

This is what we think

The perspectives of care-experienced young people
on the principles of care



In September 2023, Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, in collaboration with a group of expert academics and clinicians, developed five principles of care for children with complex needs and circumstances. This report presents the thoughts and views of 13 young people who are either in care or care-experienced on these principles.

The research was led by the following care-experienced young people:

- Leon Isaac (lead volunteer)
- Ryan Leahey
- Chloe Walker
- Kira Gould
- Janet Warr
- Kieran Warren
- Roxanne Leahey.

Thank you also to Brandon, Archie and Jasmine who helped with this project.

Engagement and Participation team, Somerset Council

The Engagement and Participation team at Somerset Council works hard to ensure that children and young people's voices are heard at strategic level to influence, challenge and make service improvements. Somerset In Care and Leaving Care Councils (SiCC and SLOC) are part of the team and are very committed to interviewing senior staff, hosting the Annual Achievements Awards ceremony, running events and workshops, giving other young people a voice through creative outlets and co-producing policy and strategy. They are welcome and appreciated members of the Somerset Corporate Parenting Board.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who gave their time and shared their stories with us.

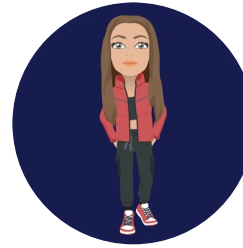
Disclaimer

Nuffield FJO has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Nuffield FJO or the Foundation.

Meet the interviewers



Leon Isaac



Janet Warr



Ryan Leakey



Kieran Warren



Chloe Walker



Roxanne Leakey



Kira Gould

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Written in partnership with:



Foreword

I'm Lisa Harker, Director of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.

We are honoured to have been able to collaborate with Somerset Council and a team of brilliant and inspiring young volunteers on this creative project.

Together, this group of young people have helped to shine a spotlight on the experiences of those who are living in care, including those who are subject to deprivation of liberty orders. From start to finish they have been in the driving seat, helping to design the survey, deciding which questions needed to be asked and providing opportunities for us to hear about a range of experiences first hand. Without the help of these volunteers, we would not have had this unique access to such vital insight and evidence.

Our gratitude goes to Somerset Council for facilitating this project. The council strives to give every child and young person in Somerset the opportunity to have their voices heard, have their needs considered and join groups where they can talk to their peers and share their views and ideas.

The five principles of care were developed by the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory with a group of leading academics and clinicians to support improvements in the care of children and young people experiencing complex needs and circumstances – those with multiple, overlapping difficulties, and including those who are deprived of their liberty due to concerns about their well-being, many of whom are currently placed in unregulated settings because there is nowhere else available.

We are encouraged that the young people who took part in this project endorsed these key principles of care – but their experiences provide further evidence that there is a long way to go before they become a reality.

My name is Leon Isaac.

I was the lead volunteer on this project and was on a deprivation of liberty order from 2019 to 2022.

It was important for me to get involved with this project partly because I wanted to make a valuable contribution to Somerset in Care Council and Somerset Leaving Care Council, where children and young people in care or leaving care can share their views and ideas. The project gave me an opportunity to get my opinion across – I never could when I had a deprivation of liberty order. Being on a deprivation of liberty order was a really bad experience for me. I didn't have a chance to advocate for myself or talk to someone to advocate on my behalf. I didn't even know I was on a deprivation of liberty order until six months after the order was put in place.

I also wanted to help other young people share their stories. I can sympathise with everyone who took part because I've been through similar things myself. I wasn't surprised that there were only a couple of positive comments.

I'm proud to have been involved in this project. I hope that the things we've said about our experiences might lead to change, like if young people going into emergency care could get suitcases and bags for their belongings instead of a bin bag. That would be a massive achievement.

This report should be read by judges and social workers and anyone else who is involved in the process of giving a young person a deprivation of liberty order. It will give them better knowledge and understanding of how young people are treated differently to those in the regular social care system – people's behaviour changes. Giving young people more of a say and changing how you act towards them could help them to have a better experience.

Background

What are the principles of care?

The principles of care were developed to support wide-ranging improvements in the care of children experiencing complex needs and circumstances, including those subject to deprivation of liberty orders.

The five principles of care are:

- 1 Stable valued, trusted relationships
- 2 Holistic assessment, formulation and a tailored plan of intervention and support
- 3 Long-term support that is tailored to the child's needs
- 4 Highly experienced multidisciplinary teams
- 5 Agency and respect.

The principles were developed and published in September 2023 by Nuffield Family Justice Observatory in conjunction with experts from Anna Freud, University of Cambridge, University of Sussex, University College London, University of Glasgow and the University of Exeter.

For further details, see: <https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/news/1249-children-deprived-of-their-liberty-because-of-concerns-about-their-welfare>

What do young people think about the principles of care?

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory commissioned Somerset Council to explore what young people, who were or had previously been in care, thought about the principles of care. Did they agree with what the academic experts said? Was anything missing? What were their experiences of care, including of being deprived of their liberty?

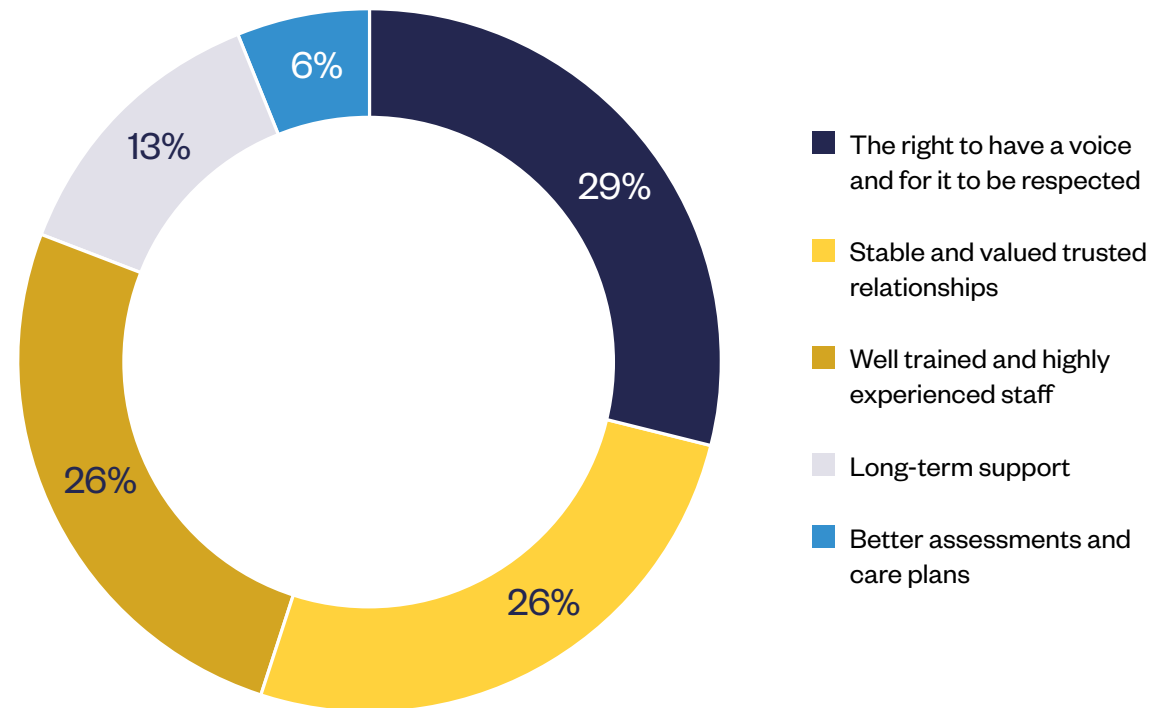
Somerset Council recruited a lead volunteer with experience of care, Leon Isaac, to help design a survey about the principles. Some additional volunteers were recruited to help interview other young people. It contacted social workers who were supporting young people on a deprivation of liberty order (DoL) to invite them to take part. The volunteers interviewed 13 young people in total, 5 of whom had a DoL – 4 were currently in care and 9 were care leavers.

Seven young people identified as female, five identified as male and one preferred not to say.

This report summarises what the young people said.

“Which three of the five principles of care are most important to you?”

Overall, the young people felt that the principles of care were the right ones and did not suggest any others. They were asked which three of the five principles were most important to them.¹



¹ In their survey, Somerset Council amended the wording of some of the principles of care to make them easier to understand. We use this wording throughout.

1. The right to have a voice and for it to be respected

What do the principles of care say?

- Children should be able to express a view about what happens to them and be listened to.
- Care plans and the purpose of decisions made about a child's care (including any deprivation of liberty) should be clearly communicated.
- Communication should be adapted according to the child's needs.
- Children should have access to an independent advocate.
- Children should be treated with respect.
- Where possible and safe, parents and other carers should have a voice in planning with children and the professionals supporting them.

– *Principles of care for children with complex needs and circumstances* (Nuffield Family Justice Observatory 2023)



What do young people say?

How well have you been involved in decisions about you?

“I haven’t been too much involved with decisions about me, I will be told the decision after it’s been made and I won’t have a choice on it.”

Male, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living in Somerset with a DoL order

“When I am low risk, I am involved well. When I am high risk, I am not involved in as much.”

Female, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living outside Somerset with a DoL order

“I was involved but I don’t feel like a lot of it was young person friendly, especially in personal education plan (PEP) meetings.”

Male, 23 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

“Initially I didn’t know I was getting a DoL. I found out I had a DoL once it was in place. Once I found out, I had to chase to be allowed to be involved. Once I got the details for my guardian and solicitor, I was able to involve myself. I did not have any support to do this.”

Female, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living outside Somerset with a DoL order

“I was not made aware I had a DoL until six months after the order was put in place, so I wanted to go about life as you would normally do as a teenager, I would go into school with my friends and then I was taken into a private room, secluded from everywhere else. I had to be escorted from the car by my carers to staff in school and then escorted from staff in school back to the car with my carers. I was in a private room from the hours of 8.45 until 3.05, the entire school day. I was not allowed to go out for break or lunch. I had to put in my lunch order with staff, I was not allowed to talk to my family or anything and at the time I had no reason why.”

Male, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living in Somerset with a DoL order



What type of stigma or shame have you experienced in the care system?

“I think there’s a lot of stigmas around it [being a child in care], it’s very hard to pinpoint specifics because it’s everything, like how you came in to care, why you’re still in care, how long you’re going to be in care, things like that. Especially to when I was in mainstream school, people wouldn’t understand, they’d ask why I was in care. The stigma around it is that either someone did something wrong to me or I did something wrong to them. Sometimes it’s just that it’s the better decision to put you in care or someone else. And as well like throughout the care system they always treat you like a criminal, like thugs or things like that. But we’re just children with problems and needs that if we are problems, it’s because they’re not being met.”

Male, 23 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset



How much did your family or carers have a voice in your care planning?

“My mum knew what I should be getting, so sometimes it felt like maybe professionals kept her out of the loop about what was happening because mum kind of knew how to advocate for me and I don’t think sometimes social workers or managers like when a parent knows their rights. And that can, even if that parent can’t have you at home, doesn’t mean that they shouldn’t have a voice in what happens.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset



“They didn’t at all really for me. My mum would find out stuff when I found out, even though she was meant to be kept in the loop.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset



2. Stable and valued trusted relationships

What do the principles of care say?

- All children need valued, trusted relationships. Such relationships form the foundations of emotional stability and healthy development.
- Important relationships are not always with family members, or a person a child has lived with – sometimes the person a child trusts is a teacher, a football coach or a family friend. Peers also matter. As do pets.
- Professionals need to actively support the continuation of these relationships, especially when a change in a child's circumstances threatens to disrupt them, for example when a placement breaks down.
- Professionals should work with children to identify the relationships that are important to them, map them out, and support them to maintain them.
- Allocating time for professionals to travel to maintain regular contact with children placed away from home, over and above that required by regulations, is essential. Family members may also need additional financial and/or other practical support to visit children.

– *Principles of care*



What did young people say?

“[I was] moved 5/6 times within a year, and this definitely affected me trusting people as I couldn’t build relationships with professionals for fear of the fact it would be pointless.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

“[Moving a lot makes it] hard to trust and build up relationships with other people.”

Male, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

“Once [I had been] moved around a few times I learnt there was no point getting to know people because it wouldn’t be long till I got told to pack my bags ready for another move [...] This then leads to feeling as though I can’t trust no one.”

Female, 18 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

Have you lived far away from your family and community and did this impact the way you form relationships?

“[Living far away from my community] has affected my social life as I don’t know anyone in the area that I live in and I cannot always make plans with people as I require time to plan and it doesn’t always work out with the distance between me and my social life.”

Male, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living in Somerset

“Me and my sister were placed in different counties so it was quite difficult for us to form a healthy relationship and now we’re grown up we feel like we lost valuable time.”

Male, 23 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset



How are/were you encouraged to have trusted relationships?

“I don’t think I was encouraged to have trusted relationships. I think I was encouraged to notice and keep in mind that social workers leave, staff are hard to retain, and to not get too comfortable, and almost treated as if I should be thankful that I have somewhere in the first place, but not to get again too comfortable.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

“[I was encouraged to have trusted relationships] By being supported by consistent staff. Opportunities to do activities with staff supporting me.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset with a DoL order

“I worked with a lady called Sarah and she was the only person who was straight and honest with me and even when I was in my lowest state and filled with rage she wasn’t afraid to help or judged me for it.”

Male, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living in Somerset

3. Well trained and highly experienced staff

What do the principles of care say?

- Children should be supported by experienced staff who are highly attuned to their needs, and able to support children when they display behaviours that are challenging to caregivers and in times of distress.
- Staff with such skills should be the most highly trained, rewarded and valued in the children's sector.
- A range of professional perspectives helps with understanding a child's needs, so those supporting children on a day-to-day basis, in turn, should be supported and supervised by a wider multidisciplinary team.

– *Principles of care*



What did young people say?

How well do you think staff in residential homes are paid enough and valued for the work they do?

“I don’t think staff in residential homes are paid enough, and I think they are overworked as well, which causes issues with them being able to carry out their jobs properly and getting overwhelmed with young people who are struggling, even though that’s the whole point that they need support.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

“I feel like the pay isn’t enough, however it shouldn’t be important as they should want to look after us because they care and they are supposed to be a care giver.”

Male, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living in Somerset with a DoL order

“The staff I had were really nice and understanding.”

Female, 18 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

“The staff with personal experiences are usually the better ones from my experience. I believe they should be paid more as they are massively impacting on young people’s lives.”

Female, 18 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

How well do you think staff in residential homes are experienced and trained properly?

“They are trained well but I feel like they could have more real life experience.”

Male, 23 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

“More training is needed.”

Female, 18 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

“Staff didn’t really manage me when I was in distress. To be honest, they escalated it further, or they acted as if the reason I was having an incident was because I wanted attention and this had been fed down by the manager who just didn’t have any understanding of mental health at all, so staff often told to let me self-manage which caused a lot of serious/close calls.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

How much have you experienced ‘professionals’ coming together and working well on your behalf?

“The disruption of moving frequently, and when I am self-harming a lot, I go from low risk to high risk in a short space of time. Professionals come together, but do not always work well.”

Female, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living outside Somerset with a DoL order

“It was kind of like everyone running around like headless chickens not talking to each other not figuring out how to get to a better point.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset



4. Long-term support

What do the principles of care say?

- All decisions about a child's care should explicitly consider their short, medium and long-term needs, as outlined in their care plan.
- The day-to-day support they receive should include a focus on their strengths, interests, hobbies and hopes for the future, helping them find out what makes them happy.
- Services and professionals working with the child should be flexible and dynamic, and able to respond to changing circumstances – for example if the child's living arrangements change.
- It should be clearly articulated why restrictions on a child's liberty are required to support the child's immediate needs, and how and when this will be reviewed. A clear exit plan should be drawn up to move towards the restrictions no longer being required.

– *Principles of care*



What did young people say?

When have short-term decisions been made for you?

“Mine was the placement moves after school. I finished school at 3.30, the taxi wouldn’t pick me up and I’d go to reception, and they’d be like ‘oh yeah, you’ve got bags here’ and move it and that was a bit difficult for those short-term moves. [...] It made me feel like sh*t to be fair. Then after a while, I’d go to school, and I’d be worried all day at school which would mean I wouldn’t concentrate in lessons because I wouldn’t know if I’d go to reception and have all my stuff there in black bags or not.”

Female, 21 yrs, care leaver living outside Somerset

“[My mental health has] affected where I’ve lived in care a lot, because for long periods of time when I was in care I couldn’t get a placement, so I was stuck in a mental health ward. They just couldn’t find a placement for me because of my needs and they’d find one and the funding would fall through, so it meant that I got stuck in hospital for about a year and then once I got a placement it fell apart straight away because of my mental health.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset



“There is a lot of focus on the risks, but not what support I need, and how to manage the risks.”

Female, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living outside Somerset with a DoL order

“Where I have lived there has always been a plan for me to stay until I am 18, but this has never happened. I have not stayed anywhere long enough to have education and employment. I feel uncertain about my future.”

Female, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living outside Somerset with a DoL order

“I feel I wasn’t moved [to an out of area placement] because that was the best placement for me and they thought it was best I move towns, I was only moved to a different place because that’s all they could find or wanted to pay for or could afford.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

How well have any ‘restrictions’ been properly explained to you?

“They were not explained when they were put on and that was hard because I felt like I was being punished as they didn’t explain anything to me.”

Male, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living in Somerset with a DoL order

“When I was sectioned it was properly explained and that was very helpful.”

Prefer not to say gender, 19 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset with a DoL order

What do you think has helped your mental health to improve?

“I think having the right people involved and being treated like a person rather than a problem. Just being given foundations to build upon, getting better myself rather than constantly being treated like I was doing something wrong.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset



5. Better assessments and care plans

What do the principles of care say?

- Every child should have a holistic, multidimensional, high quality assessment of their mental health, social care, education (including neurodevelopmental and learning), and well-being needs.
- Any assessment should be followed by the development of an individualised, comprehensive, multidimensional formulation and plan of the interventions and support required to address the child's short, medium and long-term needs.
- The goals and outcomes of the plan should be co-produced with the child – and family where possible.
- The intervention plan should be reviewed at regular intervals by a multidisciplinary team, with clear, achievable, and measurable goals.
- All agencies and professionals working with the child have a joint responsibility to deliver the plan.

– *Principles of care*



What did young people say?

“[After a psychiatric admission I was put in] the local General Hospital for a month, which wasn’t planned to be a month, but because of the complexity of my situation, health was saying that it wasn’t their job to find me somewhere and social were saying that my mental health was causing them to not be able to find me a placement, so I basically got stuck in a war between the two services whilst living on a children’s ward when I was 17, which isn’t the right place for anyone and isn’t a good introduction [to being] back into the community. Because of how complex my situation could be the only thing that I think the professional supporting me thought they could do was constantly put in short-term measures rather than planned for anything in the future because I’ve had communicated to me by professionals before [that] they weren’t even sure if I was going to still be alive by the next month, so it goes back to that constantly fighting fires, rather than planning how to stop the fire all together.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

How well have your plans fully recognised your needs?

“I think the assessments and care plans are more about my risks, instead of my needs and the type of support I need.”

Female, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living outside Somerset with a DoL order

“I don’t think my plan’s ever fully recognised my needs, it only really recognised what’s on the surface, which was sort of all the crisis stuff. But all of the stuff about not really being very independent, needing a lot more support with that was never really recognised because everyone was always putting out fires. But not really doing that work kept me in crisis because I wasn’t coping with life and that was why the crisis was happening.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset



“My Education is non-existent. I do not think my education has been made a priority in previous placements.”

Female, 17 yrs, child looked after by Somerset Council, living outside Somerset with a DoL order

How often are or were plans for you reviewed and were you informed of the changes?

“[I want] to be involved, to at least know what meetings were happening, to at least know that plans were changed. For example, there was a plan that was put in place where my leaving care worker would step back, and I’d have five core people to support me. But I wasn’t told this, so I just thought that my leaving care worker ditched me. But if I’d been in that meeting, I would have known that it was decided that it was better that five-core people work with me. I wouldn’t have waited a year and a half and then found out the truth.”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset



“Because I was under many agencies I think it was really tough to get anyone to properly communicate together. They didn’t do it very well at all and that meant that it would get quite confusing sometimes who is doing a lot with me, what the plan is. I feel if they communicated better my first placement wouldn’t have broken down in the way it did, which snowboarded into lots of placement breakdowns”

Female, 22 yrs, care leaver living in Somerset

Further information

How can I get involved?

For all questions on the research and our work in this area, please contact:

contactfjo@nuffieldfoundation.org

somersetincarecouncils@somerset.gov.uk

For all media enquiries, please contact:

mediafjo@nuffieldfoundation.org

Where can I find out more?

For further information on the five principles:

www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/principles-of-care-for-children-with-complex-needs

For further information on Nuffield Family Justice Observatory's work on DoLs and young people in the family justice system:

www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/our-work/young-people-family-justice

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

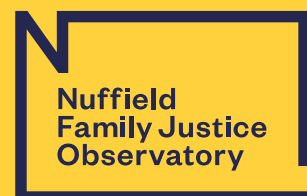
Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. Covering both public and private law, Nuffield FJO provides accessible analysis and research for professionals working in the family courts.

Nuffield FJO was established by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. The Foundation funds research that informs social policy, primarily in education, welfare, and justice. It also funds student programmes for young people to develop skills and confidence in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

For further information or to get involved, please get in touch:
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Somerset Council Engagement and Participation team

Every child and young person in Somerset has the opportunity to have a voice about their life experiences and aspirations, and the services that care for them. The Somerset Council Engagement and Participation team listens to and acts respectfully upon those voices to ensure children and young people are happy, healthy, and prepared for adulthood.

Our skilled engagement workers develop children and young people to speak out confidently through forums, events and referrals. Children and young people's voices are heard at strategic board level and feedback is always given to assure the young people that their needs are being considered.