the young person and other involved professionals. Notwithstanding the barriers to participation from the social worker's point of view discussed in Chapter 4, examination of their specific role with *Staying Put* and the conversations they have had would offer an additional perspective and insight into how and why young people feel so removed from the social worker during this time. An additional aspect of this would be the conversation with young people who are not able to stay and what the considerations are from the social worker's perspective.

With Foster Carers

Similarly, to the social worker, an additional perspective could be sought from the foster carer to better appreciate the reasons for their decision regarding *Staying Put*. Although foster carer perspectives were included in the original evaluation (Munro, et al., 2012), this was almost 10 years ago, and services have changed due to austerity measures since this time.

Other issues - Preparation for Leaving

Poor preparation for leaving care was recognised in the research viewed in Chapter 4. Preparing for leaving care sits across the range of people involved in a young person's life. However, there appeared to be little consistency or agreed approach to support young

people in developing skills or check that they feel confident before 'leaving' care. In Chapter 9, some of the young people talked about the approach taken by their foster carers in supporting them to become more independent. Further research with young people about what has worked for them would be useful in sharing good practice but also in identifying what the gaps are in more detail. There are a few angles that could be taken, one is solely to talk with young people or include foster carers to share their approaches. Another element which became apparent in my research was the absence of social workers in this role but also the active role of a personal advisor and it would be interesting to understand what role social workers and personal advisers think they should take in preparing young people to leave.

Using Foucault's Work to Explore Leaving Care

In recognition of the breadth of Foucault's work, there is potential to use other elements of his thinking to examine care and leaving care. For example, some of the issues raised by young people about growing up in a system could be examined through his work around surveillance or governmentality. Another possibility is the use of Foucault's concept of genealogy which could be useful in revisiting the history of leaving care services. As noted previously, using a Foucauldian lens may help to shine a new light on areas of social work where new thinking is required.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has brought together the summary of what my study set out to understand – the experiences of young people's decision-making about *Staying Put*. Reflecting on Hannah's quote at the beginning of the thesis outlining *Staying Put* as an opportunity to 'just stay there until you were comfortable to leave', describes what *Staying Put* should offer. My study has identified the complexity of translating the everyday experiences of young people living with their birth families into policy and associated practices for young people in care. Reviewing the literature for the purpose of this study provided an overview of progress since early concerns about young people leaving care were raised in the 1970s. Whilst there have been some improvements, for example the extension of support for young people until they are 25, my research reflects previously raised concerns of young people's feelings of uncertainty, feeling ill-prepared and limited participation in the process of decision-making. This apparent lack of systemic change means that young people still may not have the opportunities, resources, and environments in which to leave care successfully and meaningfully engage in those decisions that affect them most. The recommendations I have

made aim to offer ways to improve practice with young people and enhance decision-making processes. However, there is a continuing need to challenge the problems that we know exist within the system to ensure young people like Beth, Cain, Cally, Carrie, Eshal, Hannah, Jonathan, Liam, Tyler and Yannick receive the best possible support as they leave care.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Information – Advisory Group

Appendix 2: Consent Form – Advisory Group

Appendix 3: Topic Guide

Appendix 4: Topic Guide – Young People

Appendix 5: Ethics Panel Approval Dates

Appendix 6: Written Information for the Local Authority

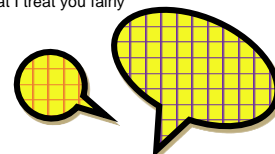
Appendix 7: Art Materials

Appendix 8: Participant Information Sheet

Appendix 9: Participant Consent Form

Appendix 1: Participant Information – Advisory Group

Agreed by the ethics committee at Anglia Ruskin University on 11/5/2017. They are responsible for making sure that I treat you fairly when I do my research.



Hi my name is **Sally Pritchard** and I am studying at Anglia Ruskin University. This leaflet tells you a bit about what I am doing and why I am contacting you. If I have missed anything or you want to ask me anything, my details are at the end.

What Is Research?

Research is the name for looking into a subject or situation in detail, usually it is something that we want to understand more.

I want to find out about the decisions young people make about whether they stay with their foster carers after they are 18.

Who am I going to talk to?

People who lived with Foster Carers and are now 18.

What am I going to talk to them about?

I want to ask people about what they thought when thinking about staying with their foster carer or moving out.

Talking to people will help us understand how young people make this decision, which will help us think about how they can be supported in the future.

Why am I contacting you and your group?

I would like your advice about the questions I am going to ask, the information I have written for them to explain my research and then what I am thinking about before I tell other people.

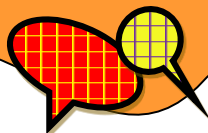
What will it involve?

I will work with the people who organise your group to arrange a time to come to meet you and talk about my ideas, but more importantly to hear what you think.

In the future I am planning to use the information I collect to train foster carers and social workers. If you would be interested in helping me with this, I can talk to you about it when we meet.

Do you have to take part?

No, you just have to tell me or the people who organise your group.



What will I do with the things you tell me?

I will write down your ideas and the things you tell to make sure that I am doing the best job I can when I talk to people.

Will people know it is you?

No. I will not use your name or anything that will identify who you are.

Taking Part

I will give you a form that you sign if you want to take part. You will have a copy of this and I will explain anything you don't understand.

Even if you sign this form, you can still decide that you don't want to take part at any point. You can tell me in person or text, phone or email me.

Will I share what you tell me with other people?

The people who might see what you have told me will be Jane and Ruth, who support me at university.

The other time I might share something you have told me is if I think you are going to hurt yourself or someone else. I will tell you if I am going to do this unless I think you or the other person will be in more danger.

Other Things to Think About

Talking to me might remind you of things from your past that you find difficult. If this happens we can stop at any time and have a break or you can stop being involved in the research.

The Last Thing.....

When I have finished my research, I am happy to give you a short version to read. I am planning to use my research in training and in social work magazines (called journals) to help social workers and foster carers understand young people.

Contact Me Here:



01223 695857



sally.pritchard@pgr.anglia.ac.uk (PGR stands for post graduate research)



Anglia Ruskin University, Young Street Site, Cambridge, CB1 1PT

If you want to make a complaint about any part of the research contact -

complaints@anglia.ac.uk or Office of the Secretary and Clerk, Anglia Ruskin University, Bishop Hall Lane, Chelmsford, Essex, CM1 1SQ

Appendix 2: Consent Form – Advisory Group

Agreed by the ethics committee at Anglia Ruskin University on 11/5/2017. They are responsible for making sure that I treat you fairly when I do my research.



Hi my name is **Sally Pritchard** and I am studying at Anglia Ruskin University. This is a **Consent Form**. We use this form to record your agreement to take part in the research. Let me know if you have any questions about any part of this form.

The name of my research is:

Staying Put? An exploration of the decisions made by young people leaving public care.

Contact Me Here:



01223 695857



sally.pritchard@pgr.anglia.ac.uk (PGR stands for post graduate research)



Anglia Ruskin University, Young Street Site, Cambridge, CB1 1PT

Your Name.....

- | | | | |
|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | I have read the information leaflet and had the chance to ask questions. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2 | I understand what the leaflet said. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 3 | I understand that I do not have to be involved in this research and that I can stop at any point, without giving a reason. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 4 | If I decide to stop being involved, the researcher can still use information and ideas I have given. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 5 | I agree to take part in the research. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

Your Signature.....

Date.....

Name of person discussing this form with you.....

Signature.....

Date.....

Appendix 3: Topic Guide

Interview Topic Guide

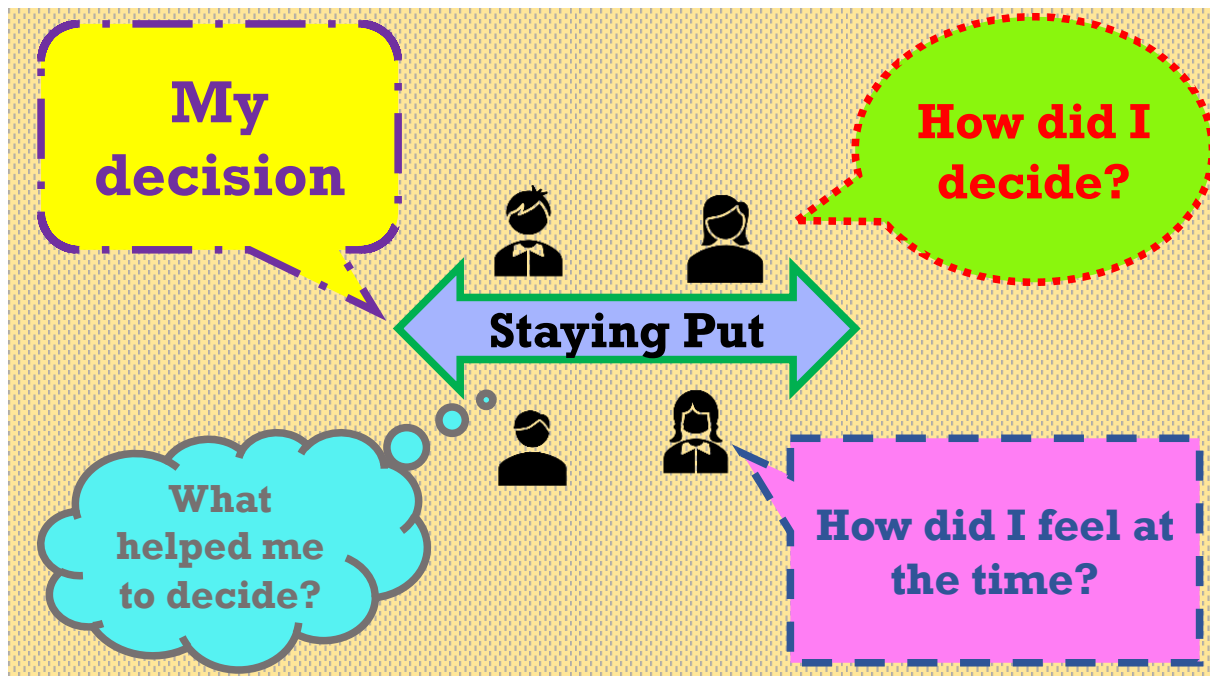
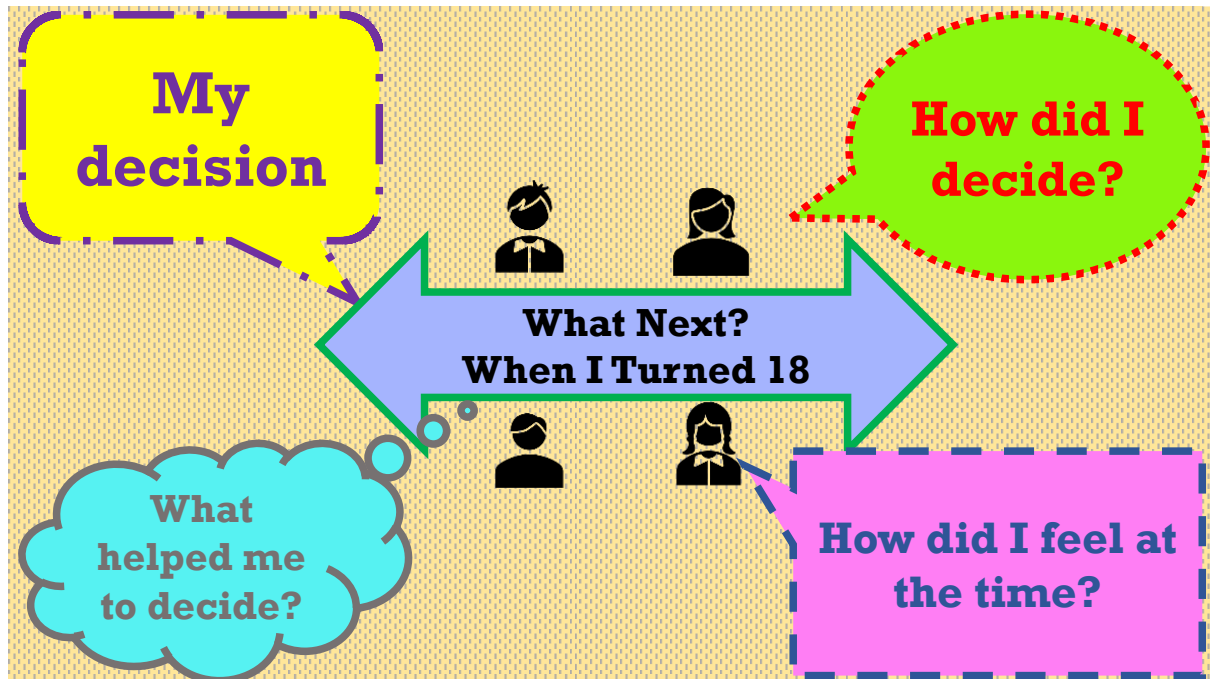
Phase	Prompts	My Notes
Introduction	Who I am and what I am doing and why – understanding and listening. <input type="checkbox"/> What research is and why it is done <input type="checkbox"/> What I have done so far – talked to young people, read about it, <input type="checkbox"/> Thanking them for time and contribution <input type="checkbox"/> Reassurance	
Consent	Information - confidentiality Forms Recording Storage Safeguarding Support	
Starting	What will happen – talking, drawing, Questions – Staying Put reassurance	
Context and Rapport	Tell me about where you are living now? How long, what it's like. Who you live with? Have you moved since you turned 18?	SP or other
The Decision	Take you back to before you were 18. When you decided to move here/stay. Could you tell me about making this decision? What did this feel like? How did this come up in the 2 years? feelings	
Opportunity	I want to ask you about Staying Put – check knowledge Tell me a bit about how was Staying Put talked about? At meetings? On your own?	

V3 10/10/2019

Support	Did you discuss your decision with anyone? What this looked like? Who else was involved?	
Information/ Options	What sort of things did you consider when you made your decision? Info on offer Alternatives – why ruled out	
Feelings/ Responses	How did you feel about making this decision? Different to other times? Reactions Considerations	Could come up elsewhere
Articulation	How did you let people know what you had decided? When What was this like	
Ending	Anything else to tell me about this time/what you think now	
Finish	Thank you Sharing information – safeguarding/support Follow up Participation.	

V3 10/10/2019

Appendix 4: Topic Guide – Young People



Appendix 5: Ethics Panel Approval Dates

Anglia Ruskin University – 11 May 2017

Local Authority A – 28 February 2019

Local Authority B – 2 July 2019

Appendix 6: Written Information for the Local Authority



Information for Participants

Introduction

My name is Sally Pritchard and I am a Professional Doctorate candidate at Anglia Ruskin University. I am carrying out some research about the decisions made by young people in foster care, about their plans after their 18th birthday. Specifically, I am looking at what contributes to their decision-making about whether or not they remain with their foster carers under the Staying Put scheme. This research is about the young person's perspective and is not a service evaluation. This sheet aims to address any questions you might have. If you need further information or need any of the points clarified, my contact details are at the bottom of the sheet.

What is the research about?

I am interested in what influences and impacts on a young person's decision about their placement choice after their 18th birthday. As you are aware, the Staying Put scheme is a relatively recent change and so very few people have looked into this subject. I hope that this research might contribute to our understanding of young people in this position. A lot of research is 'about' young people leaving care rather than sharing their perspective. This research aims to represent the voice of the young person making the decision.

Why have you been contacted?

I would like to talk to young people about this decision and will need your support in identifying participants for my research. I want to talk to young people who lived in a foster care placement up until their 18th birthday and either stayed with their carers or moved out.

What will it involve?

I will arrange to call or meet you to talk to you about what I am doing and share some information to give to the person you are working with. I appreciate that you are very busy and taking on an additional task is off-putting. I would not take up much time to tell you about the research and answer any questions you have. I will only need to contact you on one occasion but might have to get in touch after the meeting if the young person has asked me to, or there are issues of protection/safeguarding.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

I will use code names or numbers to protect the identity of everyone involved, and I will remove any specific references associated with individual experience that could reveal who or where they are. Names of participants and local authorities will be removed. I might use direct quotes from the discussion or give a general overview from the information shared with me.

The people who will have access to notes and recordings are my supervisors Dr Jane Ellis and Professor Ruth Taylor, and if I have help with typing up any interview, the transcriber. Wherever possible I will anonymise any material shared. Notebooks and recordings will be kept in secure storage within the university, also information identifying you or the young person will be stored separately from the notes and recordings, for example consent forms.

Other Things to Consider

I appreciate that some young people might have many challenging life experiences to juggle and asking them to talk to a stranger about their experience might feel like an added pressure. I am experienced in working with young people and would not put them in positions where they are

June 2019



Information for Participants

pressured to take part or continue if they did not want to. Research in social work is always complicated but it is important to try to involve people who are underrepresented, however difficult it can be.

I am happy to come to your team meeting, talk on the phone or in person to talk about the research in more detail.

Consent

I have specific information and consent material for the young people taking part in the research I am happy to share this with you. The consent form gives participants the opportunity to note what is involved and what we have agreed. Participants can refuse to take part or withdraw from the research at any point. The decision to participate is the young persons.

Other Information

If you would like a summary of the overall research, please let me know. I am intending to use my findings to train social workers and foster carers in the future.

Use of the term young person/young people was suggested by a young people's participation group. Whilst participants are legally defined as adults, the participation group felt that 'young person' reflected the language used by adults who work with them.

Approval and Contact Details

My study has been given ethical approval from a committee at Anglia Ruskin University. Approval was given on 13/9/2019 (reference number: 16_17 011). Agreement has also been given for me to undertake this research by INSERT LOCAL AUTHORITY DETAILS.

My supervisor for this research is Dr Jane Ellis – jane.ellis@anglia.ac.uk

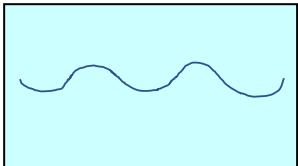
If you have any further questions or would like to discuss this further, please do not hesitate to contact me at sally.pritchard@pgr.anglia.ac.uk (PGR stands for post graduate research) or 01223 695857

If you have any complaints about the process, or my role in the research project please contact: complaints@anglia.ac.uk
Postal address: Office of the Secretary and Clerk, Anglia Ruskin University, Bishop Hall Lane, Chelmsford, Essex, CM1 1SQ

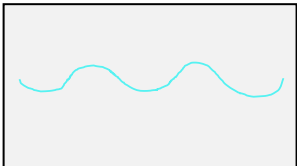
Appendix 7: Art Materials

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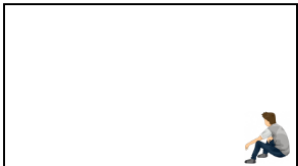
Appendix 7 - Art Materials



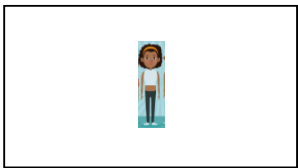
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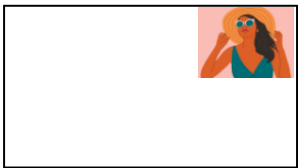
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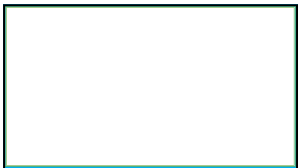
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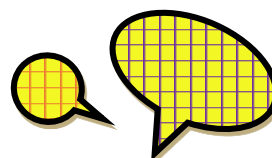
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Appendix 8: Participant Information Sheet

Agreed by the ethics committee at Anglia Ruskin University on 11/5/2017 They are responsible for making sure that I treat you fairly when I do my research.



Hi my name is **Sally Pritchard** and I am studying at Anglia Ruskin University. This leaflet tells you a bit about what I am doing and why I am contacting you. If I have missed anything or you want to ask me anything, my details are at the end.

What Is Research?

Research is the name for looking into a subject or situation in detail, usually it is something that we want to understand more.

I want to find out about the decisions young people make about whether they stay with their Foster Carers after they are 18.

Why do I want to talk to you?

You lived with Foster Carers before you were 18, and have made this decision. I would like to talk to you about the time before you turned 18, as your experience will help me understand how you and other young people made this decision.

What will it involve?

We will talk for about an hour, and I will ask you questions about the time before your 18th birthday. If you don't know or can't remember that is ok and we can move on.

I will bring some paper and pens and a picture to help me explain what I am doing.

I will make notes and record what we talk about so that when I leave you, I can listen again and think about what you have said.

If I forget something or need to check something I might ring you after we have met to ask you.

Do you have to take part?

No.

If you decide you want to talk to me, you can choose how much or how little you share, and you can stop at any point.

Where will we meet?

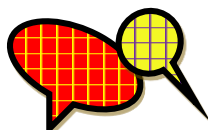
We will agree where we meet. We can meet where you live or somewhere nearby.

It will need to be quiet enough for us to hear each other and we need to meet in a place that we won't be interrupted by lots of people.

Will I pay you to take part?

I am not able to do this. I will do my best to meet you in a place that you can get to without spending money.

V3. August 2019



What will I do with the things you tell me?

I will write about the things you tell me and put this together with all the other information I have. I will then use this in training and it might be in social work magazines (called journals) to help social workers and foster carers understand young people. I will keep your information in a locked cupboard and away from your name and contact details.

Will people know it is you?

I will not use your name or anything that will identify who you are.

It might be that the people who know you well could recognise something you have said or how you have said it, but I will do everything I can to prevent this.

Will I share what you tell me with other people?

The people who might see what you have told me will be Jane and Ruth, the people who support me at university, or the person who helps me type my notes. When I share information, I will change your name or give you a code so they can't tell it is you.

The other time I might share something you have told me, is if I think you are hurting yourself or someone else. I will tell you if I am going to do this unless I think you or the other person will be in more danger.

Taking Part

I will give you a form that you sign if you want to take part. You will have a copy of this, and I will explain anything you don't understand.

Even if you sign this form, you can still decide that you don't want to take part at any point. You can tell me in person or text, phone or email me.

Other Things to Think About

Talking to me might remind you of things from your past that you find difficult. If this happens we can stop at any time and have a break, or you can stop being involved in the research.

The Last Thing.....

I am happy to give you a shorter version of my research. Also, if you are interested in helping me tell social workers and foster carers about the research in the future, I can tell you more about this when we meet.

Contact Me Here:



01223 695857



sally.pritchard@pgr.anglia.ac.uk (PGR stands for post graduate research)



Anglia Ruskin University, Young Street Site, Cambridge, CB1 1PT

If you want to make a complaint about any part of the research contact - complaints@anglia.ac.uk or Office of the Secretary and Clerk, Anglia Ruskin University, Bishop Hall Lane, Chelmsford, Essex, CM1 1SQ

V3. August 2019

Appendix 9: Participant Consent Form

Agreed by the ethics committee at Anglia Ruskin University on 11/5/2017. They are responsible for making sure that I treat you fairly when I do my research.



Hi my name is Sally Pritchard and I am studying at Anglia Ruskin University. This is a Consent Form. We use this form to record your agreement to take part in the research. Let me know if you have any questions about any part of this form.

The name of my research is: Staying Put? An exploration of the decisions made by young people leaving public care.

Contact Me Here:

01223 695857 or 07375 437093

sally.pritchard@pgr.anglia.ac.uk (PGR stands for post graduate research)

Anglia Ruskin University, Young Street Site, Cambridge, CB1 1PT

Your Name.....

- 1 I have read the information leaflet and had the chance to ask questions. ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 2 I understand what the leaflet said. ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3 I understand that I do not have to be involved in this research and that I can stop at any point, without giving a reason. ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 4 If I decide to stop being involved, the researcher can still use information I have given. ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 5 I understand that I am going to be recorded, and things I say will be included in the research. I understand that this might include words that I have said. I understand that my name will not be included. ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 6 I give permission for you to use the drawing I did during our meeting. I understand that you will only use the drawing I agreed to. You will use it in your presentations and papers and nowhere else. ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 7 I agree to take part in the research. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Your Signature.....

Date.....

Name of person discussing this form with you.....

Signature.....

Date.....

V3. August 2019