

MOVING ON - BUT STAYING CONNECTED

**An exploration of young people's
transitions from Break and the role
of the Moving On team**

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1. Introduction

Break is a registered charity which has provided a diverse range of specialist residential and community based services for children, young people and families across East Anglia for over 40 years. Their children's homes are small and cater for a maximum of four children aged 7-17.

This evaluation of the Break transitions service, part of their Moving On team, has provided an important and timely opportunity to reflect on the significant developments in the services offered to young people who have left Break's full time care and moved on to some form of independent or supported living environment. This experience of 'leaving care' was explored in the context of the young people's experience of the residential care at Break that provided the foundation of their transition to adulthood.

The study has also offered important opportunities to learn lessons relevant to the wider residential care sector, not only in relation to a transitions service but in relation to the importance of nurturing care and continuity of relationships with residential staff. The study was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation as part of their funding contribution to the development of the Moving On service (2012-15).

Aims of the study

To explore the following questions:

- How does Break prepare young people in their children's homes for leaving care and for the transition to adulthood?
- How do young people describe / experience their transition from Break residential care to adulthood - and the support they have had from the Break transitions service? What other supports do they have? Who do they see as 'family'?
- How do Break residential and transitions staff view the preparation and support for young people?

Background

The decision by Break to develop a transitions service emerged from a wish to ensure that young people who left Break's care received high quality support to maximise their chances of successfully establishing themselves as independent adults in the community. In their bid (2012) to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Break summed this position up as follows:

Three years ago Break made the bold decision to set up our own 'in house' support service for the young people who were moving on from our children's homes – known as the Transition Service. This was in line with a recognition by the senior team (supported by the Board) that, since our mission is to provide stable, longer term care, we should no longer think in terms of young people 'leaving care': instead, we should continue to be there for them, in flexible ways, as they make the transition into adult life. In this sense we were ahead of the thinking that has informed the 2008 Children and Young Persons Act that emphasizes that the care services should seek to provide a 'sense of permanence and belonging' to children entering care when past infancy as well as infant care entrants.

Although Break had been encouraging residential staff to retain links with young people who had left, the role of a dedicated transitions service was new.

Policy and research context

Two main areas of policy and research are relevant to this study; the role of residential care in state provision for looked after children and the leaving care or transitions services that are provided to care leavers. Unlike most of the rest of Europe (Thoburn and Ainsworth, 2014), residential care in children's homes in the UK is the placement for only a small percentage (9% in 2010/11) of looked after children (Berridge et al, 2012).

The roots of the UK's preference for fostering over residential care lie in a range of issues including: concerns about historic abuse in residential care; the focus on attachment and permanence in new families since the 1980s; and the cost of residential placements. Residential care accounts for around £1 billion out of the total £3 billion national spend on looked after children (Department for Education, 2014:8), at a time when funding cuts have been in place across all services.

The role of residential care has become predominantly to provide placements for children with special needs, for older children and for children whose needs have not been able to be met in foster care. Some, but not all, of the previously fostered children will have had multiple foster placements and children may also have moved between a number of residential homes. According to a Department for Education report (2014:7), approximately 29% of those in residential care have experienced six or more placements. The majority (78%) of residential care placements are now provided by the private or voluntary sector, with placements commissioned by local authorities for the children in their care. Placement in residential care may mean placement at a distance from the young person's home authority, school and family, which in itself needs to be managed.

A number of concerns about outcomes for children in care generally have been seen as specifically challenging in residential care. For example, there are high levels of diagnosable mental health disorders (46%) among looked after children, but particularly high levels (68%) in residential care (Meltzer et al, 2000). It seems most likely that troubled lives and emotional and behavioural problems experienced by young people before entering residential care have contributed to this finding, but it has significant implications for services provided in and after care.

A further concern for looked after children has been the higher rates of offending compared to the community, with young people in residential care perceived as at greater risk (Schofield et al, 2014). These risks may increase not only because of the prior behavioural difficulties, including offending, of the young people placed in residential care arising from histories of abuse, neglect and poor parenting, but because of the possibility of unnecessary criminalisation in residential care, if police are called for minor incidents (Taylor, 2006). There are protocols and restorative justice practices in place in many areas to manage behaviour and avoid police involvement, but nevertheless bringing groups of young people at higher risk of aggressive behaviour and offending together in children's homes presents challenges in promoting prosocial behaviour and keeping young people and staff safe.

Low educational attainment is also a concern for all looked after children, but is a particular issue for children in residential care. Berridge et al (2012) reported that only 41% of children in their study of children in residential care had been in mainstream school in the previous 6 months. There are also related concerns about young people missing from school and also going missing from care (Biehal and Wade, 2000), in that young people not engaged in education can start to feel disconnected from their communities and slip into anti-social peer groups. They may also be at increased risk of child sexual exploitation.

Berridge et al (2012) reviewed the residential care research and concluded that more effective homes tended to be small, which helped to reduce problems in managing individual behaviour and group dynamics. They also concluded that high quality care tended to be associated with effective leadership and a coherent theoretical approach. In their own study of children's homes, they observed great variety in all aspects of care, but two aspects seemed particularly important - warmth in relationships (which they found in only 50% of homes) and the level of attention paid to education and activities. This reflects important themes identified by the report of the Care Inquiry, which was titled *Making not Breaking: Building relationships for our most vulnerable children* (Care Inquiry, 2013). The new children's homes regulations and quality standards (Department for Education, 2015a) are providing new guidance regarding the needs of children in residential care and how they should be met - and these have a strong emphasis on the quality of relationships but also on the role of education and constructive activities.

The significance of warm, secure and continuous relationships for young people from troubled family backgrounds is apparent while they are in care and need a secure base to which they feel committed (Schofield and Beek, 2006, 2014, Sinclair et al, 2007), but becomes particularly crucial in how they manage the transition from care to adult life (Stein, 2012). Here there are real tensions between the stated goal of the care system –to achieve permanence and a sense of belonging (DCSF, 2010) – and the expectations around 'leaving care' when young people from residential care are expected to move into 'independence'.

These issues are not new. Research on services and outcomes for care leavers (e.g. Stein and Carey 1986; Stein and Munro, 2008) contributed to concerns and to new legislation (Leaving Care Act 2000, the Children and Young Persons Act 2008) and to the 'Staying Put' arrangements (Department for Education 2013). But the 'Staying Put' provision, based on an expectation that children in care may need support up to the age of 21 and beyond, has been applied to foster care and not to the group who are probably the most vulnerable in the care system - young people leaving residential care. However a group of agencies have been exploring models for extending the principles of 'Staying Put' to residential care (National Children's Bureau et al, 2014) and this is an ongoing debate.

If the child's care plan while in residential care is to reflect what is said to be the goal of all work with children, *achieving a permanent placement*, then this raises questions about the expectations of the experience of children in residential care and about whether there is the possibility of continuity of relationships after leaving residential care. In the *Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (Volume 2)* (Department of Education, 2015b), the definition of permanence in Para 2.3 no longer requires that the caregiver has legal responsibility, as was the case previously (Department for Children, Schools and

Families, 2010). The focus is on the quality of the experience of security and belonging.

Permanence is the long term plan for the child's upbringing and provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and their families from family support through to adoption. The objective of planning for permanence is therefore to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging. One of the key functions of the care plan is to ensure that each child has a plan for permanence by the time of the second review, as set out in the statutory guidance to the 2002 Act. Achieving permanence for a child will be a key consideration from the day the child becomes looked-after. The permanence planning process, informed by multi-agency contributions, will identify which permanence option is most likely to meet the needs of the individual child, taking account of his/her wishes and feelings. (Department for Education, 2015b, para 2.3).

In this key statement, there are a number of issues that need to be thought about in relation to permanence and residential care. Important here is the fact that there is no age differentiation- so all children must have a permanence plan, including adolescents in residential care. If there is a plan for the child to remain in residential care and no plan to move into a birth or foster family home, then the children's home will need to be considered their permanent placement. The emphasis in this guidance remains that of linking permanence to *family*, which may appear to rule out residential care, and yet 'security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging' – key elements of what makes a family – may be available in residential care, and this was a question for this study¹.

Of additional value in the amended care planning guidance on permanence is a discussion of residential care.

It is also important to think about the needs of older children and young people in relation to achieving permanence in their lives. They may not be able to live with birth parents for a variety of reasons nor wish to be in a foster home or to be adopted but prefer to live in a children's home where they can also achieve a sense of security and belonging. The care planning process must also identify adults such as wider family and friends or other connected people who can provide emotional support and a long term trusting relationship which will provide continuing support, particularly during periods of transition. Good quality work with families can help the young person build bridges back to his/her parents or other family members who may be able to provide that support even though it is not possible for the young person to live at home. (Department for Education, 2015b, para 2.3).

Here too there are several issues to bear in mind. First is the recognition that 'security and belonging' can be achieved in residential care. Secondly there is the importance for young people of identifying adults who can provide emotional support and trusting

¹ Gillian Schofield was a member of the Department for Education Improving Permanence Expert Working Group that helped to develop the new regulations and guidance (Department for Education 2015b)

relationships, especially during transition. Although some young people will have family and relatives who, with help, can provide that support, as suggested by the guidance, it is likely that for other young people those trusted adults will need to come from the professional network around the child, in particular those caring for the young person and providing support for transitions. These were issues and possibilities in this guidance which this study had set out to address.

Methods

In approaching the evaluation of the Break Transitions Service for young people, it had been agreed that our focus would be on the experiences of young people, with some contextual data and views of staff included. The project was approved by the UEA School of Social Work Ethics Committee and included the following:

- *Contextual quantitative data* on young people who had left Break Children's Homes were collected and analysed by Professor June Thoburn, a Trustee of Break.
- *Interviews* were conducted with a sample of 20 young people aged 17- 26 who had left or were in the process of leaving Break's care. Young people were approached by Break staff initially and then by a member of the research team. The sample were those young people who were willing to engage in a research interview, so we are not able to state that they are representative. However the sample provided diverse histories and a wide range of positive or less positive experiences. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using narrative and thematic analysis.
- A *focus group* was conducted with predominantly residential staff from Break to explore their views on how the care of children within Break might contribute to good outcomes for children, especially during the transitions phase.
- *Interviews* were conducted with transitions workers to explore their experiences of supporting young people and the development of the transitions service within Break.

Narrative analysis

Narrative methods underpinned the research project from the interviews with young people to the analysis, in order to provide a sense of participants' whole identities (Crossley, 2000) rather than focusing on a slice of participants' lives as thematic analysis or grounded theory sometimes do (Riessman, 1990).

Many different narrative interviews exist, ranging from those that ask participants to imagine their lives as novels (McAdams, 1993) to those where the interviewer sits back and listens to the participants with minimal interruption (Wengraf, 2006, 2001). However, given the age of the participants and the wide range of subjects the researchers were hoping to hear about, in addition to their experiences using the leaving care service, a semi-structured format with follow-up questions was chosen as per Riessman (1993: 55). A semi-structured format was thought to simultaneously address researchers' questions while avoiding putting excessive pressure on young participants to talk about their whole lives to adult researchers without guidance.

The interview schedule, therefore, asked participants to generate narratives within seven mostly temporal areas, which included early years, school, going into care, time in Break, adolescence, leaving care, participants' current lives, and future plans. In addition to these time periods, participants were asked to talk about their experiences of social workers and of friends. Although the interview schedule invited participants to tell their narratives in a chronological way, which is one recognized

practice in narrative methods (Mishler, 1995), the interview encouraged participants to tell whatever stories they liked within these rubrics. The interview schedule was also not fixed; that is, participants could begin wherever they liked if generating a spontaneous narrative came easily to them. Some young people, for example, chose to begin talking about Break and then worked their way backwards or forwards.

Once the interviews were transcribed, they were read for 'big stories,' or overarching meanings (Phoenix, 2013, Freeman, 2006, Bamberg, 2006). In narrative theory, such 'big stories' have sometimes focused on participants' perceptions of their lives across time, such as Gergen and Gergen's (1983) description of participants' life stories as 'progressive,' 'regressive,' or 'stable'. At Other times, scholars have sought to classify participants as narrative types, depending on the themes, tone, and imagery within their stories such as McAdams' (1993:122) who searched for 'imagoes', or participants' 'personified and idealized concept (s) of the self' from participants' transcripts.

In order to gain a wider perspective of participants' life stories, both Gergen and Gergen's (1983) and McAdams's (1993) approaches were used to analyse the participants' life stories. Analysis began with attention to narrative tone, metaphors, and imagery (treating the transcripts as 'literature' (Freeman, 2004)). The researchers also searched for positive or negative turning points that might have changed the way participants saw themselves or the world around them (Gergen and Gergen, 1983), as well as participants' 'motivation', which according to McAdams's (1993) theories tends to revolve around either connection or independence.

As identities were analysed alongside participants' sense of themselves over time, the narrative 'types', which emerged reflected movement and changes in young people's identities. As in Gergen and Gergen's (1983) and McAdams's (1993) work, the classification of participants into types was based on how the participants described themselves and their own perceived changes rather than the researchers' interpretations of their talk. Five transformations were identified: love and loss to moving on; victim to survivor; victim to struggling; 'bad child' to survivor; and 'bad child' to struggling. The language of these transformed identities deliberately match Stein's analysis of leaving care outcomes, which include moving on, surviving, and struggling (Stein, 2012). Additional categories were created, however, to demonstrate subtle differences within those general categories and to emphasise the importance of young people's perceptions of themselves at younger ages as well as in the present. Such perceptions, and especially changes in perceptions, were sometimes reflective of underlying resilience or unresolved vulnerabilities.

Outline of the report

The first part of the report focuses on the interviews with young people. The first findings chapter reports the *narrative analysis* of these interviews which focused on how young people constructed their identity through the stories they tell and the meanings they attributed to different experiences and turning points in their lives, including relationships with residential and transitions staff. The second findings chapter reports on the common themes from interviews that emerged across the sample.

All material relating to the young people's interviews has been carefully anonymised. With a small sample of young people (n=20), it has been necessary to anonymise

stories by, for example, concealing certain details, even at times gender, and by not always making connections between quotations from the same person or quotations and other stories from the same young person. For the same reason, numbers are not given for the narrative groups - sub-groups of a sample of 20 will inevitably be small and no claim is made about the proportion of young people who might be expected to be in any particular group; these are possible narratives and pathways that young people may take.

The third findings chapter reports on the views and experiences of residential and transitions staff, gathered from a focus group and interviews. Conclusions and implications for practice, in Break and more widely in the residential care sector, follow.

2. Pathways through Break: identity narratives

In making sense of the twenty narratives in the interviews with young people we have focused on their pathways from early childhood in their birth families to their current situation and identities as young adults. These are the stories, as young people tell them, of each stage in their lives and the nature of all of their transitions; in particular out of birth families, into Break and out of Break into adulthood. These accounts include their experiences in each family or home or set of relationships and the reasons they ascribe to the care they received and to these key moves.

Certain sets of ideas emerged that provided a focus for this narrative analysis and will be returned to in the implications for practice later in the report.

- Agency: the extent to which young people felt they had been able to exercise agency, make choices about their lives, influence events by their own actions.
- Connection: how young people describe the quality of their relationships e.g. with parents, relatives, foster carers, children's home and transitions staff
- Strategies for coping and survival: how young people managed their feelings and behaviour
- Constructive activity: how young people engaged with education, activities and the world of work
- Coherence of the narrative: whether stories make sense and indicate that past experiences have been processed and resolved to some degree.

We have also drawn on the three outcome categories used by Mike Stein (2012) in his analysis of leaving care pathways – *moving on*, *surviving*, *struggling*. But through the narratives of these young people we have tracked the stories back to early childhood to show the different accounts they use to explain their pathways to the identities they now have as young adults. As in Stein's analysis, even those who might be thought of as successfully 'moving on' will have moments and periods of doubt and setbacks; those who are 'survivors' will have elements of vulnerability; and those who are 'struggling' may nevertheless have strengths that they are building on with support.

It was possible through the narrative analysis of the young people's accounts to trace five different narrative pathways from childhood to young adulthood.

1. Love and loss to moving on
2. Victim to survivor
3. Victim to struggling
4. 'Bad child' to survivor
5. 'Bad child' to struggling

These are summarised here so that pathways can be compared - with summaries repeated at the start of each extended account.

1. Love and loss to moving on

Narrative pathway

These were stories of generally positive childhood experiences, without abuse or neglect, which included having at least one loving caregiver. Loss of caregivers, through death or separation, was accompanied by grief and led, ultimately, to the moves into care. Foster care or other residential placements did not work out, for reasons perceived as linked to the placement and not to their own behaviour, and they moved into Break. Break was a positive experience, though they felt different from other residents as they were less needy or difficult. These young people used their agency to draw on other resources and connections with people at school and in the community. As they moved on from Break into adulthood, they had resilience and social capital, in terms of education and other constructive activity, self-esteem and positive networks. They also told a coherent story that was mainly positive about self and other. They had coherent and prosocial strategies for managing their lives and seeking help flexibly from a range of people, including transitions workers. Agency and the need for connection to others were both present. Overall, they were achieving a balance between independence and interdependence and were capable of both giving and receiving in relationships.

2. Victim to survivor

Narrative pathway

Narratives of early childhood focused on themselves as victims of abuse, neglect and rejection. Their move into care and into Break was as a result of the behaviour and decisions of others. Although feelings about families were complex, the contrast between early maltreatment and subsequent good relationship experiences in Break are reflected on as a form of 'rescue'. This led to a transformation during the teenage years from a victim identity to that of a survivor, someone who could connect with others and who had the agency to make choices. This adult identity included showing the world that they had changed and beaten expectations by overcoming past adversities. Vulnerabilities persisted, however, so although both agency and connection are present and narratives are coherent, surviving can be threatened in adulthood by loss of employment or relationships, with a sense of being unloved, helpless and victimhood resurfacing. An open door to support from transitions workers remained necessary.

3. Victim to struggling

Narrative pathway

For these young adults, childhood experiences and identities that focused on victimhood in the face of maltreatment in their families of origin had not been resolved, but seemed confirmed by accounts of subsequent experiences of victimhood in foster care, in adoption and, for some as they saw it, at Break. Feeling singled out for rejection or bullied by others led to a persistent sense that life was unfair. Where their behaviour was difficult, this was explained as the consequence of excessive victimization. Their persistent emotional demands of others who could never care enough led to disappointment. There was a sense of inevitability and other blame – so even a choice that they had made, for example to leave Break, could be seen as the fault of others, as being 'kicked out'. A lack of agency and self doubt as young adults was sometimes defended against by claims of being 'special' but this was accompanied by a desperate need to connect, to belong and be loved. Inevitably they were demanding of and sometimes grateful for transitions workers' time, but equally inevitably they could become disappointed, when care was not

immediately available, with feelings of rejection and victimhood resurfacing. A challenge for transitions workers was how to promote agency and autonomy for these young people while meeting their emotional needs.

4. 'Bad child' to survivor

Narrative pathway

Narratives of childhood for these young people focus on how what happened to them, including abuse, rejection and moves, was a result of their behaviour, was at some level their fault as a 'bad child'. Where legitimate anger against harmful or neglectful others was briefly expressed, the story soon turned back to self-blaming in ways that protected parents and others from blame. Language such as 'little devil' or a 'little terror' was used to describe the childhood self, with the fact that siblings remained at home seen as evidence of their difference and the reason why parents or other family members could not cope with them. Such stories are followed by vivid accounts of the transformation experienced at Break. Staff are given credit for sticking by them in spite of their 'bad' behaviour and supporting them to change. Becoming a survivor for these young people was less about exercising agency and more about discovering the value of relationships. There were turning points as they started to behave better, to take responsibility for themselves and to build better lives as better people. For some young people the significant change into becoming more settled and a 'survivor' occurred in early adulthood with support from the transitions team rather than while resident in Break. But as young adults their awareness of how far they had come, their belief in Break and the availability of transitions staff gave them some hope. Agency and connection based on a sense of belonging were both present, although vulnerabilities inevitably continued.

5. 'Bad child' to struggling

Narrative pathway

These narratives were also dominated by the young peoples' sense of themselves as 'bad children' who had perhaps caused or deserved rejection or removal into care, in spite of histories suggesting that they were also victims of maltreatment and loss. Unlike the previous group, however, for these young adults the sense of badness and self-blame persisted, with some positive experiences at Break but no significant transformation experience. They described their behaviour as leading to them being 'kicked out' of Break with stories of subsequent downward spirals that included self harm and heavy drug use. They blamed their own behaviour for losing Break and either longed to keep the connection through transitions and other Break staff or maintained an angry and resentful stance against everyone including Break - or both. However, there were still signs of hope that things might get better and that ties to Break were still valued.

1 Love and loss to moving on

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reasons perceived as linked to the placement and not to their own behaviour, and they moved into Break. Break was a positive experience, though they felt different from other residents as they were less needy or difficult. These young people used their agency to draw on other resources and connections with people at school and in the community. As they moved on from Break into adulthood, they had resilience and social capital, in terms of education and other constructive activity, self-esteem and positive networks. They also told a coherent story, that was mainly positive about self and others. They had coherent and prosocial strategies for managing their lives and seeking help flexibly from a range of people, including transitions workers. Agency and the need for connection to others were both present. Overall, they were achieving a balance between independence and interdependence and were capable of both giving and receiving in relationships.

Early childhood

These young people described narratives that began with a positive childhood without abuse, containing at least one loving caregiver who had helped them to feel valued. The main caregiver may be a grandparent or other relative because of the death of a parent or parental family instability of some kind—divorce or something undisclosed. This relatively positive start (in terms of the absence of abuse or neglect) was then interrupted by further illness or death in the family (usually the grandparent), which brought them into care.

Birth family memories varied in how vivid or detailed they were for these young adults, with one young person seeming to have a general sense of being cared for but little in the way of specific memories or stories. At the other extreme, a young person remembered every detail of key events and places - for example running through the park and falling into a muddy puddle but not minding, seeing a woodlouse on the floor of a house she and her mother moved into.

I remember sat there in a nappy and a vest on the cold concrete floor because there was no carpets and drawing a picture ...there was a woodlouse and I sat there poking it.... My auntie and uncle kept it all in a box for me when I got older ...and I pulled out the picture and I was like 'Oh My God I remember doing that.'

She had held onto the experiences but also the emotional tone that she recreated as she narrated the story—including the impact of the continuity provided by family members who held onto her history for her. She recalled who she would turn to in childhood if upset in the period after her mother died. 'My granddad, always my granddad!' It was he who reliably picked her up from school and she described how when living with informal carers and she was ill, saying:

'I want to see Granddad, I want to see Granddad'. And Granddad came over because Granddad would do anything for me... and I can just remember immediately feeling better.

The detail of the stories was in itself compelling evidence of the power of these memories to fortify a sense of connection and identity as well as a sense of being loved and lovable. This could be accompanied by the capacity to be loving and protective, as one young person describes:

Because my school was quite far out, granddad would always make me a bacon sandwich in the pan he had done his kippers in half an hour before so not only would the house stink of kippers, my bacon tasted like kippers as well! I never said anything to granddad...

Stories like these had clear 'secure base' attachment characteristics (Schofield and Beek 2014), capturing the young person's sense that a loving and safe caregiver enabled them to trust that somebody was available, to know that they were thought about and understood, to feel accepted and valued, to feel competent and confident and to feel they had a family to belong to.

Some stories were more complex, with family circumstances described as 'strained'. One young person's mother died when he was in middle childhood, which led to an unsettled childhood and divorce. The mother had 'custody', but was described as 'stuck in her own world'. Memories of a father and grandmother were vivid, with closeness to the father continuing to the present day. But the key element of these stories was that they were neither victims nor responsible for what happened.

In care before Break

For these children, coming into care was mainly a result of loss and bereavement, although all had family members who might have been able to care for them. But their story, told as adults, was of being lucky in who had cared for them and unlucky to lose them. One young person described this process of coming into care:

Well I come into care when I was fourteen. It was after my granddad passed away, bless him, yeah. He was my sole carer. I had my mum, my mum was alive, but she couldn't look after me through one reason and another. She didn't look after me so my granddad stepped in and took care of me for, well, fourteen years.

Foster and residential care before Break was temporary, but with mixed reports as to the quality of the experience. One story was of 'nice' people in a foster home and then a residential home that was 'homey'. But another young person described 'awful' carers, which led to a request to move to a relative, which was also not a good move as the relative was misusing drugs. As with some young people from other pathways, where professionals followed children's expressed wishes to move, this could later be viewed as a mistake and a source of regret.

One young person had been heading for a more permanent placement through adoption, but suffered another loss as the prospective adoptive carer became ill and there was a move to foster care.

These further losses and moves needed to be managed emotionally and cognitively, but did not appear to have threatened their sense of self - and rather confirmed the story of being unlucky.

Moving into and experiences in Break

As they looked back, young people described Break as a place where they had to 'start again' but where they had gradually 'settled down'. One young person had only come into care in his early teens and moved to Break after a year, as a long-term plan.

It was more permanent, sort of. The place I was at was only ever a temporary thing for young people. The staff are nice, but much better obviously because it is more settled. It is like I knew I was going to be there for some time. ...I could settle a bit more... because I had my own room I could pick my own colours, everything like that.

Another young person who had experienced more moves and changes, including going back home, then to another family member and then returning to care, found the care received at Break well suited to her needs. She enjoyed the 'variety' of people to go to rather than wanting exclusive relationships. And as an emotionally competent young adult, she was able to identify more subtle factors; commenting for example that 'staff had such a good bond with each other' and staff made it 'homely' by bringing their dogs in and so on. For another young person, the routine was welcome and the key worker system worked well, describing being able to have more 'in depth' conversations with a 'bubbly' key worker who would 'lighten the mood'.

For these young people with histories of loss rather than harm, however, there was a sense of being different from the more troubled and troublesome children around them: 'They were a tiny bit more needy than me'.

One young person displayed some problematic behaviour during foster care and Break, which was attributed to contact with a surviving, antisocial parent and too many failed foster homes. But other children in the home were 'kicking off' in quite extreme ways at times and there was sympathy for staff, who 'shouldn't have to deal with it'.

*They try to run it as much as a family home as they can.
Did it feel like a family there?
A very dysfunctional one but yes!*

Because these young people had not experienced maltreatment, they had other forms of social capital while at Break, in particular in one case the continuity of school and friendship networks.

I still had my friends at school and I was quite settled at school. It's actually the one thing that didn't change throughout when I was sort of moving around in care and stuff, that is one thing that didn't change.

Continuity of history, being known at school, meant that others were aware of the reason for being in care - the death of the family member who had been the carer.

Having already established talents, such as sport, also provided something to build on at Break and gave a continuity of identity and an identity that was community rather than care based and provided a sense of both agency and connection.

Turning points could be failures as well as successes. One young person got low grades in secondary school and decided 'Oh, I have got to do something', and so went to college where the young person recalled having benefitted from two mentors - one academic and one sporting coach.

The coach gave me that drive but failure at high school forced me to buck myself up and make sure that I got my grades up.

The resilience that supports this kind of reaction to failure rests on a core of some degree of self-esteem and self-efficacy. The young person also had 'dreams' of what could be achieved. Hopefulness is itself a resilience characteristic.

The moves had affected educational continuity and success for one young person, who was encouraged to keep the doors open by someone from Break.

At the time I had no intention of going to university but she said, 'Well why don't we put it in your Pathway Plan' ... I was like fair enough.

This young person, who did subsequently go to university, recalled the social worker not wanting this to be included in the plan and felt pushed towards risky options in semi-independent living arrangements. Again there was an awareness for this group of young people of the difference between their aspirations and what they felt was expected by social workers of children leaving care.

I knew most of the kids that lived in these places and they just weren't the sort of kids that I wanted to be associated with, like they were drug users and things like that.

This position sums up the dilemma for young people in care who can accept the benefits it can offer while wanting to separate themselves from the perceived negative expectations that they would live on the margins of society. For this other young person, engaging with education was a dramatic turning point.

I didn't do very well in school and it wasn't until I went to college and started doing something that I really enjoyed that I started to excel academically.

Birth family membership and contact

These young people did not have histories of harm in their birth families, but this did not necessarily mean that birth family membership was uncomplicated, with some parents and other family members having let them down in the past. As one young person put it, he did not want contact with his father as it was his grandfather who had been a father to him. Another young person spoke of realising that keeping a distance from her father was a good strategy for maintaining her prosocial identity and well-being.

However, each of the young people had some birth family connection that was of value. One young person had an adopted sister who had got in touch through social media and this had provided him with some, albeit limited, connection. Another young person had remained in contact with his birth father throughout, and this father was seen in adult life as a key source of continuity and support.

One young person spoke very eloquently about what it meant to her to have someone from your family who is not only supportive in adulthood but has held your history throughout. Her aunt had 'known me since I was a baby' and knew her mother, who died when the young person was a pre-school child.

I can be closer to her than I am to any other member of the family and it is nice knowing that she is there. It is kind of like a security and safe, because

even though I have got a lot of people I can go to, this is an extra security. She doesn't have a file on me like a social worker does and things like that, she has experience of me rather than files - she knows me better than most people.

There is something special about family members or friends who 'know' them on a personal rather than professional basis, particularly when memories are carried over time, giving young people a sense of continuous connection and belonging.

Moving on from Break

Moving on from Break happened at different ages and stages for this group of young people. One young person moved on to foster carers after less than two years at Break. This left him feeling unsettled, as he had been doing well at Break and could not understand why he needed to move. His 'world turned upside down again', but in time he settled and felt 'part of the family' - 'I still see them and call them mum and dad.' He also built important friendship networks, which 'helped mould my life from that point on.' But perhaps because Break featured as an important turning point in his life, he continued to feel a sense of involvement and to enjoy their interest and pride in him and how he does.

Where a young person moves on to university, the role of Break residential or transitions workers is crucial for the many times when parents are expected to be involved - open days, personal statements, visit days, moving into halls of residence. Week-ends and university breaks could also be challenging.

For young people, including one young person in this group who moved out of Break when he reached care leaving age, it often felt that the timing was procedurally driven rather than happening when it felt right. As one young person put it, he moved when it was 'not legal to keep me'. For him the moving on felt forced by the fact that funding was withdrawn. Break staff tried to minimise the impact of a move that was before he was and felt ready, and he recalled the message, 'You can still keep your stuff here'. The transition was therefore gradual to some degree, so that he described using the flat as 'Just bed and breakfast'. He went to Break in the day and staff visited him at his flat.

At the time of the interview, he felt 'settled' in his accommodation and had moved on with his options. For example, he now had choices and could go to Break for Christmas as the previous year – when he had a second meal plated up for the next day - but now he may have the option of going to his girlfriend's family.

Transitions workers

For these relatively competent young people, transitions workers were nevertheless valued for the support they could offer. Qualities described included 'I could trust her with, tell her anything' and 'She was not judgemental, gives good advice, talks to the council on peoples' behalf'.

The need for and type of support varied significantly, even within this stable group who often had other resources, from help with all details of finance for daily living to a more general sense of support, available as needed.

Where the worker was already known from young people's time as Break residents this was a bonus. But the sense that transitions workers were linked to and part of Break, and had a special responsibility for them once they had left, was an important source of continuity. Break often provided a source of affirmation for their successful pathways.

Social workers

Even where a young person had had a number of moves and changes of social worker, it was possible to appreciate the contribution of social workers.

I had like five social workers. I had a good experience with all of them. You know, they all brought their different personalities and so on but they all, you know showed that they wanted to help me and that they cared and that they were there if you needed them. Which is the main thing, you know that when you are unsettled you are not by yourself. So it is more like extended like support persons family if you like. They were always key to my development.

Another young person though had not felt understood by social workers and gave them this advice: 'You need to get to know the child, not just read the file'.

Adult selves

The capacity to *move on* successfully into adult life relied on feeling a sense of comfort with themselves and the environments in which they found themselves. Some of the statements made about their current status were about being straightforwardly 'settled' with traditional aspirations, for example talk of 'ticking over nicely' and planning for 'marriage and kids'.

But important also were ways in which these young adults were continuing to reflect on and resolve their thoughts and feeling about lives that had seen both losses but also positive care, and to plan what they needed to do to assure a positive future. This meant not denying past difficulties but taking a mature adult stance for their lives ahead, such as making judgements that certain family members could be helpfully kept close while others may be best kept at distance. This enabled young people to tell a coherent story, in which connections between past, present and future experiences and identities made sense.

One of the options favoured by young adults who exhibited a strong sense of agency was to turn to careers in professions which helped other people, demonstrating their ability to care for others and give back, to value and build on a sense of connection. Overall, they were achieving a balance between independence and connection with others and were capable of both giving and receiving in relationships.

There was no clear sense though of a specific house or place that was 'home', but there were a number of places where they could feel at home; at university, with friends, with relatives, in a previous foster home, at Break, with work colleagues.

The links to Break were important as a source of positive memories. But the range of moves and key people over the years may leave a young person feeling it is up to them alone to make coherent sense of things. This young person talked about the contrast with people brought up by their parents.

Whereas most people have their morals and values imbedded in them by their parents, I have been brought up by so many different people that I have kind of created like my own person.

In summary, these young people had felt accepted in Break following a series of losses in the birth family and /or in care and had encountered people in Break and outside of care (teachers, friends' parents) who believed in them and encouraged them to either higher education or work. At the time of the interview, this group of young people were doing well in their work or educational roles.

Some needed little moving on support, beyond the occasional catch-up, while others depended on the transitions service when experiencing health scares or anything significantly worrying. All, however, were developing enough connections outside of Break (extended family, friends, and sometimes partners) such that they could make decisions about the occasions when they wanted to rely on Break or someone else.

2. Victim to survivor

Narrative pathway

Narratives of early childhood focused on themselves as victims of abuse, neglect and rejection. Their move into care and into Break was as a result of the behaviour and decisions of others. Although feelings about families were complex, the contrast between early maltreatment and subsequent good relationship experiences in Break are reflected on as a form of 'rescue'. This led to a transformation during the teenage years from a victim identity to that of a survivor, someone who could connect with others and who had the agency to make choices. This adult identity included showing the world that they had changed and beaten expectations by overcoming past adversities. Vulnerabilities persisted, however, so although both agency and connection are present and narratives are coherent, surviving can be threatened in adulthood by loss of employment or relationships, with a sense of being unloved, helpless and victimhood resurfacing. An open door to support from transitions workers remained necessary.

Early childhood

Difficult accounts of victimhood experiences of neglect and / or abuse in their birth families had left a profound mark on these young people. As young adults they have both the consequences of these experiences in terms of vulnerabilities to anxiety and depression, but they also have the memories and stories of their early childhood that need to be made sense of as adult identities are constructed and adult relationships develop into new families. Although these young people were clear about having moved on quite successfully, given their past, one young person requested after the interview that no material relating to early childhood and family could be included in the report.

Young people who come to Break in the teenage years will often have experienced multiple damaging experiences. One young person's experience was of physical abuse as well as being singled out for harsh treatment, resulting in difficult behaviour and running away by the age of five or six. Subsequent victim experiences included being bullied, moving between family members, exclusion from school, a mother who 'wouldn't stir herself' to feed the children, and then some detailed violent memories –

being beaten, locked in a bedroom and looking through the window to see a grandparent walking away, unable to help. All through childhood there were sometimes memories of being under threat of being sent away - to boarding school or prison and finally coming into care in the teenage years and into Break.

By early adolescence one young person had experienced both birth and foster family settings which were physically abusive, and also the death of several family members.

For most of these young people who described the experience of being victims of abuse and neglect, these were also narratives of loss and bereavement. Stories included reflections on the impact of these early experiences on them as children; 'I was a messed up kid'.

In care before Break

Narratives in this group were characterised by complex and damaging journeys before admission to Break, including multiple moves in the birth family, returns home from care and multiple moves in care.

In addition to the picture of moves, were accounts of being victims of further neglect and abuse, both when placed in the extended family and in foster placements. One young person described the experience of foster care.

She (foster carer) just accused me of stuff like, punch me, slap me, pull me downstairs and then drive me back upstairs. I used to kind of get tortured. It wasn't very nice.

Moving into and experiences in Break

It was hard for these young people to manage these memories as they moved into Break. One young person had thought coming into a children's home was being punished for bad behaviour, because of previous threats that this would happen, and felt again victimised and singled out for rejection. He ran away the day he moved in and was brought back by police. These feelings translated into continuing troubled and troublesome behaviour, taking drugs, staying out or just 'kicking off'.

One description of the 'biggest shift' in their behaviour resulted from spending time with staff when away on holiday, and seeing them as people to trust.

When we started going on holiday together and I could see the guys out of work, I got the chance to understand them as people, not just as workers.

But other turning points came when staff and other children in the home started to feel like family.

They were my second family, every single one of them you know they were who I counted on, still do to this day sometimes.

In contrast, some young people with experiences of being victims in families welcomed the move into Break because it was *not* a family. When asked to explain why they thought Break had been helpful, one young person said,

Well it wasn't a family environment. I didn't want to be in a family environment.

Young people also used the concept of 'friends' as well as 'family' in order to explain their different relationships with different Break staff. A key worker was described as 'like the Mum I always wanted' and a residential worker as a 'best friend' who helped him give up his fears and feel 'at home'.

I had never had a best friend and when I was younger I used to class him (residential worker) as my best friend because every time he used to come into work he always used to like put a smile on me because he used to put in a hundred and ten per cent effort. Like, you know, he would come in , give me a high five, give me a hug and all that and like proper like make me feel like I actually was at home.

Some young people, especially those who had a series of unsuccessful birth and foster families, did not want to have key workers or link workers as 'special', or perhaps 'family like', but just to have everyone available, a range of options. However, it was clear that being settled as a long-term resident meant feeling that this was 'home'. This led to mixed feelings about new staff and new children. For example, one young person described resenting new staff arriving, 'You are walking into my home', and so appreciated being involved in interviewing staff.

Young people could articulate how significant it was that workers, both residential staff and transitions staff, stuck with them:

In Break they don't want to let go of their young people, they want to keep hold of them, so I think in that perspective that is good, really, because it is like they are not giving up on them.

This capacity of staff to be persistent in making themselves available was important, as trusting others was not easy for these young people. One young person said it had taken him three years to 'come out of my shell.' Break staff became very important to him and he felt loved:

They said, "We have all loved you - you are a good lad with good potential".

The transformations young people experienced at Break could lead to a sense of personal debt: 'I will never be able to repay them enough'.

Birth family membership and contact

For this group it was hard to come to terms with their family experiences, especially as some difficulties, such as troubled relationships and parental mental health problems, often persisted in their impact during Break through contact or lack of reliable contact.

Options for young people included reaching the point of saying 'I don't have a family' and building other networks through Break, through friends and, later, through partners and their families. One young person was helped to reconnect more positively with his birth family and in spite of detailed memories of abuse, was able to include family members in his list of people he would tell if he had a problem. But

these relationships remained difficult and it was unclear whether they could in any way support young people reliably in adult life.

Moving on from Break

The quality of experiences of moving on from Break for young people depended in part on whether they had moved on from their sense of being victims to having some sense of agency and connection in relationships, often through relationships with Break residential staff and then transitions staff.

But it also helped when young people had been able to build on this foundation to maintain adult independence, especially through work. For young people who had previously felt unloved and powerless, it was challenging to even go for a job, but all the more significant for self-esteem to get and keep one. One young person had impressed herself and others by getting and holding on to a job for four years after an unsuccessful school career

I just thought that this is like someone, they don't even know me and they are like, 'Yes, give you a chance' and that is why I went for it! Proved everyone else wrong!

This experience had in itself transformed her sense of herself and contributed to the stability in her life and hopes for the future with her partner and baby.

Another young person had started out in one career direction, but having discovered a particular talent had moved into a very different pathway, which included university. This was said to be with the support of Break, hostel and college staff. As in the previous pathway, university may not be an obvious goal to young people with disrupted education careers or to their social workers, so it was important that it was kept alive as an option.

A young person who had had significant experiences of abuse and rejection prior to Break did change significantly, but was still showing troubled and difficult behaviour at school leading to exclusion and a lack of qualifications. He had been both in need of and grateful for the support he had received and found reassurance from the way in which Break staff signalled that they were holding him in mind after he left Break.

I just kind of got scared because I thought it would be the other way round that they would drop me and like they wouldn't get in contact with me and they do. Sometimes they ring me on my phone to see how I am doing.

His sense of the ongoing and maybe 'permanent' relationship with Break is evident.

They still treat me as if I am in care because like they don't ever want me to lose contact with them... I would recommend Break – the best children's home anyone could ever ask for.

But the notion of Break as a family in adulthood was in the context of a realisation, reported by one young person, that staff have their own families and are not always available to go for a drink or provide company.

Transitions workers

For this group with such damaging early experiences, it was not surprising that support by transitions workers to maintain the progress made while at Break was highly valued. One young person was full of praise for the transitions worker, with relationship continuity from being a Break resident into adulthood being mentioned as something special. The strength that had been gained during and after Break, with the help and role model of the transitions worker, was facilitating a greater sense of agency.

She is just fun to have around. She's lovely lady. If it weren't for her I probably still wouldn't be ringing up about the bills. She would ring up like the council because I wouldn't have a clue. I would be like, 'You ring them, I don't want to ring them'. And I would be just watching her and I am like, 'At least I don't have to do it'. It got to the point like, 'No, I'll do it now, I'll do it.' But she'll still come round for coffee. I don't see her as often and I don't really notice that, but I think it's because I don't need her as much. I still think she is there if I need her. If I got really stuck in the dirt I can turn to her and just sort of say, 'I need help'.

One young person was about to be allocated a new transitions worker and this uncertainty was not easy to manage when he was in unsettled living accommodation and also unemployed. He was still visiting Break every week so had their support. This was an example of what a lifeline the transitions workers were perceived to be, but also the value of the continuing relationship with residential staff. The integration of the transitions service as part of Break allowed for valuable flexibility for young people.

Social workers

Social workers featured in very mixed ways within these narratives - some were blamed by young people for moving them or not being as available as they wanted, but others were described as being more helpful.

As in other research (Schofield et al, 2011, Dickens et al 2014), young people in this group were sometimes hostile to the idea of attending reviews when it triggered their feelings of powerlessness, or was associated with social services 'being on my back'.

People who I have never met in there talking about me, talking about my life and I am thinking, well who the hell are you? ...I am not listening to this ...you talk about me as if I am not in the room. ..

Even the idea of a Pathway Plan could be seen as intrusive, 'That's all everyone is going on about this bloody Pathway Plan'. This feeling emerged when young people felt they had the support they needed at Break or felt competent to make decisions themselves.

Adult selves

Negative experiences in childhood that had been overcome were not dwelled on by this group, and they could even see this process of recovery and survival as character forming.

It's my past that has made me like that - it has made me wise.

These young people were focussed on moving on - and also keen to attribute responsibility for this to Break. When asked about what had helped her move on from her past, holding down a job for example, one young person commented on why she had been able to do this.

I don't think none of my childhood has got anything to do with that, I think Break has got a lot to do with it. It was just, they support you, they didn't give up on you. They made you learn who you were, umm obviously you learn yourself who you are. They help you realise that you can do things and you might act like a spoiled brat and you might not want to go to school, you might get kicked out of school, but they, you have these people that go so downhill but they (Break) put their lives back on track and they sort of try and tell you, 'You can do that' –they don't give up on you.

She was one of a number of young people who reflected on an imagined or feared future which had been prevented by Break's involvement in her life.

Where would I be today if it weren't for them? I would probably be in jail, drugs, fighting....

The notion of having a debt to Break as an adult was raised by several young people who had experienced a positive change while with Break and / or through involvement with the transitions team after Break.

I shouldn't have been in a position where I am today and so I think of it as , because I am in this position I kind of owe it to other people to make a difference, because otherwise why was it wasted on me this potential to actually make a difference?

Even a young person who was still in need of quite significant levels of support from Break transition service saw himself as someone who could make a difference and help others out. Some young people who had experienced this sense of transformation were given the opportunity to speak at events as an example of the positive contribution that Break could make to young people's lives. This was experienced as a privilege but could also be rather a pressure, something to live up to, a success story which was challenging to sustain when there were problems emerging with day to day living.

I have to achieve because otherwise I have let myself down. I feel I have let other people down.

But making a difference could be understood in a number of ways. A young woman living with her boyfriend and baby had a different vision 'He is going to have everything I didn't have'. In summary, these young adults carried some of the feelings of victimhood from early childhood but had found ways of exercising agency, of finding a sense of connection in relationships in which they were caring, cared for and cared about. But also, the possibility of constructive activity, including parenting, and making a contribution was empowering and protective.

3. Victim to struggling

Narrative pathway

For these young adults, childhood experiences and identities that focused on victimhood in the face of maltreatment in their families of origin had not been resolved, but seemed confirmed by accounts of subsequent experiences of victimhood in foster care, in adoption and, for some as they saw it, at Break. Feeling singled out for rejection or bullied by others led to a persistent sense that life was unfair. Where their behaviour was difficult, this was explained as the consequence of excessive victimization. Their persistent emotional demands of others who could never care enough led to disappointment. There was a sense of inevitability and other blame – so even a choice that they had made, for example to leave Break, could be seen as the fault of others, as being ‘kicked out’. A lack of agency and self doubt as young adults was sometimes defended against by claims of being ‘special’ but this was accompanied by a desperate need to connect, to belong and be loved. Inevitably they were demanding of and sometimes grateful for transitions workers’ time, but equally inevitably they could become disappointed, when care was not immediately available, with feelings of rejection and victimhood resurfacing. A challenge for transitions workers was how to promote agency and autonomy for these young people while meeting their emotional needs.

Early childhood

Accounts of early childhood had variable amounts of detail for these young people, but dramatic events stood out and became symbols for the level of harm they felt they had experienced; for example a mother setting the house on fire or going to prison or threatening suicide, or wanting the young person to repay the cost to the taxi driver resulting from being born in a taxi.

These stories had not faded into the background but were very live in the young adults’ narratives as they sought to explain their lives. These early experiences of being and feeling themselves to have been a victim, of feeling powerless and rejected, were not necessarily worse than the previous group, but had not been processed to the same degree in the light of subsequent experiences of the more positive care that it seemed likely they had received.

Being a victim from childhood, with its associated mix of neediness and anger, too often continued to define the identities of these young adults, in their feelings about themselves and in their relationships with other people.

In care before Break

Negative stories also persisted in young people’s minds of the time in care before Break, with accounts of multiple moves, but also of foster carers and adopters who were also emotionally and physically abusive or neglectful

Even when we were good she (foster carer) hit us so we never learned why we were bad. Mum used to hit us because we were being naughty or when she was drunk, but you are hitting us for no reason. And we got moved.

Sometimes the memory was of carers simply preferring another child.

Oh great, these carers are keeping my sister but not me - what is wrong with me?

Key here were narratives of feeling persecuted over time, of being singled out for harsh treatment and then not being believed when attempts were made to report it. Their own behaviour was said to have been misinterpreted; for example a child kicked in a window, but in an attempt to protect a sister who was being hit. Or punched another child, but only because that child had destroyed precious family pictures. Not being believed could lead to long-term placements continuing in damaging families and then downward spirals out of school and into drugs and antisocial behaviour.

But their sense of their own unfair and harsh treatment was also stored up in terms of a combined sense of rage and extreme neediness that contributed to ongoing problems in Break and later during transitions.

Moving into and experiences in Break

Unlike the previous group who identified as victims in childhood, there were no consistent or coherent accounts of experiences at Break and little sense of transformation from victimhood to agency and constructive relationships. The language used in the interviews was often a flow of extreme swearing, with switches between distress and anger.

There were positive accounts of Break workers who were 'mumsy' or 'like a mum' or 'really nice' - and being taught to 'stand up for myself'. But then there were negative references to a member of staff and to being 'treated like a piece of shit'. These contradictions could occur in the same interviews. There was recognition of support being offered, for example when a parent died, but then rage when other memories surfaced about being sent to their room or disappointment that others were preferred to them. These young people had been challenging children, but in the main attributed problems to other people, rather than to their own behaviour. Workers were described as sometimes seeing it as 'a job' and 'not caring' – or perhaps not caring enough (if this was indeed possible) to compensate for previous hurts.

There was a tendency to use a range of what seemed to be defences against their sense of neediness, including a tendency to talk about having exceptional talents or unusual competence. Some references were made to the benefits of peer relationships gained at Break, though again stories were not always coherent, with a 'best friend' who had not been contacted in six months.

Birth family membership and contact

Ongoing difficulties with memories of and feelings about the birth family from early childhood were at times reflected in ongoing actual problems in managing problems with families, such as a parent's mental health problems. One young person's mother died from drugs while the young person was at Break.

These ongoing challenges from their birth families to a young person's sense of self provided a difficult backdrop for some young people to the hope of improving their situation.

Moving on from Break

Perhaps inevitably for young people preoccupied with relationships but feeling a deep-rooted sense of grievance, leaving Break was both threatening to their sense of self and likely to be a source of anger. One young man who expressed a love /hate view of Break talked about his resentment at being prepared to leave. He suggested that it was not good to leave Break, 'because I miss it, with all the help I have had.'

They was like helping me out... they did have a timetable for a weekly plan ...if I wanted an activity, if I wanted to go out, if I felt stressed they would take me out for a drink ...and basically they was like a father and mother to us...it is hard to let go of them now because it is like picking up areas does hurt even more.

Contradictory comments then included 'Sometimes Break don't give a shit, they just stab you in the back'.

Another young person took issue with the idea of Break as family.

They go on so much about having a family like making family with them at Break and then as soon as you have, you are kicked out and you are not allowed to see them when you go back.

This reference to being 'kicked out' was accompanied by an account of moving out apparently by choice, with the story seeming to be an inconsistent combination of assertiveness and yet feeling rejected. Even when a great deal of support was being described, young people could still somehow be angry and resentful, blaming others for it still being not enough. Externally a young person might be seen at times as a survivor, but the way the story is told suggests that the young person's feeling is still that of a victim.

Moving on into adult life for all young people should include moving towards or being in work if they are going to be truly 'independent'. Although these young people had plans to move into different areas of work these were yet to prove fruitful - one young person had spent money on a training course for which they were unsuited and which seemed unlikely to lead to employment or income. Although these young people were at an age and stage when many young people are unsure of their employment destination, it was apparent that juggling benefits, managing housing stress and filling empty time was not helping their underlying anxieties and anger - nor resolving their sense of being victims. One young person who was interviewed in a particularly squalid flat with cannabis smoke in the air and dog mess around, communicated a sense of combined anger and hopelessness:

If people have f - ed you over your whole life you are not going to trust people, are you?

Transition workers

Inevitably, these young people's views of transitions workers could be affected by this tension between neediness and resentment. Their problems with taking personal responsibility made relationships designed to support them but also to encourage

'independence' difficult. One theme was that transitions workers were 'paid to do it', but at the same time the contradictory message – the worker was 'kind of a mate'.

Where there was an explicit sense that the transitions worker was important and helpful, there were slightly backhanded compliments, for example, 'She would come round, do my washing up if I was too lazy to do it.' But there were some straightforward statements of gratitude: 'She is a very nice lady, she helps me a lot'.

This switching from positive to negative, needy to angry, showed how hard it was for these young people to properly accept help, but would also make it very difficult for transitions workers to establish a stable, supportive and coherent relationship.

Social workers

Young people's views of social workers were equally contradictory and even extreme – for example described as 'very lazy' or 'very good'. But as part of their story was feeling that they had not been believed by social workers in the past, there were some longer term consequences in terms of lack of trust of social workers.

Adult selves

Dominant for these young people was the fact that childhood problems have not gone away. In some cases there were longstanding emotional and behavioural consequences of early maltreatment that left them vulnerable. But in other cases there was actual continuity in terms of, for example as mentioned above, young people still having to find ways to deal with contact with a parent whose mental health problems were part of their original reason for care. Uncertainties through childhood and adolescence, such as the exact nature of a young person's own mental health condition following a series of different diagnoses, could also make it difficult to feel that much was 'settled' or resolved as they entered young adulthood.

Young people's sense of family at this stage was diffuse, with Break staff playing some family roles, as did friends and other sources of relationship /connection.

I see friends more as family, some of the carers at Break as family, like I see ... as a bit of a family, but like a distant family.

As with other groups, but perhaps particularly significant for these more anxious, angry, vulnerable young people, in the absence of a supportive family and with other problems to manage such as learning difficulties, much hope could rest on a girlfriend or boyfriend at an age when partnerships are more likely to be transitory.

Mixed feelings about Break often reflected their sense that nothing would ever be good enough - with negative remarks such as when asked to advise Break for the future saying that some staff needed to change as they were 'really stuck up' followed by very positive comments, such as 'what Break do is really good'.

These young people as they looked back saw themselves as always having been unfairly treated from the beginning. They contrasted their experiences with a sibling or another foster child or another Break resident and believed that others were preferred. While young people sometimes regretted a particular episode in their childhood when they did something wrong, such as acting out, rebelling against

caretakers or being aggressive, for the most part this was explained or justified as the consequence of excessive victimization.

They described patterns of the same terrible events occurring and reoccurring in their lives. Such events mainly had to do with their sense of unprovoked rejection, loss and abandonment. Young people spoke about needing to leave Break early, through apparent choice (though perhaps rejecting Break before they could be rejected) and another just before turning 18, but these are described as being 'kicked out'.

The overarching narrative of seeing the self as misunderstood and cast aside makes the young people likely to appear to others as being excessively needy and perhaps manipulative. Possible rejection at this point (or perceived slights) seems to increase the young people's concerns about not being liked or preferred. Young people with this sense of self have not been able to make the transition to another type of life story and view of self. They appear to be stuck in a life story which suggests they will always be left behind and never be fully accepted.

Transitions work would be needed to build self-esteem for these young people, to develop agency and a healthier self image, but there is always the risk of the worker being a disappointment when time for any one young person is inevitably limited and the needs of the young people are still defined by damaging and unresolved early experiences. All the more reason, though, for a worker to stay available and help the young person build hope - but all the more reason too for support to be needed from the manager and the rest of the transitions team when the going is this tough.

4. 'Bad child' to survivor

Narrative pathway

Narratives of childhood for these young people focus on how what happened to them, including abuse, rejection and moves, was a result of their behaviour, was at some level their fault as 'bad children'. Where legitimate anger against harmful or neglectful others was briefly expressed, the story soon turned back to self-blaming in ways that protected parents and others from blame. Language such as 'little devil' or a 'little terror' was used to describe the childhood self, with the fact that siblings remained at home seen as evidence of their difference and the reason why parents or other family members could not cope with them. Such stories are followed by vivid accounts of the transformation experienced at Break. Staff are given credit for sticking by them in spite of their 'bad' behaviour and supporting them to change. Becoming a survivor for these young people was less about exerting agency and more about discovering the value of relationships. There were turning points as they started to behave better, to take responsibility for themselves and to build better lives as better people. For some young people the significant change into becoming more settled and a 'survivor' occurred in early adulthood with support from the transitions team rather than while resident in Break. But as young adults their awareness of how far they had come, their belief in Break and the availability of transitions staff gave them some hope. Agency and connection based on a sense of belonging were both present, although vulnerabilities inevitably continued.

Early childhood

Stories of early childhood often contained themes of sadness and loss, but these are soon replaced by the dominant theme that they were difficult children. One young person talked of his father leaving in infancy, the death of his brother and grandmother, but then focused on his own bad behaviour in his self-description:

I was about seven or eight - I was quite a nasty brawler.

He now regretted this childhood self.

I am not proud of my fights now. I look back on them and regret them, but at the time I wasn't afraid of no-one, it didn't matter what size they were to me.

He also recalled the consequence of his bad behaviour, being 'kicked out' of school. Subsequent losses led to family breakdown, in part because he could not be coped with.

My granddad had died which my mum then got into a distress and just couldn't cope. The whole family kind of shuddered apart.

The sense of having been children who were bad but also distressed was a theme in particular for those young people who received mental health diagnoses. One young woman recalled how she jumped out of a window, aged five, and threatened to cut her sister's throat, before being diagnosed with ADHD and sent to special school. Other young people told similar stories:

I got diagnosed with ADHD at the age of five and learning difficulties. I was a little devil because I used to get my sister's head and smack it on the concrete or drown her in the swimming pool.

It was hard because I always used to kick off, umm. I always used to hurt my mum and all that because I grew up really violent with my dad, umm. I always thought it was right and I always used to hurt my mum and family so that is one of the reasons I got put in care because I have got ADHD, speech problems and anger problems.

As in this second example, it was possible for young people to make some connections between their bad behaviour and the care they received. Others made some critical comments in relation to parents.

My mum wasn't the nicest mum I had, where she was kicking me, slapping me and things like that. I didn't really want to say in case anything worse happened.

Mum never cared, she didn't really care about us, all she was really bothered about was the computer. In the end we all smashed it up.

More than one young person talked of escalating their difficult behaviour in order to come into care.

Obviously when I used to live in (town) I used to always get into trouble, out on the thieving all the time, stealing, swearing at people, verbal abuse at

everyone...obviously they (family) got too much trouble and they said 'Oh if you go out thieving one more time you will go into care' so I thought why not try it and see if they do it because I wanted to go...

One young person who described a combination of loss, poor care and his own 'bad' behaviour, was asked how he would describe his 11 year old self. He replied 'One angry little shit'.

These stories rarely showed much anger at parents' behaviour and indeed at times seemed to explain and excuse it in terms of bereavement or not being able to cope. One young person talked of his mother's actions as legitimate. When he went out for the day without permission and was late back his mum was concerned 'as mums always do, stressed out for where their kids were' and when he gets back, she 'panicked' and took him to social services, saying 'He is too out of hand'.

Although these are negative memories of themselves as children behaving badly and hurting or upsetting family members or friends, there is some understanding that maybe there were reasons for their behaviour. It is perhaps this that they build on, with Break's help, in developing a more coherent story and achieving the transformation in their sense of themselves as 'better people' that occurs later.

In care before Break

Like young people from other pathways, the day of going into care could itself be a scary experience - and is remembered. One young person who had already been cared for by extended family members because his parents could not cope recalls in great detail the day he came into care. It was a Thursday, and a taxi was supposed to be dropping him back to his relative's house after school but instead dropped him at the children's home, where he says people were 'waiting to grab him' and 'I managed to free myself' and ran away.

But for this group who made progress once in care, it was possible to look back on this transition period and feel that coming into care was the right move, given complex family circumstances as well as their own bad behaviour. The picture is not straightforward – as this young person struggles to explain.

It was more what I couldn't get with mum I could get with dad but what I couldn't get with dad I could get with mum, so obviously it was quite hard for me to decide what life I wanted and I think although me and mum do get on that me going into care was probably, mum regrets it because she blames herself for all the stuff that happened, but I have said that is probably the best decision she has made because...

Why do you think that?

Personally I think I would probably have been in prison by now.

He had reason to have concerns about what might have happened. He mentioned being previously caught for an offence, 'but the social worker got me off'.

For some young people, their difficult behaviour persisted during their early days in care, leaving them with vivid memories of how out of control they were.

The first few weeks...I was breaking out, fighting and punching the staff because I wanted to go home, I was genuinely really not liking it. Like any

kid, well I can't say every kid, but my experience in my heart was when I, I just did not want to be there! It was hard enough. I remember them having to restrain me in the car going down there because I was going that violent that I think it took four adults to hold me down. Even then I was still getting them like on the odd little back fist. I am not proud but it was a distressing time definitely.

This account is coherent in reflecting on the reasons for his behaviour and also his remembered feelings of distress alongside his aggression. For him the process of changing and learning to trust residential staff began in an assessment placement prior to Break. His transformative experiences centred on the closeness he felt to a residential worker.

Who I loved like a dad really because he was, whenever he was there he always took time out of his day to sit with me and help me. Whenever I got stressed about something he was always there for me to go and talk to. My favourite memories of me and him were we always used to love going swimming, we always went there, that was my fondest memories. ..

But the support available was wider than one person.

They just genuinely cared for our well, for our wellbeing. If there was ever any trouble in my life they were on to it straight away...Staff there were amazing.

One feature that was also making a difference to some children's perception of themselves was the diagnosis during their time in care of a range of mental health conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or personality disorder. This shifted the balance towards being someone with a medical condition, which could explain some of their behaviour but also offered the possibility of treatment.

The advantage of a medical diagnosis is that it changes the narrative from being 'bad' to being 'sick'. This removes some of the sense of blame from the self, but also from parents and family members, although some conditions such as PTSD would include the idea that the condition might have been caused by maltreatment. The impact of a diagnosis on young people's sense of agency may of course be less positive – a young person could 'decide' to change difficult behaviour, but may feel less able to make a difference if the behaviour was deemed to have a medical basis.

Moving into and experiences in Break

Whether young people had previously good experiences in temporary care or had felt moved around in other placements, the move to Break was a chance to take up new opportunities and to benefit from the sense, as one young person put it, that this was now 'permanent'. However for other young people, difficult behaviour persisted in their early days at Break and they remained challenging to staff.

There were therefore different kinds of 'turning points' for these young people. Most common was the sense that they learned they could trust people to care for them. A young person who had described himself as 'a little devil' gave an account of a scene in which he had taken offence at something said to him by another resident and head butted him. The police were called and he was arrested. This situation was resolved,

but he described how he subsequently learned to talk to carers when he had problems in the home.

I would speak to them about it and sit down and say 'Look...this is my problem. How do we deal with it from here?' and they would say, 'Well this is our problem and we can see your side, but this is how we dealt with it and the reason we dealt with it.' They are very good listeners.

Feelings of growing trust in Break staff were expressed in terms of the range of roles that were played.

I see them (Break staff) as it was like everything, like carers, friends, family because they were there mainly every day and I treated them like as family, friends, carers.

Although there were advantages which young people mentioned to having a number of staff available for them, they also enjoyed special relationships. However they commented on how sad it was when staff, especially key workers, left. One young person talked about asking after a former member of staff when he went to visit Break after leaving and this was his way of keeping that sense of connection alive.

Transformation stories often began with an account of how extreme their difficulties and behaviour had been in the early days. One person's turning point came when he was motivated by staff who he described as getting him to realise the importance of work and independence.

I didn't want to do anything, but then (Break home) had a good word with me: 'If you don't do this you are not going to succeed in life, you are just going to be on benefits and all that, sponging off everyone'. And I thought to myself, I don't want to be doing that.

This young person had taken this message positively and achieved a focus and self-respect in relation to work that had continued to be in evidence after leaving Break.

Part of the positive shift for young people was a growing sense of agency which contributed to their sense that they may not be all bad as they could make positive choices. One young person asserted that he had *chosen* to move to Break from an assessment unit: 'If I didn't feel comfortable then I wouldn't have moved in'. Other young people mentioned asking for a particular key worker and the manager listening and agreeing to this request. There were references made to choosing the colour of their rooms or being consulted about food and activities - with the importance of food, activities and holidays mentioned in all accounts.

One concern for young people who have had such difficult early years and then thrived at Break is that they may be expected to leave before they are ready – with age setting legal and financial limits rather than the readiness of the young person to move on. One young person seemed to be in this situation, with the social worker perceived as leading the build up of momentum to move on to more independent living arrangements before the young person felt ready.

It was clear that for these young people opportunities of different kinds at Break had helped them move away from their sense of being problem children to finding a

sense of connection and agency. When asked to give advice to Break, one young person who was in preparation for moving on from Break commented:

Keep doing what you are doing really because you are doing a brilliant job at the minute from what I have got...if every key worker is like mine or other members of staff here I don't see how anyone could complain.

Birth family

For young people whose story of childhood was a combination of their own problem behaviour and negative experiences in their birth families, managing their memories of and current relationship with family members was always going to be challenging. This was both during their period in care and, perhaps in particular, as they were moving into adulthood.

As with other narrative groups, there was no simple and right way to do things with birth families. For some young people it made sense to sustain birth family relationships even when they were less than perfect. For others, it made sense to keep some distance and in preference rely on people outside of the family, including Break staff and friends. Some young people were fortunate to have at least one positive family member who maintained contact, worked well with Break and was a key part of their identity. Some stories blurred talk of birth family and Break family members as different kinds of 'family'.

One young person who had been with Break throughout his teenage years captured some of this family uncertainty - and the need to adapt over time to changes in young people's lives and in the lives of family members. His relationship with both of his parents had continued to be tense during his time in care. His mother had stopped visiting and he described this as 'She couldn't be bothered. She used to say it's too far'. But he mentioned how Break staff shared his sense of loss with him as he was 'part of the (Break) family'. He described reaching the point where he decided to break off contact with both parents in his late teens, and said that as an adult, he 'would rather sit on my own than have my mum and dad around me'. He was, however, fortunate to have another relative who he saw very regularly and he commented, that although Break was family, 'it was good to have real family'. Feelings about his mother and father remained unresolved and, as with other young people from Break who are now in their 20s, it was possible to see how positions do shift and change, with young people at times reaching out to family and at other times protecting themselves from them.

This move between birth, Break and other families may culminate in some clear choices in later teenage years and at the point of leaving Break. A young woman, for example, was given away by her former foster carer at her wedding, which was attended by Break key workers and transition workers.

Where birth family was very important to young people, Break's role was seen as having supported this relationship, including in one case opposing a social worker who suggested that 'settling in' to Break required a suspension of contact. For these young people, and when things were working OK, birthdays and Christmases could be flexibly celebrated - at Break but also with the birth family.

Moving on and out of Break

Although these stories were predominantly positive in terms of changing from very difficult behaviour to more settled behaviour and a more positive sense of self, moving on and out of Break still presented challenges and was not straightforward. It is also important to bear in mind the level of mental health and other difficulties persisting among this group of young people.

The most positive stories were where young people had felt that 'moving on' was experienced as gradual and included significant points of continuity. One young person had been working before leaving Break and continued with his employment. He said that preparation for leaving had been very important and also talked of 'visiting' Break once or twice a week after he left as they were 'just like another family towards me'. He talked of feeling special for having a key to the door of the Break home so he could visit, and also about Break staff going the extra mile by helping him get things for his flat and sometimes paying for things themselves.

That showed me that they cared a bit more about me, like they actually took me on as their own family that loved me, they loved me they did.

Powerful in these stories is the sense of a negative pathway that they could easily have taken.

If it wasn't for Break I wouldn't have no flat, no job, I would have nothing, I would be like basically homeless I would.

Even when young people had other support staff in their semi-independent living arrangements or hostels, there were times when Break seemed to be key. One young person who was stable and about to start college with plans for next steps into better housing still had a legacy of upset and anger that could erupt and needed strategies to cope- including calling on Break when stressed.

My support worker was there one time when I was like really upset because I had a really bad argument with people I used to live with and no one could have calmed me down apart from Break so I went like texted them and said 'Can you ring me because I can't calm myself down? I'm like really upset'...so they would ring me up and talk to me on the phone to calm me down and that really works - so I would either speak to them or my sister...or listen to my music.

For some young people, transitions living arrangements had not worked out so well and there had been a period of uncertainty. But for one young person this had been followed by a positive experience in a hostel where again he felt able to trust and turn to staff – a capacity to seek help which he described developing at Break.

One young person, in her mid 20s at the time of interview, had continued to have very difficult behaviour while resident at Break and described herself as first being 'kicked out' of school and then 'kicked out' of Break at the age of 15. However she also described how her own behaviour had led to her leaving Break, as she had previously 'set fires in the house, smashed the house up, beat the kids up'.

One day I decided I didn't want to be there so packed my bags and smashed the house up and they got me arrested and I never went back.

She went into foster care but subsequently had two periods in secure units due to behaviour and mental health problems. Further downward spirals were triggered by bereavements. Because of her age, she has only benefitted from the transitions service in recent years but this has been helpful if not essential.

Becoming a parent could be transformational experience in itself.

I did like a drink and going out but when I found out I was pregnant it completely changed me. I am never going back. I don't miss that life either...

Was it difficult to make that change?

Not really it just happened naturally. I have got to do it, I am not going to lose my son so....

It is clear from this account that a great deal of support is needed, given this mother's own mental health problems, but also there is a sense of pride in the contrast between being out of control in the past and being in control now.

Transitions workers

Perhaps because moving on was experienced as challenging, transitions workers were said to have played a very significant part in enabling these young people to manage their adult lives. Within the range of positive stories, it was possible to see that although all young people valued help with practical tasks, in particular finance and bills, there was a range of levels of reliance on transitions workers for emotional and other support.

One young person who was in work and also had a girlfriend, described how contact with the transitions worker had been once a week at first but had then reduced to once a fortnight but with an ongoing sense of availability if help was needed. This fitted his growing sense of autonomy.

At the other extreme was a young woman with a significant history of mental health problems who had a new baby and who described how she was 'taken to every single doctor's appointment (by the transitions worker) – 'and if he can't, someone else will.' She described how transitions workers were 'more understanding and had more time' than social workers. She was offered a transitions worker some years after she had left Break as part of their commitment to former residents and it seems likely that this was making a significant difference to her ability to become more stable and to function, although she clearly also needed to draw on psychiatric services for medication and support. In this situation where there is a vulnerable young woman caring for a baby, the need to promote self-reliance had to be balanced against the general need to support her in this new role, promote strengths and manage the risks to herself and the baby.

Social workers

There was a generally more positive account of social workers from this group, consistent with their increased ability to seek and get help. Though one young

person's advice to social workers was that they needed a phone so they could be contacted more quickly.

As long-stay young people, most had experienced a number of social workers, but were able to see comparisons.

My previous social worker never phoned me etc but the social worker I have now, 'We can do that, that and that for you', and I was thinking 'Brilliant!'

One young person talked about seeing his social worker quite regularly and commented,

If you get the right social worker and care worker they work together, but if not, they won't.

One young person complained that a social worker had argued he could not have contact with his birth family until he was 'settled' - something that was challenged and an issue that residential workers also commented on.

Adult selves

These narratives demonstrated the importance of having the capacity to reflect on their lives and how they personally had changed. As well as the content of the stories, it was helpful to think about the quality of the story telling and the apportioning of blame and responsibility for problems as well as credit for progress made in turning their lives around. So these interviews contained important evidence of how young people had been working on making sense of their lives in order to resolve who they were as adults - and to exercise some choice over the kind of lives they wanted to lead.

As for most young people leaving care, they were mentally revisiting their sense of why they had been in care and what they had been or done as young children. One young person had applied for and read the local authority files - which led her to conclude, 'I didn't realise how much I did kick off, like most days, for years.'

It was helpful to be able to put their own childhood behaviour in context, as another young person commented:

I was annoyed at a lot of things mainly because mum and dad split up. I just didn't think they cared ...so I thought if they don't care why should I? So I just kind of thought kicking out was the best option.

Where positive changes in their lives were being sustained, this was reflected in their revised sense of themselves. The young person who had fixed on work as important to his identity, reflected on what this meant now.

If I buy anything it is out of my pocket and I can look back on myself and I haven't sponged off the government. I don't need their money, I have my own, I have worked for it.

Other kinds of activities, such as engagement with the Prince of Wales Trust, could also be a source of satisfaction. When asked if there was anything he would like to say to Break, he said,

Thank you for all your help and there will be a time that I am going to do something back for what they have given me.

Past and present tenses rather blurred as significant supports from the past still seemed relevant in the present to their sense of support and connection to people who 'knew' and 'know' you. When asked to reflect on who had been key people in his growing up, one young person said:

Key worker, home manager and deputy home manager. They have seen me every day constantly and they know what I am doing and all that lot and they know how I am feeling and they can see that I am upset or they can see that I am being really hyperactive things like that.

Key to thinking about what may help young people was the idea that multiple sources of support could be relevant to new circumstances. So in adulthood, for example, the use at different times of psychiatric services, counselling or daily practical help meant exercising agency and turning to the right resource. Transitions workers had a role to play in supporting this developing sense of agency.

5. 'Bad child' to struggling

Narrative pathway

These narratives were also dominated by the young peoples' sense of themselves as 'bad children' who had perhaps caused or deserved rejection or removal into care, in spite of histories suggesting that they were also victims of maltreatment and loss. Unlike the previous group, however, for these young adults the sense of badness and self-blame persisted, with some positive experiences at Break but no significant transformation experience. They described their behaviour as leading to them being 'kicked out' of Break with stories of subsequent downward spirals that included self-harm and heavy drug use. They blamed their own behaviour for losing Break and either longed to keep the connection through transitions and other Break staff or maintained an angry and resentful stance against everyone including Break - or both. However, there were still signs of hope that things might get better and that ties to Break were still valued.

Early childhood

Childhood stories were of being 'too much to cope with' - in one case a child and his brother were put up for adoption by their mother because she could not cope after the death of his father. Narratives for young people combined a sense of injustice and victimhood, with reference made to being pushed downstairs, having marks of physical abuse, black eyes or being physically punished.

She (mother) punished me for like bad behaviour and stuff which she shouldn't have actually punished me for, which probably added up to me being really nervous at home and stuff.

Although there is recognition here that a parent 'shouldn't' have acted as she did, it was nevertheless described as being in response to their bad behaviour. In one case the young person recalled being accused of 'squeezing a pet gerbil almost to death'

which as a young child had not been intended. This young person also recalled being 'grounded' by a step-father for seven weeks for swearing, likening it to 'solitary confinement'.

Where there was physical punishment, this could be seen as just a family pattern that led to well-behaved children. This way of making sense of events reduced the potential for blame of parents and was in defiance of judgements made by social workers.

When my mum was little she got the belt which is a lot worse than what I got because of the metal thing in the belt. I would have the slipper...

Sometimes their own 'bad' behaviour was said to be justified.

I used to beat pupils up in town I really did - can't stand disrespect. My mum said if anyone hits you, hit them back and don't listen to the authorities.

I nearly killed this girl cos she was taking the piss out of me.

Violence was also justified when it was seen as, for example, protecting family members. Given the ways in which their own aggression and the aggression of their parents could somehow be explained or excused it was perhaps not surprising that these young people were ambivalent about changing their own aggressive behaviour which was also seen as protective and even justified as honourable.

In care before Break

As with the previous group, coming into care was at some level experienced as their fault. One young person said that everyone told her it was not her fault, but she did not believe this:

Well kind of in some way it must be my fault you know. I must have done something wrong. ...The reason why I see I went into care is because of me, because I was so naughty...

Once in care, moves between placements were frequent, again with young people holding themselves responsible. 'Just because of my behaviour...I would just kick off to get attention.'

Moves and separations, including from siblings, made young people more angry and more aggressive - but also being more angry and aggressive made moves more likely - one young person talked about threatening to stab a family member. In care his behaviour continued to be difficult, which seemed inevitable, and described why he kept getting moved.

It was like terrible. I was going out getting in trouble every day with the police, it was just the way I was, yeah...

Moving into and experiences in Break

It was often the case that Break became the placement option only after a number of other placements had been tried and failed. Young people's accounts included positive relationships with Break staff that were better than previous placements,.

I could just sit there and talk to him about anything and he don't judge you.

They found some stability they had not experienced previously,

Two and a half years – the longest place I stayed. It was welcoming.

But for these young people whose time at Break had not ended well and who remained unresolved there were also lengthy and angry stories and complaints about Break. At times these accounts included both good and bad, with no real sense of why their problem behaviours continued in spite of the good things on offer. One young person described a range of activities including board games, films, movie nights, Spanish night, American night, baking cakes together, driving to the coast, going on holiday and concluded, 'It was brilliant' - but also said, 'I got the police called on me the most because I kept running away. I didn't used to come back.' It was hard for young people in this group to piece together in a logical or coherent way why they felt unable to settle. This process in the interview seemed to reflect a general difficulty in making sense of themselves or their behaviour.

There were also some long passages of complaint about Break, ranging from not being able to choose the television programmes to being 'accused of being a slag' (because of staying out late). These accounts were often full of aggressive and sexual swear words with some drastic descriptions of fighting between residents. Although other young people had talked about fighting occurring at times, this picture of life in Break was more extremely expressed than others, 'It's like a prison environment, based on violence.'

One theme that supported their sense of grievance was of being misunderstood and not being believed throughout childhood, including while in care with Break.

No one believes that I am completely innocent, but I am innocent of everything.

In spite of the issues raised about violence in their own life, one young person insisted in their advice for Break that what was needed was physical discipline.

They don't discipline people enough – need to bring back corporal punishment and it will stop it all because these kids only understand violence.

In making sense of these accounts it was clear that what in other groups was described more in terms of fights where staff needed to intervene and even restrain troubled young people at times to keep them and the other residents safe, here the account focussed only on violence - violence between other residents and staff, their own involvement, and perhaps pride or anxiety about their own potential for violence. As a young adult violence was something to be feared, but also the capacity for violence was maybe something for these young people to be proud of or hold onto for survival.

These stories were not coherent, with positive activities and responses from staff featuring alongside accounts of anger and aggression, some of it their own. But perhaps their sense of internal chaos is reflected in how they think about and recall experiences. Their memories tend to focus on conflict and the difficult times because of their unresolved sense of victimhood.

Birth family

In the context of difficulties in settling in residential care it was common for young people to try again with family members at various points in their care career and after leaving Break. These young people had struggled and were struggling to resolve some of the troubled relationships with birth family, with some claiming they had now given up with some or all family members.

With families often separated, young people were making some judgement calls between parents that related to early experiences, but also to how they were now. .

Dad did worse things than mum but he is trying to change. Mum –one minute she wants to be there and the next she doesn't. The moment she gets a partner you get slung back out again...I haven't got any connection with my mum for the simple fact that she has had so many chances and she just ruins them all...so I have said that I am done with her so.

As young adults, there was often the sense of a last straw, as in this example, after many failed attempts to connect with parents.

Social media could be a help in keeping in touch with family, but could also add to problems.

She (mother) puts loads of stuff up on Facebook like slagging me off... threatened to smash my face in, so after that like, I am done...

Mixed and unresolved feelings about parents were common, as one young person reflected, 'I still care about her, but I just can't forgive her.'

Moving on from Break

Young people in this group all described themselves as being 'kicked out' of Break, although each was able to give a reason for that decision and in some cases, and with the benefit of hindsight, take some responsibility for it.

One young person described being asked to leave at 16 because of staying out late, and claimed she was accused by worker of having sex with men when she said she was just 'hanging out'. As an adult there is regret attached to this move: 'I wish I had stayed in care until I was eighteen so maybe I might have had a better life.' She said that because she had been moved around so much before Break and failed to sustain an education, she had no GCSEs, so she found it hard when applying for jobs. But in commenting on how she was coping in a flat, she also said.

Obviously I did learn quite a lot of things when I was in the Break children's home because obviously they taught me to cook ...yeah it was pretty good.

Another young person also expressed regret about getting 'kicked out' following running away and staying out late. He described becoming homeless and in a downward spiral into drugs, exacerbated by the death of a friend.

I was saying to (Break Home Manager) 'I wish I had never got kicked out of here because it is really hard living on your own'. So I know I would have been out by now anyway, but living on my own, being homeless and that through the time of leaving Break messed with my head and if I had never left Break I would be fine, I would have a job or I would be driving but I was stupid and got kicked out.

However, he did have ongoing contact from Break, the home manager came round 'even now', and he acknowledged the value of this.

For me it was important because obviously I didn't know hardly anyone else when I moved out and as long as I had them to go and talk to it was good.

He had lost two families - a birth and adoptive family- and saw Break as being a family:

I would class them as family not friends, they are like uncles and aunties and like sisters and well it is just like one big family.

In reflecting on this loss, he contrasted real families unfavourably with the Break family.

Like everyday it just felt like a proper home, to me a family, but when I went to a proper family for Christmas or whatever, it don't actually feel like Christmas but when I am with Break it does. I don't know, they would just make it good.

His disappointment with his own 'real' families was reinforced by his failed attempt to re-establish a relationship with his birth mother, contacted through Facebook after leaving Break when he went to live with her briefly.

She don't talk to me, she don't treat me like a son. But that proved - I don't need her, I don't need family to be happy. Because I have been happy without a family.

Although Break residential care had given him an alternative to a real family, he was still reflecting on Break as 'family' and on his alternative mother.

I used to call her (Break staff member) all the names under the sunthough I used to tell her I love her ...I had never had that mother figure before and then when I moved into Break she was my mother figure. And I just grew so attached to her.

This ongoing connection was giving this young person, still only 18 years old, a lifeline. It seemed that although he was struggling, his pathway could improve if only because he was regretful and could appreciate the value of relationships.

One response to being asked to leave Break was to remain preoccupied and angry. A young person who had a very strong sense of the power of their own aggression

had a limited recognition of Break offering support. This account was dominated by anger and resentment, not just about Break but in relation to all agencies and to society at large.

Transitions workers

In spite of the fact that leaving Break had been in the context of being 'kicked out', as they recall it, because of their own bad behaviour, all the young people maintained some kind of useful contact with a transitions worker. But the role of the worker varied.

One young person felt connected with her transitions worker, who she knew while a Break resident, not just for practical advice and support but also emotionally, saying she saw her as a member of her family and adding 'I trust her with my heart'.

Another young person also started the relationship with the transitions worker while at Break. He reported very positive experiences of help with bills and as someone to talk to. For him, as for a number of others in other groups, the sense of support since Break combined a supportive relationship with the transitions worker with some ongoing contact with residential staff.

One young person wanted to limit the sense of obligation or closeness to the transitions worker, suggesting that the role is practical.

That is what her job is. She really is nothing else to me. I mean she can be nice to me but like I couldn't class her as a friend. They have good jobs ...I would say acquaintances.

This insistence on the idea of emotional distance from someone 'doing their job' does not mean that the transitions worker was not important in their life but does maybe reflect struggle with closeness and dependency.

Social worker

Social workers were in the main seen as failing this group, given that they had had many social workers and had not had placements that had, in the end, lasted. There was a sense of conflicting views of different social workers, but most young people in other groups also talked about good and not so good social workers.

Mixed feelings about reviews were also reported, with one young person saying they never attended reviews - but then talked of attending but other people making the decisions.

Adult selves

As adults the variation in this group was around the extent to which they were able to reflect back and tell a coherent story that acknowledged the role their behaviour had played. But there was also variation in how young people were managing day to day.

At the time of the interview, one young person was living in a very dirty flat with little furniture, about to be evicted and feeling pretty hopeless and also angry: 'I have been in care practically my whole life and it is actually quite horrible.'

A young person talked of wanting to move on from her problem child identity but finding that difficult. She felt judged by others as a child and still feels judged as an adult. She recognised the value of relationships with people who see her differently, including the transitions worker.

It's like everyone sees me as this aggressive girl but obviously when it comes down to (transitions worker) and my partner they see all the sweet girl.

But she still acknowledged some of the strong feelings of anger that legitimise her, at times, aggressive stance. She commented: 'Unless people are going to be nice to me, why should I be nice to them?'

Reflections on the impact of being in care on their adult selves varied in this group, and the benefits of care for how their lives turned out could be acknowledged and weighed in the balance.

Now I think that was a good thing, whereas I wouldn't have got what..., I wouldn't have my flat now. So I regret it because I wish I had a family life, but being in care has done me better sort of thing. I would probably be in prison by now.

This young person is now off drugs and is thoughtful and reflective, but is still vulnerable and talked of previous suicide attempts. He draws on support from former Break home manager and is expecting a new transitions worker. He has a view of a future that includes having his own child – and adds the comment that he would make sure any child of his behaved: 'Because obviously I didn't behave properly and it's f-- d my life up.' This again is about the question of how to move on as a young adult from a difficult childhood identity and a sense of self-blame.

One young person who found it particularly difficult to resolve their feelings about the past also dwelled on their own violent behaviour and the tendency to 'go mental' in the past.

My actions are completely beyond my control, like literally completely beyond my control. I can punch someone in the face and not even realise that I have done it until after I have done and no anger there just pumph and it is like 'why the f- did I do that?'

In current 'battles' there were a range of long-standing grievances, such as not trusting the government or the police. 'I will do anything to stop paying taxes – why should I pay for the treatment I've had?'

Participation in the project was framed in terms of getting this anger heard.

I am glad that you are showing this to people that are actually in power because if they have a human bone in their body and they are not complete fing robots they will hear me out. They will see past the swearing and stuff and they will actually think, 'This is one person who is actually right, oh my God, we are actually wrong for once'.

These young people were making all efforts to sort themselves out and in fact drawing on support from Break transitions workers to do so. The fact that they were able to acknowledge some positives in their experiences in Break and with transitions workers was encouraging. So although in many ways they were 'struggling' there was also some hope and expectation that things could get better.

Conclusion

These different narratives had a number of themes in common about young people in transition to adulthood managing their complex histories in different ways - some in order to move on from the past and become more competent, confident, connected and prosocial adults, while others were just trying to get by while maintaining some sense of self. These themes will be explored further in the next chapter.

The narrative analysis has demonstrated the different ways in which children and young people construct stories about themselves; how they explain the pathways they have taken and the roles that they and other people have played at each stage of their life and during each major transition. The meanings they attribute to their own behaviour and the behaviour of others leads to very different apportioning of credit and blame, leaving them with different levels of self-esteem - and hope.

The impact of these stories and their very different meanings for young people are still being worked on at the point of leaving Break and moving on practically if not necessarily emotionally.

The transitions team have the essential role of picking up that work with young people and build on the foundations established during their stay as residents at Break. How far young people have been able to resolve their feelings about the past and move on will present different challenges for Break as an organisation and for individual transitions workers, as young people move into and through their 20s. These implications will be discussed in the final chapter.

3. Pathways through Break: common themes

In making sense of the young people's narratives we were also pulling together themes that ran across all narrative pathways and which need to be thought about and understood if we are to be able to move towards recommendations for practice.

In this chapter on pathways through Break there will be a focus on outcomes and support needs at the point of the transition to adulthood. But as in the narratives chapter, account will be taken of the whole of a young person's experience through childhood and adolescence.

The structure of this chapter will follow the chronological route of the narratives chapter and consider the risk and protective factors that characterise children's pathways. A major challenge is to make sense of how children and young people store and process experiences, both positive and negative, the impact this has on their behaviour and their need for certain kinds of caregiving and support. The approach here is therefore psychosocial and developmental, but also includes an ecological perspective in making some sense of how other systems such as the Break transitions service, education and social work support interact.

What do children and young people bring to Break

A number of key issues emerged from the study concerning the previous experiences of relationships and connection to others that young people had before coming into Break, both in their birth families and within the care system. There were accounts of experiences of being loved, of loss and separation, of some good care, but also of abuse and neglect, and then of the positive or negative involvement of professionals in their lives.

Each of these elements made their mark on the children at the time, but lived on in the young people's minds as vague or detailed memories and as different internal working models of the lovability of the self and the extent to which other people could be trusted and relied on for love and protection. These experiences and the ways in which they had been processed cognitively and emotionally were also having an impact on the wide range of emotional and behavioural consequences (positive and negative) of what they had seen and done - and what had been done to them or for them.

Love, loss and separation – being on the move

Although it may be obvious to think about the impact of separation and the loss of a previous home and relationships when children move into a children's home, for most (though not all) children, the move into Break was just one more move in a history of disruption, discontinuity and disconnection.

In their birth families, it was common for parents to have separated, but also for children to have been separated from siblings, moved to new addresses, changed schools - and been placed in the care of relatives. For some children, parents had become ill or died- or the subsequent relatives caring for the children, particularly grandparents, had died. Losses of caregivers had left children unsettled, although some young people could recall positive experiences of parents before they died or

subsequent good care from grandparents which allowed them to build a set of ideas about the potential for adults to be loving and trustworthy - a set of ideas which they could build on in Break and were still reporting on in early adult life. Memories of good and bad experiences often overlapped.

The issue of how memories are 'held' practically in terms of photos and objects from the past or in children's minds and the minds of family members and professionals on behalf of the children is a key theme. Sadness and good memories were often mixed.

Well the only memories I have are of when I saw my nan and brother die, so it is sort of bad memories. But there are the odd good memories. I remember me and my granddad used to go into the pear and apple trees and I would climb up to get the apples ... We even had a pear pie, it was quite delicious. But unfortunately my granddad died before he told me the recipe

Connections may be at an emotional or social and identity level. Cultural identities specific to the birth family may also be claimed as part of their heritage, with past memories incorporated into current presentations of self.

My earliest memory was like a wooden windmill...and like these rocking horses. My mother's side are part of the traveller background so it was like a traveller windmill and we wore like traveller clothing. I use it on my Facebook cover pictures – I don't follow the traveller background but it is nice to know that I am part of the culture.

A key question for young people is whether the story is coherent. Do things fit together and make sense? Can events be explained? In thinking about their childhood selves, young people tended to remember not knowing why things had happened - and even as adults looking back, the reason, for example, why a mother or father had not cared for them and they had lived apart, only seeing parents from time to time, was rather uncertain.

My mum was alive but she couldn't look after me through one reason and another...

There is often little expressed emotion associated with this memory of uncertainty - and it seems likely that once children had moved from the familiar to the unfamiliar several times they rather accepted that this was just how their family lives were. Given some of the complex family stories, they would not have been alone among children of the family or children they knew in care in having a variety of caregivers. Memories of sibling relationships then became important, whether because they had been rivals or because they were dependent on and felt a strong connection to each other through shared experiences.

Like the police - my brother would have got away with it but I grassed him up as well as I didn't want to go into care on my own.

The move from birth family into care may have happened just before or, more commonly, some years and several placements before the move into Break. Some young people had come into care at an early age as part of a child protection intervention, although memories included trying to fight with those who were taking them to foster or residential homes- and even trying to run away.

In birth families, some young people had been threatened with being 'put into care', so their sense of coming into care, as was shown in the narratives, could be as a victim of rejection or as a result of their own bad behaviour. Thus the separation and loss was affected by varied but negative ideas and emotions. Though for children whose birth family experiences were very troubled and violent, the move into care and into Break involved coming into a safe haven.

Where memories were positive of these first experiences in foster or residential care, credit was given to foster carers who had care for them.

Me and my sister felt loved, not like as foster carers –we sort of started seeing them as parents.

But for some, moves had not felt right – this young person talked of regretting a move from this stable foster placement. He had asked to move to be with a sister after an argument and because he felt sorry for her.

We said we want to go - but obviously we didn't mean it at the time, so I felt really upset when we left because actually they were my favourite carers.

It was hard as young adults to think with regret of how their lives might have taken a different turn. And especially hard when it might be something they had asked for, a point when exercising agency had a negative consequence, as they recalled it.

Abuse and neglect

As young adults, reflections on experiences of abuse and neglect, primarily in birth families but also in foster care and adoption, were very varied in the degree of detail, the level and type of emotion and the attribution of subsequent problems to these experiences. But these were clearly issues that would have been very live when young people entered Break as they were still very live, and in some cases preoccupying, in early adulthood. What did these experiences contribute to their ability to trust relationships and to value themselves? Certainly their sense of connection and agency were both affected by this processing of troubled experiences.

At one level, stories that may have looked like neglect were of parents 'not coping' with looking after them - or of subsequent relatives also 'not coping'. There was in some cases a link made by the young person to their parents' mental health problems or problems arising from bereavement leading to neglect. From young people's point of view, links between their parents not coping and their own bad behaviour could also be explained in terms of their own mental health problems. Here the sense of children who were 'bad' but also distressed was a theme for those young people who received mental health diagnoses.

But sometimes the story was simply that parents did not care and this connected to their own destructive behaviour. These stories of abuse and neglect in their birth families were told to project researchers and are clearly childhood stories that in early adulthood are still an important part of who they are. Memories of being shut in cupboards or pushed downstairs are hard to make sense of - whether young people

saw themselves as victims or as having 'caused' their parents' behaviour by their own difficult behaviour.

To some extent, stories and memories have been processed over the years and put into context in the way that an adult mind has a greater capacity to do. However, at the point they entered care for the first time, and later a Break children's home, they were far more likely to be struggling to make sense of these memories. They were also very likely to be unclear as to who knew what about them. Children in care have their lives recorded in files and discussed at great length in courts, meetings and their LAC reviews. Some young people's stories were mainly coherent, but others suggested a great deal of confusion and inconsistency, with memories and what they had been told not adding up.

Hard to resolve also were memories of feeling that they had not been believed regarding their abuse in their birth family. One young person recalled experiences having been returned from care to their father's care.

I remember my dad would always hit me. It wasn't like a slap across the back of the knees...it would be a full on whack on the face and I remember saying to my social worker...and telling her everything, and it was 'That's fine, that's normal, all families do that.'

For some young people, the history of abuse and neglect included experiences of harm in foster care or adoption. There were stories of carers or adoptive parents 'not coping', which were sometimes linked in the young people's accounts to their own difficult behaviour. But there were also more serious cases, where experiences included being singled out for rejection, physical and emotional abuse and neglect. Young people reported being treated differently and worse than carers' birth children or other fostered and adopted children in the family. This echoed some of the experiences of being singled out also reported in birth families which had a clearly negative effect on their sense of self.

For children maltreated in foster care or adoption, there were a number of consequences. This betrayal of trust suggests to the child that the courts and professionals were not able to protect them from harm - and indeed put them in harm's way. Abuse and neglect by foster carers or adopters that singled out the child for harsh treatment was particularly distressing and a source of anger that lasted to the present day.

Every kind of psychopath thing you could think of they did....they would go away for the week-end and take my (sibling) but leave me locked in a bedroom.

Again, very difficult for some children was the experience of not being believed. This was particularly a problem where other children in the household did not confirm the story, but was also a problem because children from disturbed backgrounds may be less likely to be believed than approved foster carers or adopters.

In understanding the impact of maltreatment, whether in birth, foster or adoptive families, on children who entered Break it is important to reflect on the mechanisms by which these experiences and the strategies to protect themselves had become embedded in young minds. This is relevant as some of these mechanisms and

survival strategies were apparent in young people's stories and current lives even in early adulthood. Internal working models of the self, of others and of relationships that are based on fear and anxiety will leave a child feeling that they are unlovable, that others are uncaring and that relationships are not to be trusted and may be harmful. Strategies for coping may be seen in insecure patterns of attachment – shutting down on emotions, being emotionally demanding and becoming controlling. These strategies for survival developed in previous caregiving environments added to the challenges for Break staff hoping to enable children to build more secure and trusting relationships.

The move into and experiences while at Break

At the point of moving into this unfamiliar place, the Break children's home, young people were faced with another challenge – how to adapt to, survive in and get their needs met by a new environment of unfamiliar children and adults.

For some young people there might have been just one placement between their home and this new home, for others this was the latest move after many moves in the birth family and or in care - and for all young people this was not the last move they would make as it would only be their home, at best, for however many years was left of their childhood. For some the move into Break was a great relief - while others were already planning their escape. The first move into care may have been the point of greatest loss /change /shock, but the move into Break was nevertheless a significant experience to be managed cognitively, emotionally and practically.

The sense young people made of previous moves was likely to affect their *expectations* of Break, just as the feelings associated with moves would also affect the *emotions* experienced in relation to this one. If the move to Break made sense in a positive way to the young person, then the expectations of the move would be positive. For some young people the move to Break after a succession of unsuccessful foster homes felt like a good move and made a coherent story. This could, for example, be because there was less pressure to be in a family and young people liked the idea of a variety and range of people to care for them, to have fun with and to turn to.

It was also possible to have memories of a positive short-term placement and then be content with the move to Break as a positive long-term placement. Here the idea that Break was the 'permanent placement' could be helpful for young people, in particular the word 'settled' is used

The staff are nice but much better obviously because it is more settled. It is like I knew I was going to be there for some time. I knew I could stay there until I was 18. I was told that.

But for some young people who had experienced multiple foster placements, a young person's general distrust of new places and new people would leave them with negative expectations and a general fearfulness. Young people reported trying to run away when they were first placed in Break - sometimes simply running away, with talk of the police trying to find them, and sometimes running to relatives.

Given this range of expectations and emotions from fear and anxiety to joy and hopefulness, *first experiences* at Break were important and most young people could

recall the first day. One positive experience and source of reassurance was the sense of community - and its ordinariness. One young person talked about the first evening sitting around watching television and eating a takeaway. Another was the offer of a special adult to look after you, with key worker available when they arrived thus giving the young person a secure base to gradually engage with other staff before not being available in person.

The overall sense of welcome was recalled by most young people, but not all felt comfortable and there was quite a variety regarding how soon it felt possible to build relationships of trust. There were descriptions of feeling relaxed almost immediately. But other young people recalled particular points in time when they started to trust, especially when they went on trips with staff and

First and perhaps most important was being available. There were stories about staff being there for them when they were upset or troubled

I could just sit there and talk to him about anything.

Although individual workers, especially key workers, were mentioned as having special and available relationships, there was some appreciation of the potential benefits of residential over foster care - especially if there had been negative experiences of foster care, as this young person had found.

Foster carers have to deal with it twenty four seven if they have a difficult child. At Break, they do a shift, they go home and they come back the next day refreshed you know, they have got over whatever insults you have thrown at them. That is why for me a children's home was the perfect place.

The full test of staff being available was linked to both being understood and accepted, with bad behaviour being 'put up with' and young people being reassured that bad behaviour did not mean you were a bad person

Although being accepted by staff was important to young people, this did not mean that staff were not active in challenging certain behaviours, including self-harming. In fact there were comments that staff were more interventionist than foster carers. One young person talked about how staff would be persistent and intervene more than a foster carer if a young person was suicidal and self-harming.

Young people also reported on how important it was to be encouraged and inspired to change - again by staff who were accepting of children but were also focussed on helping them to make positive changes. Some of these changes were around changing their behaviour, often through managing their anger or aggression. This young person describes help from a key worker.

She helped me get most of my anger under control. By that point I was still quite angry and violent, but she was the person who helped me get control of my anger and violence...She would show me ways of relieving my stress, like there was a boxing bag...

Sometimes these challenges and the encouragement to change were associated with setting different and more prosocial goals for themselves, as for example in relation to work rather than relying on benefits, as was significant for another young

person. But the starting point for this young person was being able to recognise their own capacity for violence, the link to anger, and how this needed to be managed - with help.

Both the development of closer relationships and changes in their behaviour and aspiration were linked to support for education and activities.

They were always nagging at us but they truly did care like – the nagging was for our benefit like when I had homework to do and I didn't want to do it they nagged at me and eventually I would do it; they would help me with it.

There were some important stories of positive education experiences, which could be the result of continuing in a former school or starting a new school or getting a place at a specialist college. Break staff were seen as playing an important role in providing positive continuity in schooling or turning a poor education trajectory into something more positive.

But for many, even for some who were successful and later went on to college and university, school was a challenge following childhood lives where education had not been valued, continuous negative experiences or periods of disruption and moving between schools.

Behaviour problems and a general disenchantment with education and dissatisfaction with their own performance led in some cases to a sense of inevitability about school failure and truanting –and may also have contributed to a more general pattern of running away. Staff responses to such difficulties were part of generally making the young person aware of the need to change if they were to take a more positive trajectory. Linked to the offer of support to change was the expectation that change was within their control - they must decide to do it.

Among the stories about promotion of greater autonomy for young people were stories about being given *agency* and choice from the time of their arrival. At its simplest level, this could be about choosing food or making their bedroom their own.

I could feel a bit more settled because I had my own room and I could pick my own colours in my room.

It was also important to young people that they felt involved in making decisions about life in the home, including new staff. The staff expectation that young people might take responsibility for their own lives was challenging in itself and produced a variety of responses.

Activities were also a source of agency, new skills as well as enjoyment.

I have been trying to just improve my skills...I just came off a residential camping trip for four days which was quite an experience. I did canoeing which I was terrified of, abseiling, rock climbing, obstacle course. A BBQ cook out, camp fire, it was just amazing!

Taking part in fund raising activities, including for one young person cross country running, fire walking and a Boxing Day Dip in the sea, provided personal challenges,

were a shared experience with staff, and also gave them satisfaction at raising money for Break and creating their own 'home'.

I felt really good for it because we got to like raise money – we raised money for what we called the games room because it had a table tennis table but we changed it to a chill out room, so we got a sofa and some bean bags and just liked decorated the room.

Was it better than before?

Yes because we made it our own.

Activities and role in the wider world, linked to having a voice, were encouraged through, for example, membership of the Children in Care council.

I thought that was really good because I had my say and as a team leader I was also making sure everyone had their say, writing it down. You would get like a £10 voucher and it actually made you feel good about yourself. Because you know what you want and you spoke about what you feel and what things needed to change and about doing more stuff with children in care.

Staff as family

One of the most important turning points in relationships was when young people started to feel that staff were genuinely caring for them - not just 'doing their job' - an idea that was often expressed in terms of family.

When I first moved in I thought she (worker) was paid to care - but if I stayed out all night she'd be 'I was really worried about you', like kind of how a parent would be.

Instead of it being a house it became an actual home for us where we could actually feel like where we lived was a family.

They spoke to you like a family, 'How are you today?'. Like any mum and dad would do.

The descriptions of Break staff as like family members was a theme across the narrative groups - even some angry, unresolved young people would describe at least one member of Break staff using the language of family - linked to availability and acceptance.

I would chat absolute abuse to her for like three to four hours but she put up with a lot of my crap really.... She kind of had like a mumsy role really, because she would take me out shopping and talk about boys and if I had problems with my boyfriend I would sit and talk to her.

Young people's idea of individual Break residential staff as being / being like family members and Break as an organisation as (like) a family needs to be carefully teased out. It is an issue that carries over into the transitions period and young adulthood. It has implications for young people's experience of and relationships with birth families. It also goes to the heart of what is thought of as permanence.

As the Secure Base model (Schofield and Beek, 2014) suggests, these different elements of caregiving and outcomes described by these young people - availability and trust, sensitivity and managing feelings, acceptance and self-esteem, cooperation and feeling effective need to be accompanied by family membership and a sense of belonging.

For young people with little sense of their birth family or negative feelings about them it was particularly important that they had the sense of Break as family.

Yes I would call them (Break) as family, not friends, they are all like aunts and uncles, like sisters and well it's just one big family.

But it was quite common for young people to tie themselves up linguistically as they sought to explain - as no doubt they needed to explain to people in other social situations - who was their 'real' or 'actual' family. At the point of leaving Break, for example, it was necessary to define their family. Family could be defined legally or biologically - or for the role that staff had played in their lives.

Before I left I said to them, you're like my actual family, because I have got my actual family, but you are like a second family. You have helped me through life when it gets tough, you like help me with my anger.

Although there were very positive stories about celebrating birthdays and Christmas in Break, there were also challenging times if, for example, you were hoping to go home to your family for Christmas but this wasn't possible.

I was supposed to go down my mum's for Christmas, but unfortunately I wasn't allowed so I stayed at the house but I didn't like that...I kicked off...I just went out of my head... They made it the best they could, but it just wasn't the same.

As ever, experiences varied, with one young person saying (as quoted above) that after some years at Break, Christmas at Break felt more like a real Christmas to him than Christmas in a family home.

For all young people their membership of the birth family and relationship with family members was a complex feature of their history and affected their experiences while at Break. Young people talked about how their relationships with their families were sometimes linked to good times or to problems experienced in the past. Where memories of being treated badly, physically or emotionally, were still vivid, it was then a matter of how angry or distressed young people continued to feel as to the place that the family held in the young person's mind. It was also important for young people to take account of whether family members had played a helpful or harmful role during their time in Break. Reflections on parents who 'didn't bother' to come to contact contrasted with reflections on parents or other relatives, grandparents or aunts and uncles, who had kept the relationship going.

For young people who found stability combined with care and concern for the first time at Break, it was a safe environment in which to reflect on the past and to talk it through with staff. There was also help from staff to renegotiate relationships with

birth families where there were family members who could play a constructive role in the young people's lives.

As we will see in the section on transitions from Break - some of this careful renegotiation with birth families, whether towards greater closeness or distance, can break down when young people are feeling isolated in the community after leaving Break. They may turn to birth family members who cannot meet their needs - and this hope followed by another disappointment was a challenge for them and for their transitions workers.

Peer relationships

Peer relationships featured in two important ways in young people's accounts of their time at Break –those occurring outside of Break and those with fellow Break residents.

External peer relationships had often been disrupted by moves, but there were young people who had reasonably settled lives for part of their childhood and could appreciate that other children at school knew them and understood why they were in care - which made the story easier to tell and their care status less stigmatised.

Continuity of friendships was often supported by remaining at the same school after they moved to Break. This continuity had a rather mixed press- as also discussed by staff (below). It often involved long taxi journeys over a number of years. For some young people continuity was valued and seemed to be linked to the value of keeping friends. But feelings could also be mixed. One young person said

I had to get up at about half six in the morning to travel to School. I was the first to be picked up and the last to go home I was shattered- I thought oh I've got to get up the next day.

But also said:

They wanted to move me and I said if you move me I won't get out of bed because I liked my school and all my friends.

But the picture of taxi journeys- maybe spending 3 hours a day in a taxi- was in itself a difficult experience. It also meant that young people not only did not make friends and get involved in activities locally, it could also limit social contact and activities with other young people in the home. It may also have contributed to young people actually losing interest and dropping out of school, with one young person attributing leaving school early as when he couldn't stand the travel regime any more.

Perhaps inevitably for children who had moved frequently including moving schools before entering Break, and who struggled with both academic work and peer relationships, it was not unusual to report experiences of being bullied at school. Just being 'different' by being in care, and in particular in a children's home, can become the basis for bullying.

For those who did make friends external to Break, sport was an important option and the link between friendship and activities had laid the foundation for a stronger sense of self.

So those years were key, so making them friends obviously that led on and sort of helped mould my life from that point on.

Peer relationships within the children's home also ranged from the most supportive to the most troubling. Where friendships were close and supportive, young people turned again to the language of family – in particular, a best friend being referred to as a 'brother'.

Like (resident), to me he is practically my brother, because me and him grew up together. Me and him both went through all our hardships together.

Relationships could simply be ones of comfortable familiarity with other residents – rather than necessarily having individual friends singled out as a confidant. In fact there was sometimes a sense of a sibling group, in which older, and /or more settled young people helped settle new group members.

What was reported to be very troubling for a few of the young people was the reported level of conflict and physical aggression which sometimes emerged within the peer group and between peers and staff. This was sometimes described as erupting just occasionally, but could also be described as an ongoing problem.

A typical day when I started getting older when more people moved in it was disruptive, there were people always kicking off, and I was like 'I don't want to be here anymore if they are going to kick off'.

Where staff had seemed not able to manage disruptive young people adequately, this was a source of anxiety and sometimes anger – either at staff for not controlling the group or on behalf of staff and other children who were under attack. But young people admitted also to themselves being responsible for anti-social behaviour such as damaging property. At points when they felt more in control of their own behaviour there was a tendency then to find the damaging behaviour of others upsetting. Children would inevitably be at different stages in their recovery.

As can be seen from the different narratives, accounts of and reactions to conflict in the home varied dramatically. Some angry and anxious young people whose negative feelings about their childhoods, including Break, had not been resolved spoke very powerfully of the atmosphere in the home; one young person referred to it as a 'war zone'. Where young people understood and accepted some of the reasons why other children became aggressive, this could reduce both their anxiety and anger. Young people who had not come from backgrounds of abuse and neglect felt themselves to be very different to the more troubled children around them but also, being more integrated and empathic themselves, had a degree of sympathy with them.

Although only a small minority of young people interviewed recalled their experience of the peer group as being at times out of control, it is inevitably a challenge to maintain a safe environment – safe physically and psychologically - while offering a home to some of the most troubled children in the care system. Children were also at different stages of their journey to resolving some of their difficulties. The fact that residents were enabled to discuss a new person arriving was helpful in

acknowledging that the whole group - children as well as staff, have a role to play in helping a new person settle in and to change over time.

Transitions and after Break

Although the circumstances and feelings varied, there was a common sense of loss at the point of leaving Break as this young person describes.

Because you have been living in a Children's Home for like four years and you get attached to them, but when it is time for you to leave it is actually kind of sad and emotional. You know you are going to realise that you are not always going to wake up everyday, going downstairs, it is not going to be the same, so it is kind of hard.

All young people are vulnerable to a greater or lesser extent at the point of leaving care and Break young people faced a number of challenges. In spite of young people 'settling down' while at Break or even changing quite significantly, there were still problems of many kinds facing them. Not untypical was one young person who had learning difficulties, ADHD, emotional problems, poor physical health, was unemployed –and was living in supported lodgings where some degree of independence was expected. Life was a bit of a struggle and it was not surprising that he was someone who felt that he had been expected (by the system) to leave Break sooner than he was ready.

There were a number of key themes emerging from the young people's interviews regarding their experiences and the kind of help they needed and valued, as has already been indicated by the exploration of the young people's narratives in the previous chapter. These can be separated out into areas which overlap and interact.

- Practical matters
- Relationships
- Family membership and a sense of belonging
- Constructive activity

Each of these areas presents different kinds of challenges to young people and requires different kinds of support – some of which might be available from Break transitions workers, while young people would also use informal networks of friends, partners and, where they were supportive, family members.

Practical matters

Practical and housing issues were obviously important as young people tried to set up home. Much of this support was from transitions workers, who helped young people to get launched.

She come round here like nine o'clock in the morning and she went about half one, two o'clock in the afternoon and she had all my bills set up, direct debits. So I reckon they should do more transitions workers they should because they are good for like young people leaving care homes.

The transitions worker helps me, they just help me to talk to, they talk about how my life has been, how are you coping, are you buying enough food, are you doing this? They are making sure I am alright.

Young people tried to distinguish between roles, emphasising the practical support from transitions staff.

Link worker is more for your personal problems, like school, relationships, family. It is sort of the same job as transitions, but transitions is more like moving into independence, more to do with bills, housing, jobs, anything really.

Relationships

Young people recognised the importance of the quality of relationships that were alongside the practical support they valued from their transitions workers.

I could trust her with, could tell her anything.

What do you like about her?

She is honest, very honest. She says it as it is. She doesn't sugar coat anything.

The ongoing role of Break offered relationship continuity of different kinds, but in particular young people commented on feeling 'known', known at their best and their worst, so staff recognised when their behaviour changed for the better or signalled that more help was needed. Feeling understood in this way was a great gift and arose from their sense of continuity with Break staff.

The reliability of the support was important for its comprehensiveness and because it was expected to last.

As far as I know, the transitions service is indefinite. It is designed to be not like a stop off point. They will always be there. There will always be a Break transitions service.

Leaving care worker (from LA) only came to see me a couple of times... But there was nothing else they could provide support wise than what Break was already doing.

But others wanted extra reassurance about how long the supportive relationships would last, especially when they sensed that it was going to be difficult.

Well I was hoping for him to support me a bit longer like. I know he can't support me forever, but I was hoping that he would still support me in the long run like after when I move into my own place, just like helping me, guiding me, see what I can get from like shops, things like that.

'Transition' was rarely one smooth move - young people might move into and then on from temporary accommodation or from supported accommodation to more independent living.

Trust in the transitions workers had to be built up through a working relationship which was different from that of residential workers – less room for day to day tension perhaps, but also more work was needed with intermittent contact to build closeness and trust. But there was an intensity in feelings on both sides, perhaps because it

was a relationship forged at a difficult time. And it was obviously important to most young people in our study:

I trust her with my heart, I tell her everything.

Although relationships with the residential home staff could also be very close after leaving, there was a sense that things inevitably moved on and they may have to also.

I haven't been back for a cup of tea in ages. I used to be able to ring them up in the evenings but (children's home) has changed quite a bit

The shift towards accepting that, looking into the future, relationships could not always be that close was there with the transitions worker too, although most young people said they would definitely want to keep in touch and know that somebody still cared.

Family membership and a sense of belonging

Particular kinds of relationships with transitions and other Break staff could be associated with concepts of family and belonging as discussed above. But birth families were also a powerful tie for some young people. At the time of interview it was possible to see different kinds of singular or combined family identities and belonging developing. The current situation regarding young people's family membership and sense of belonging in early adulthood could be loosely grouped into:

- Primarily birth family
- Primarily Break
- Dual membership of Break and birth family
- Primarily anticipated membership of new /own future family
- No clear or comfortable sense of belonging and family membership

For some young people leaving Break's care, there was a strong positive sense of *primarily birth family membership* – often because of early positive experiences or because more recently relatives were able to offer not just a relationship but specific skills and advice e.g. for university applications and interviews. These were young people who valued the support that Break offered but had no need or wish to think about staff as family.

Other young people prioritised their birth family in their thinking once they left Break's care for perhaps more negative reasons. Some of the careful renegotiation with birth families undertaken with staff support while at Break, whether towards greater closeness or safer distance, broke down when young people were feeling isolated in the community after leaving Break. They turned to birth family members who often could not meet their needs - and this becomes an additional challenge for them and for their transitions workers to work through as they may have needed routes to move away from the birth family and turn back to Break. It was disappointing when attempts to get help from the birth family were rebuffed.

I asked my mum once, when I had a lot of trouble – ‘Can I come back and stay at yours for a bit because I have nowhere else to go?’ ‘No it won’t work. I don’t want you to mess up my living room.’I applaud your selfishness!

This kind of response drove young people back to the reassurance that Break was able to offer.

For some young people it was just important to be selective about their birth family in adulthood – feeling close to some family members but keeping their distance from others. One young person had family members who had provided constant support through childhood and pro-social role models into adulthood. But she had also struggled though childhood having contact with a previously abusive father. It was only when she moved into adulthood that she was able to reflect on the impact of this.

My dad was very negative and. as soon as I had contact with my dad I hated social services, I hated Break – as soon as I stopped talking to my dad I was the complete opposite.

A strong sense of *Break as family* often led young people to make great efforts to explain why something that did not look like a usual family could feel like one. This young person compared Break positively to a former foster family.

There was more staff there that could speak to you –they weren’t just like two people constantly there. You got to know different people. Like (Break home) is like a big family to me now. I could go there and tell them anything I have got problems with.

For young people who combined a sense of *family membership in Break and with the birth family*, there were different patterns and weight and roles attached to each. Sometimes young people returned to the birth family to look after family members.

I want to be able to get a job so I can support my mum and sister because my sister has short-term memory loss and a number of disabilities.

But this young person also included Break in his concept of family.

Who do you consider to be your family?

Well my family of course! It is everyone I have met in care, even the staff I consider among, not among family but close enough to consider them family.

For some young people the question of a family from childhood was rejected, with young people suggesting that either their whole family or sections of it, no longer existed. That conclusion led young people to *look to future families*, identifying partners, a partner’s family and their own children as key to their sense of family.

Who would you consider as your family?

My girlfriend and her family.

A young mother described herself as having been transformed by becoming a mother.

He is my pride and joy...I am fiercely protective of my son you know.

A small number of young people interviewed *did not clearly have any sense of family* to belong to. Alternatively, the 'family' was so diverse as for it to be unclear whether this was a family to belong to.

Who would you consider your family?

I don't really know. I have got a lot of friends. I have got a lot of kids that were in foster care that I class as my brothers and sisters as well so I have got one giant family.

Whatever their sense of family, all young people with care experiences realise that they carry some differences to others in their social networks. One young person used the example of hearing a friend complaining about her mother.

One of my friends was slagging off her mum and things like that get to me a bit and I just went, 'Person over here without a mum!'

Constructive activity

Constructive activity would include education, employment and leisure activities. The significance of education has been noted throughout the analysis, most practically in relation to travel to school and continuity issues. But the option of further and higher education was also important and could be transformational.

Also noted has been the important role of activities, as young people reflected on the range of sports, hobbies, outings and holidays that they were introduced to, engaged in and enjoyed while at Break. These were closely linked to the strong relationships with staff and peers but also to settling down and seeing a future for themselves as a different kind of person.

There is a particular significance of paid work during the transition to adulthood and this too was represented in the study. There was the young person for whom the motivation to be independent and not on benefits motivated him to work on his education and settle down in his behaviour. Also, there was a young person who had surprised everyone including herself by getting a job at 16 and sticking to it for the previous four years. This was a small sample but the capacity for young people to surprise themselves and everyone else by what they proved capable of with Break's support was impressive.

Conclusion

What emerges from these stories is the importance of factors that were also used to think about the young people's narratives, in particular a sense of connection, agency and engagement in constructive activities, the cornerstones of resilience.

What is also clear is that in order to think about the needs of young people in transition from residential care, it is necessary for workers as well as young people to reflect on the cumulative impact of experiences through childhood and adolescence – and to consider the potential for further growth and change in early adulthood that may only be possible with support from the transitions staff and other agencies.

4. Being there for young people: perspectives of Break residential and transitions staff

It was important to consult with residential staff as well as transitions staff, as both groups would be having an impact on young people's capacity to manage the transition to independence successfully. The extent to which young people would be able to face the demands of more independent adult living would rely to a large extent on the quality of their residential experiences in Break. Transitions staff would be building on those foundations.

Break staff focus group

The focus group with Break staff consisted predominantly of residential staff, with two members of the Moving On team also present. The group discussion covered a range of important issues, regarding perceptions of young people's experiences - and of their own experiences of providing care and support from young people arriving in Break through to the transition to adulthood.

Moving in to Break

Residential staff were very much aware of the multiple moves and difficult backgrounds that young people had experienced before they moved in to Break. This was linked to a view that residential care is treated and perceived as a last resort.

Children were thought by staff to be 'already set up to be rejected'. They always expect that is what is going to happen'. From the staff's point of view, this means that in the early days of placement 'being tested' by children was the norm.

They will test whether you really are unconditional. ..I think all homes deal with what can be quite high level stuff at first. It's their distress coming out.

Although Break being the latest move was a common experience, it was also possible for Break to be a child or young person's first experience of care. Examples were given of children of ages ranging from 9 to 15. Echoing young people's views and memories, staff were aware of the importance of every young person's first experience of Break.

The process described as best practice started with meeting the young person in their previous placement, and using a book including staff photos to orientate the young person in anticipation of the move. Other detailed preparations included drawing up plans, ensuring the bedroom was decorated and that staff have things in the house that the young person liked to do. An example was given of another young person in the home making her own contribution to helping the new resident feel welcome.

She had done her own book about the home, taken pictures of things that we couldn't have thought of and you know it was so powerful and it was just a really nice gesture.

It was arranged for the key worker to be on shift for a young person's arrival.

The worker would go to meet her, be there for her first tea, be there on her first shift and introduce her to each person individually – so that as the weeks go by she would feel more comfortable.

Staff were aware, though, that even with preparation it was not always easy to manage a group of young people that had to accept a newcomer. Sometimes staff felt they needed more information about the young person.

Sometimes you are just thrown a hand grenade and you have got these unsettled young people and then you put someone else in and for both sets of people, the ones coming in and the ones already there it can be a complete disaster. It is really hard – you feel a bit of pressure to take someone if there is a vacancy.

There can also be tensions when a social worker is keen to move a child in as the child is in crisis, but other children can get 'a bit confrontational' if there is someone new coming into the 'family'. Staff emphasised the importance of planning but also of being aware that group dynamics will change.

Social workers need to know that a young person is moving into somewhere where the other children are going to be curious and who are going to try to find out like 'how are you going to fit into our environment and how we work' and you also have the staff team who is saying, 'We have just got our heads round these young people and the dynamics and now there is going to be a whole new challenge coming in'.

The majority of children at Break were being offered a home until they left care at 18. But in some cases with younger or less damaged children, it was reported that Break children's home staff had rather different task - of settling them in but then preparing them to move on to fostering - to become 'fosterable'.

This was a very different role and led to some discussion among staff about the nature of the relationship that staff should build when they are also effectively preparing children to move. There was also a question about the idea that fostering is preferable and better able to meet a child's needs than residential care. This was linked to concern about the denigration of children's homes, which was referred to as 'Victorian'.

How can we get rid of this whole thing that the children's home is a last resort punishment?

There was a strong defence of how they felt Break children's homes should be seen, 'which, as social workers know, is about settling them and forming attachments'.

Nurturing and parenting relationships

In describing their work staff focussed unanimously on the importance of the quality of their relationships with children in their care. The goal of secure attachment was

mentioned directly and indirectly and the strongest response among staff to the question of what mattered in their care of children and young people was their sense of the value and power of relationships to help and heal troubled children.

Marked here was the language of 'parenting', but expressed in ways that also suggested a psychodynamic understanding of parental sensitivity or attunement. So, for example, a worker talked about keeping a child in mind.

It's just a natural thing. I am the key worker for a younger child and especially during the first few months I would just be at home watching TV and I know MasterChef came on and they made spag bol and I immediately went, 'Oh that is her favourite dinner'. And I would be walking along the street and going 'Oh she would really like that' and so I think it is a natural thing. I don't think it is something you can train yourself to do.

This is akin to bonding or 'primary maternal preoccupation' and it shows how, as the worker's mind focuses on the mind of the child, this contributes to a sense of attunement. For this to be of maximum benefit for the child it was crucial for the child to know that they were kept in mind even when apart – a message of both *availability* but also *containment* which needed to be communicated to the child, for whom this may be a new experience. This attention to careful communication of relationship availability was very relevant around managing staff holidays. Children were prepared for the fact that staff were going on holiday - with the 'reunion' being valued.

When you get back from holiday the key child is pleased to see you - you have brought back a little gift so you hold them in mind. You prepare them before you go and you bring them a little something, even if it's a stick of rock: 'I was thinking about you. I thought you might like this'.

Other workers added ideas of how children are thought about and 'wondered' about by staff when they are apart:

I guess it comes from the philosophy of what you would do with your own child. You are constantly thinking, 'I wonder how they are getting on at school today? I wonder...'. You are the parent!

They come home from school and their bedroom is done and it's lovely and it's ready and waiting for them and we have been thinking about them and who is going to pick them up from school and give them that kind of early experience that they didn't have really of being loved.

It was not only that staff were doing this particular kind of attuned parenting - they were able to use theory to see why this would be beneficial and to be explicit with children.

A few weeks ago we knew that (two female residents) wanted to go bowling so during the day I called up the bowling alley and booked it- and then when they came back from school, 'Oh you know I was thinking about you today and I know you like bowling so I have booked this for you while you were at school' and for them that was really positive because they were like 'Oh thanks for thinking about us' and they had a really good night.

The nature of these relationships was described both in cognitive and emotional terms - thinking about young people, but also actively caring about and caring for. The language for these 'parental' feelings was defended as 'love' – indeed it was seen as strange if a child for whom you cared for significant periods of their childhood would not be 'loved' and so this language should be used. The fact that this word was acceptable was said to be new - previously staff were told even if a child says, 'I love you,' they had to say, 'And I care for you too'.

We can say that we love the children now and we do. It is an arduous task sometimes but what gets you through is the fact that you are going to stick by them and you love them.

Parenting and loving was also discussed in terms of what was acceptable in relation to physical contact. Here again, as with using the term 'love', it was said that if a child was in a living environment where they never had a hug that would be positively abusive. More experienced members of staff were able to reflect on the phases and fashions that had affected residential care, of which the restriction of physical contact was seen as a concerning example. The current situation was seen as much better than it had been maybe five years previously when they were expected to provide a restricted form of 'safe care' – care that required care givers to keep their physical distance, not read bedtime stories while children were in bed, avoid touch and only give 'sideways' hugs. This had become the response in foster care as well as residential care to concerns about abuse in care and false allegations by children against carers – but times had changed at Break.

Four or five years ago everybody was pretty much scared witless to show love, affection, nurture. This sterile and non- nurturing environment has changed hugely.

Social pedagogy was described as having been 'drip fed' into the organisation, but was basically giving them permission to go back to previous good practice, before restrictions came in.

We needed someone to say 'It's OK to do that' in that risk averse culture.

One member of staff also commented on research that children's homes that do not allow hugs have higher levels of restraint. This comment suggested that staff had been keen to find support for practices that felt more reflective of their own sense of what was appropriate when caring for troubled young people in a 'home' environment.

But staff also commented that it was Break as an organisation and a staff group that had wanted a more nurturing environment.

And I think the children have flourished because of that. There is a different care - there are not the restraints and there are not the complaints and they do feel loved and nurtured.

Staff commented on how managing these close, family-like relationships as an employed member of staff who works shifts, takes holidays and has a private life outside the home, is a challenge but also an important part of the job. Certain communications to young people could reduce the impact of this - for example staff

being open with young people about when they would be off shift or away, preparing them and showing they were thinking about the young people even when away. But it was accepted, given shift systems, that the young people needed to be able to trust more than one or two workers - and that the staff team needed to create a culture in which as far as possible all staff were seen as able to provide what could be described as secure base availability (Schofield and Beek, 2006, 2009, 2014).

Education, activities and friends

Discussion in the staff group about education and activities led to a lively debate about the rights and wrongs of maintaining children in their previous schools. Staff had views of the *costs* to the child of travelling long distances to sustain a school place. These included the time taken travelling, the difficulty in maintaining friendships from school that are at a distance and the loss of opportunities to make relationships in Break and do activities in the local area.

It just puts so much time on their day - that they are not in the house making positive relationships with their peers and the staff ...I think is far better to pull them out, get them in a good school and then encourage relationships.

A link was also made here to the most common care plan for children in Break at the time, which was that it would be long term, 'until independence'. This meant that the child needed to be settled in the area and build connections in the community which would help in the longer term, including the transition to adulthood.

Moving schools generally, even from one local school to another, was said to be justified if it gave children a better experience. An account was given, for example, of a child who had experienced a great deal of 'negativity' in a previous school, including not being allowed on school trips as she was deemed unmanageable, but who blossomed in class and in out of school activities when given a fresh start in a new school with a positive attitude towards looked after children.

Moving on from Break - transitions

Given their sense of being able to make an important contribution to children's lives there were inevitably some concerns among the residential staff about what happened when young people left their care. They expressed the concern in particular that sometimes young people's anxiety about leaving Break and living alone meant that they regressed to behaviours and levels of anxiety from before their arrival in Break, risking some of the gains they had made.

I think when they get to that transitions stage their stress behaviour, that they have learned from when they were tiny, all comes out and we have found 18 year olds that will go back to being 8 - 'I can't look after myself, I can't wash, I can't do this.' They recall that time and they are absolutely terrified.

For some young people, transitions may be officially or unofficially *moving back* to the birth family and this raised questions about how contact is managed during their time at Break.

Our experience is the first door they knock on is the parent's door and you think that all that time in care everyone said 'You can't see your parents, we need to protect you from them.'

It can be hard to let a child go to a risky situation in the birth family.

When you are going through that reunification process you are always sceptical about how it is going to work. Because you are obviously very protective over the young people that you have cared for such a long period of time and what you...think you have put back into their lives.

For one young woman who returned home with support after a year in Break's care this move had gone well but there were questions about whether she had needed to come into care and experience the disruption.

There were also some rare but more risky cases where a young person went home as the only available option, perhaps because the young person wanted to go home, was not competent to look after themselves and would probably end up going home anyway. Concerns were expressed about how timescales for preparing such vulnerable young people and their families for this move often seemed too tight.

The need for good work to be done with birth parents, from the child's arrival through to leaving Break and beyond, was a significant theme – especially since contact was so important and so challenging. For some children it was felt that courts were too quick to reduce contact - while in other cases contact could become less welcome over time as the child started to experience a different quality of care in Break and to see themselves differently. Parents could also be resentful of children's experiences in residential care. As one worker put it,

The parent will turn round and say 'You have got away with that in the children's home. They treat you better and you think you are better than me just because they give you a holiday in Spain'. And the young person feels guilty – 'My life was much better than I could have had with you'.

Whatever the direction taken by young people, the ongoing connection with them after they had left Break was much valued by residential staff. It was often only then that they were able to reflect on having done a good job.

Sometimes you can't see the relationship when you are working with them and living with them, but it is when they leave and come back...that is when you realise you have helped in some way.

There were also benefits to other young people still resident in the home from seeing returning young people.

It sets a good example...because ours are saying 'Well I know I will keep seeing you because the boys still come back'.

Some young people were coming back regularly – one young person came in about four times a week and had brought in his girlfriend to 'introduce her to the team'.

It was also recognised that young people might need more contact at certain stages in their life.

Since she's had a baby we have noticed that she has needed us more and I guess that is quite normal in terms of different people at different stages of life isn't it- that when a young person has a baby they need you again.

Sometimes staff needed to do more for a young parent than offer their availability- they had to challenge the parent about the care of the baby.

We raised with her that we were not really comfortable and happy with the way you are treating or caring for your baby....

When staff then involved a number of other agencies in helping to support a young person, this might at first be resented.

She kicked off a lot, all of a sudden we were evil and we were bad ... but we didn't move away, we rode that wave with her ...and she accepted it a few months ago and is flourishing.

Residential staff views of the transitions team

Residential staff were clear that the role of the new transitions team in supporting young people had not only been beneficial it had been crucial to good outcomes.

I think every opportunity that our young people have had in the last few years has come from the transitions team and not from the social worker.

There were a range of concerns raised about social workers during the transition into independent living - and a sense that their availability had decreased and there were delays in getting pathways plans etc. There was a recognition that it was Break's concerns about this that led to the decision to 'be proactive' and set up the transitions team rather than continuing to accept the problems in local authority support that left 'their' young people in difficulty. This change was seen as profound.

Ultimately we are not telling the young person 'Oh we can't see you this week because we have to try and find your social worker' we are saying 'OK we will deal with the problems where we are now'.

The fact that the transition team are part of Break and not separate from the residential care teams was seen as crucial to making the service work.

You've got to have the same philosophy haven't you? We have got a shared philosophy here that we carry on the love and care.

It was also important for these staff groups to have trust in each other and that requests would be followed up.

When a particular young person comes to me and says I need information on this, I can say I am going to ask (transitions worker) and I can trust that she is going to do that.

But residential staff were keen to emphasise that whatever external support services were available for example in supported lodgings and even when people from those services have suggested that Break could now 'let go', there were some ties with them that should not be broken.

We have got the emotional link with them and the history. So you can provide the support service... but we will still go and see them.

This ongoing commitment by residential staff seemed valuable to young people - and young people talked of wanting to know staff still cared. But this suggested the importance of negotiation within Break and with other organisations, at all levels, about the role and scope of these ongoing relationships.

Experiences and views of transitions workers

It was essential to capture directly through interview the views of the transitions workers from the Moving On team. As a new role and service, it was necessary to understand and take account of their experiences of both delivering support to young people and receiving support from the organisation. Consistent with the growing and evolving nature of the transitions service, routes into this new role could be from other roles at Break or from being specifically recruited for this role.

This account will focus on two broad areas: how transitions workers describe the work they do and the role they have with young people; and how they see their place within Break and the support and training they receive. A final section will draw on conclusions about the implications for future planning of this service.

Meeting young people for the first time

The core and distinctive principles of the role of a Break transitions worker were clearly shared and established. The 'work' starts during a young person's time in the children's home. It is very much about giving all young people the message that when it is time for them to move on from Break's full time residential care, the Moving On team will provide a range of support. Transitions staff talked of popping into children's homes, talking to staff and any young people who were there, having a cup of coffee –and generally being around and known.

Chatting to staff and young people that are about, because there are young people who will be coming up to sixteen so will start to become on our radar.

The power of this informal process of engagement, of transitions staff meeting young people who would come on to their 'radar' and putting themselves on the young people's 'radar' is multi-faceted. Young people could engage with the worker at many levels. Those who were already part of a process of planning for leaving Break's care may have specific questions that need to be answered. But for other young people even the very youngest- the message was that Break was offering permanence, and that a member of the Break 'family' could rely on ongoing and future care, concern and support from the organisation which was not restricted by boundaries of age, legal status or local authority funding policies. That is not to say that there would be no restrictions and limits, but the relaxed message communicated by the presence of

transitions workers as part of Break and in their living room had the potential to reduce some of the inevitable anxiety that children in care can feel about their future. Also when their turn came, the discussion about 'moving on' would not come out of the blue.

Some important confidence can be built from getting to know the transitions worker on a personal level, but the bigger picture for young people of the longer term commitment of Break, the organisation, was a significant part of the transitions workers' accounts. This is not only about future time- it is about the child feeling they matter enough *now*, are *members* of the Break family now- as permanency principles would suggest is helpful to children.

Another theme emerging from this early engagement of transitions staff in the young people's home environment, was that if there is an expectation that the residential staff are trusted caregivers / attachment figures, in particular for long-term children, then the signal from residential and transitions staff having a coffee and chat together is that these 'outsiders' are also 'insiders' and to be trusted.

This becomes important for the next stage, when young people are in the process of preparing to leave Break. Their early conversations about next steps may be with the residential staff, the transitions staff- but also in meetings which include other members of the Team around the Child, such as LAC Reviews, Pathway Planning meetings, Personal Education Planning meetings etc. One worker commented on how trust in a transitions worker, alongside support from the home, can reduce the risk, previously a problem, that young people's behaviour would start to deteriorate once there were these wider discussions about 'leaving care'. The context of these anxieties was described from the young people's point of view about their moves into and out of Break.

Because they were frightened, they were scared they were moving into the unknown. It was just completely daunting because they had come from a troubled situation... they were being cared for and then they were being 'kicked out' again.

As in the young people's narratives, the sense of being 'kicked out' may occur even when leaving Break is planned and understood as occurring at an appropriate age and stage. So feeling 'kicked out' in terms of leaving Break may be a result of a reawakening of some very basic feelings of rejection, requiring positive kinds of support and reassurance.

Managing the move from Break

However much preparation had gone on, the *timing* of the move was commented on by transitions staff, as it was by young people and residential staff, as often being far from ideal and generally too early. It was particularly damaging if the young person moved out while still in education.

I think they should consider upping the age to 19 or 20, because by then they will have finished school... Having to go into transition while they are in education it doesn't just damage, it can set them up to fail. It is such an important transition having to move out while you are in education because

one thing has to give generally and normally they give up on their education, unfortunately.

Once young people had moved out from Break and started to manage their lives, the role of the transitions worker was described as including the complete range of practical supports in terms of managing accommodation, money, education and employment. But descriptions of the process of 'support' varied in terms of managing the balance between acting 'for' the young person, acting 'alongside' the young person and promoting the young person's autonomy. Preparing young people for this aspect of transition was undertaken at an earlier stage.

From the age of 16 onwards we are teaching skills to become more self-sufficient and actually be able to manage themselves, so when there is a crisis it is not just they are reliant on us, they can be a bit more resourceful themselves.

The aim was to place all young people in accommodation where they had support not only from Break staff but also from other people, including hostel key workers and other community supports, so that becoming more 'independent' was a gradual process and built on relationships, what Mike Stein (2012) calls 'interdependence' in preference to 'independence'.

Coping with risk

One of the most challenging aspects of the transitions work was how hard it was to protect young people from some of their choices and from some of the risks they faced. This could be particularly concerning when a young person had made good progress within Break but was about to find themselves in a high risk situation, where their resilience and capacity to make the right choices would be tested.

The children we have come in are very damaged and the staff work hard to get this young person able to be more sociable and to present well in society and then we sadly sometimes put them into a home where there are drugs and some of the young people there use. Then you feel you have sort of, it is a bit of vicious circle, you think 'Oh God, I am putting the young person who has changed his life so much back into that environment and you think - Oh this is quite damaging again....'

One example that was given highlighted the gap between the young person's prosocial and healthy lifestyle as achieved within Break and the environment into which he might be going.

I have got a young man who is about to be moved (out of Break) and he is such a quiet young man, lovely, he is an incredible young man, working, fantastic at his job and he doesn't want to go to family, he wants to go to this hostel and I know several young people in this hostel are completely different, they do dabble in weed and get drunk and I am just praying that this young person stays the good character he is ... and would be like, 'No thank you'.

This worker had been concerned enough about this young person to keep exploring other options in the hope of finding a more appropriate plan that would support rather

than threaten the progress made to date. But this type of concern was not unusual and perhaps not surprising given problems in finding appropriate accommodation. The need for Break to have its own transition accommodation, a 'moving on house', was commented on by several transitions staff.

Once young people were living 'independently', in whatever setting, the heart of the transitions worker role, as staff described it, was the importance of *relationships* and *availability*, making sure that young people knew they were there for them.

Because we are consistent, we don't give up, we keep going back. That is what they see, that no matter what they do or how they might annoy people, one day they can tell you to F off but it doesn't mean that I am never going back and then when you do go back they can see that 'Actually she is here because she does care'.

Providing the right level and type of support

It was accepted that young people needed different levels and types of contact with staff and this depended on a number of factors. The stage they were at in the transition process was significant, with most young people initially needing contact at least weekly, with further availability on the phone and text. But also in the mix were the particular needs of young people; for example, extra support for young people with disabilities or mental health problems. There were also particular turning points - perhaps pulling back a bit when someone had a job and partner, but needing to step back in again if the job or the relationship ended. Throughout, however, the need to promote the young person's competence and self-efficacy was paramount.

Sometimes they think you can do absolutely everything for them...but we don't want them to become so reliant on us.

The challenges are sometimes I think they come back to us before trying to solve it themselves

Maintaining this position was not always easy, as one worker explained:

Sadly you sometimes have to allow them to make mistakes to actually learn from them... and just be there for back up if they need you. So we advise and support but we can't rule their lives and we can't take over their lives so we just make sure they know we are available.

Within this theme there were important links between workers being available, practically and emotionally, and also using multiple forms of communication with young people (phone, text, Facebook) to ensure that they signalled their availability and that young people could always reach them. As with residential staff, the sense of both keeping young people in mind and making sure young people know that was an important theme for transitions workers, particularly as contact was more intermittent than when young people were Break residents, and there needed to be a sense of the worker in the background as someone who would always want to hear from them, with good or bad news. Young people's capacity to keep the worker in mind as a positive presence was obviously then a strength.

There were numerous challenges to maintaining the 'right' frequency and type of contact for each young person. In addition to managing the balance for each young person, the geography of a large shire county and beyond created problems for staff as they sought to prioritise visits and to avoid spending too much time travelling. Staff varied in their sense of current challenges in managing their workload, but the management of their availability to different young people was more than a workload and geography issue.

I had switched my phone off for 20 minutes and had seven missed calls from young people. Some days you don't hear from anyone and another day it is just like everybody needs you so it is just about prioritising and thinking who needs you most at the time, because in their minds they all need you.

I had a young man who rang up and said 'I need help with my water bill' and another young lady who rung up to say her mum had set herself on fire- you just have to prioritise the need.

For some young people with learning or additional needs, support with basic self-care was needed to maintain employment.

I support him first thing in the morning to get up and ready for work. Mondays are difficult for him so on Monday I will go in at quarter past seven, assist him with his morning routine, reminding him to get showered, find his uniform, make sure he has got his wallet and keys – and that just sets him up for the rest of the week.

Transitions workers' efforts for young people went well beyond the visits, with each visit or phone call needing to be recorded but then also potentially leading to another piece of work on the phone, chasing up resources - and checking back with young people.

Given this level of need and of engagement, each young person held their own place in the life, mind and emotions of the worker. First here was the workers' notion of young people as vulnerable and deserving of all possible effort, with staff going the extra mile.

I sort of went over the hours because he needed quite a lot of extra support.

Sometimes this commitment of energy might be about their own direct work with young people, but on other occasions it might be about their role as advocates – with one describing their role as at times 'badgering' and 'hounding' other agencies to get what the young person really needed.

Sometimes the support from the transitions worker had to be intensive and practical and for the whole family when young people had returned home. The young people had learned to expect clean bathrooms, for example.

There is a lot of parenting we do of the parents. It is actually physically teaching the mum and saying 'Alright, get your gloves, get the bleach we are going to clean the bathroom' because your children are saying 'I don't like it when the bathroom is like that'. I am teaching the mum, helping the mum to raise her self esteem and a sense of parenting.

Striking in this story was this account of how young people had moved on and raised their expectations while in Break - but the mother had not, which inevitably created the potential for tension if and when they return home.

Planning and hoping for the future

In the transitions work described, the emphasis was always on looking forward, planning, hoping and working for good outcomes - with an emphasis on 'my' or 'our' young people'.

My aim is to have all my young people who I am working with now, in five years time I would love to see them all settled and living in their own accommodation and doing well.

The sense of 'attachments' between workers and young people and between young people and Break was commented on as based on the longer term nature of their and Break's involvement.

We do have an emotional attachment with the young people - well the young people have an emotional attachment to Break as well. They are not just young people who have come into care and gone through various different places - our young people come in and they tend to stay in our homes for a long time.

However challenging the work, there was a sense from all the workers that the rewards could also be significant.

I absolutely love my job and I enjoy helping and supporting them and you know the rewards are amazing.

In some cases the workers experienced quite dramatic changes in young people that helped them to maintain their confidence in their role. There was considerable satisfaction and renewed optimism when it was possible to see a 'transformation'.

His flat was absolutely disgusting, bags of rubbish, so with quite a lot of intensive support this young person is now in a spotlessly clean and newly decorated flat which is what he asked. He has had new furniture that he paid for himself, he is working full time, he is smart and presentable –the transformation in this young man is absolutely amazing.

Workers were always keen to give credit to the young people for what they had achieved, but were aware of the role they had played themselves.

I am just incredibly proud of him, but it has been perseverance, persistence and offering him that support package.

Pride and admiration for the way in which some very vulnerable young people were coping with the challenging situation of living independently was mentioned by all workers. But given how young people often lived their lives, workers' own persistence and ability to highlight the positives was important, as in this example:

You know young people are going to be out everywhere or you know live a potentially chaotic life, but you have to be persistent and not really give up – for every meeting I have not been able to meet with him there have been several which I have and have been very productive.

Identities and roles

Transitions workers varied in the language they used to describe their sense of the positive role they played; for example, 'mother hen', 'rescuer', 'stepping stone', 'safety net' and 'professional friend'.

Most of them see me as a bit of a mother hen and that I always do the best and want the best for them. I do nag a little bit because I worry about them.

And, as quoted above, young people understood that 'nagging was for our benefit'.

But these roles still needed to be adapted to different young people. Some young people wanted 'a reaffirming hug just to make sure they feel safe' from a 'motherly' worker, for example, but others may not. A 'rescuer' had accepted that the time had to come when it was necessary to say to a young person who was not complying with agreements, 'You need to meet me half way'.

Managing the more difficult cases

As the young people's narratives described, although many young people had settled and been transformed by stable good care in the children's home, other young people were still troubled and angry at the time of leaving Break, and were battling with unresolved feelings from the past and often also mental health problems. This was then reflected in chaotic and destructive lives in the immediate years after Break, which exacerbated these mental health problems and impacted on self-esteem.

In this context, accommodation was often allowed to deteriorate and other high risk young people who were into drink and drugs would gravitate to their flats. One worker described a particular young person's experiences of this process and how a pattern of psychiatric hospital care and prison had started to develop. Positive turning points for this young person after leaving Break related both to acceptance of support from a transitions worker- but also to the growing and constructive involvement of a network of other support agencies, facilitated by the Break worker.

However, it was acknowledged that there were young people for whom even the most determined and persistent involvement by transitions workers and support from other agencies seemed not to be able to help young people succeed or to end certain patterns of negative behaviour. One example was a young person who seemed unable to follow through on any of the plans that were made. A great deal of effort had been spent in arranging to take part in a particular activity that then was dropped almost immediately – hopes are raised and then dashed. On the one hand this was frustrating for the worker, but the worker was also concerned about the impact on the young person of feeling that they had let other people down. When these patterns and negative cycles persist over time, it is hard for the worker to maintain their own hopefulness for the young person as well as build the young person's sense that things can change for the better. It is that sense which is at the heart of resilience – for the young person, but also for the worker.

There were also difficult cases where a young person refused to engage with the worker in any significant way and it reached the point of having to say simply - well you know I'm here when you need me. Particular cases when even persistent care and messages of availability seemed to be failing were when there were other issues, such as enduring mental health problems, which made it difficult to fully connect with the young person. Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) was mentioned as one of the more challenging such conditions, and given the connections between BPD and histories of abuse, neglect and trauma it is not surprising to find this diagnosis, or a concern about the possibility of this diagnosis, among this group of young people. Where a young person through their mental health condition is not only unable to engage with a worker but seems actively at times to be destructive and controlling in relationships, this could get to the point where the worker would offer the young person help with practical things and engaging with psychiatric services, but had to accept that the quality of the direct relationship with transitions staff may be limited.

Because of the success of much of their work, it was not easy to accept that there were cases where they may not, at that point in time at least, be able to build a relationship or prevent a negative trajectory for the young person. This is where the hope that they and Break could be a 'safety net' in the future for young people who may not initially think they need one but at least can know it is there at any point.

Impact of the stress of transitions work

There was no doubt that although the commitment to the young people was obvious and the rewards of the transitions work were emphasised, working alongside young people with difficult histories and at a challenging stage of their lives was stressful. This stress needs to be managed - and below it can be seen that the role of the team and the manager were seen as crucial to this. But each person had to develop their own strategies, not easy when sometimes their concerns were a matter of life and death.

I am pretty good at switching off- because you need to. You can have a stressful day...the young people we work with do have an impact on your feelings and your thoughts, especially when they are sort of suicidal and you think, 'What can we do?'...It is an emotionally draining job.

Sometimes the drive for workers to meet the needs of vulnerable young people can feel as if it is taking away from their own personal life and family - either because they are mentally preoccupied or because literally the job requires them to be elsewhere. This has a particular resonance when the feelings and sense of responsibility for the vulnerable young people have become 'parental' and keeping the child in mind can mean that there are not always clear boundaries between being 'at work' and 'not at work'.

The sense of individual connection to young people and responsibility for them was described as essential for the work. But it was one reason why it had proved important that transitions workers, who work alone with young people on their often geographically widespread case load, felt they could share a transitions team responsibility for the young people.

The development of the transitions team as part of the Moving On service

The development of the transitions team over the previous three to four years was a source of pride and satisfaction among workers. There was an awareness of how long-running concerns in the organisation as a whole about what happened next for young people leaving Break had led to this very significant new development and commitment.

Comments on the improvements in working practices around transitions work focussed on the quality of their work as a team, which was attributed both to the role of the team manager and also to the mutual support from other workers that was now accepted and valued. The appointment of a manager was said to have given a sense of 'structure', which was seen as supportive by existing workers and into which new people could come.

The new work structure was in part built on the regularity and value of *individual supervision* by the manager, which gave a helpful framework for their work. It provided a set of expectations but also of boundaries that the manager would support and defend. Individual supervision was much valued - both its regularity and its educational and supportive content. But the general availability of the manager was also much valued.

He is a fantastic manager and I know that if I am ever concerned about anything, I know that he is at the end of the phone.

This 'secure base', as in all relationships, enabled workers to manage levels of stress and anxiety about young people and so to continue to be available, persistent and creative in their work.

The other key element was building a sense of being and *working together as a team*. For a group of staff whose work is spread through a large county and beyond, getting together as a group was essential. Sometimes this was just to meet up, but was also sometimes 'group supervision' where people felt able to share both their successes and their more difficult challenges honestly.

We all throw ideas into the room which can be an absolute life-saver, because sometimes you feel as though you are banging your head against a brick wall.

The 'brick wall' may be the fact that a young person seems determined not to accept help or unable to adapt to their adult life. But it was often other agencies who presented a 'brick wall' when resources for young people were being fought for.

The leadership and sense of team identity was said to have given workers more confidence, both within the organisation and in multi-professional meetings outside of Break, such as LAC reviews, housing association meetings etc.

He (Team manager) has given us a little bit more freedom to express ourselves and to challenge. Because there were a lot of times when you go along to meetings and you just feel that you were there as a representative to sort of assist or help the young person –but now you can actually go in and you can challenge some of the decisions.

The *training* staff received was also highly valued and commented on very positively as 'brilliant', 'absolutely fantastic' and a 'very comprehensive package'. New ideas and information from training was seen as important to the work, but so also was a more general learning culture, in which the importance was recognised of curiosity, questioning and a capacity to reflect on the specific needs of each young person.

It's about trying other avenues for working with young people – you do spend a quite a lot of time reflecting on how to work with our young people... They are all incredibly different.

In summing up their feelings about the work of the team, it was possible for some workers to contrast the current situation with the previous absence of a Break targeted transitions support for young people.

It was quite obvious that at 18, sometimes sooner, they were just black bags, gone, never saw them again – sometimes heard from them with a phone call. So I am very happy to be part of it, in fact I am proud to be part of the team that works with young people and gets them settled into normal life, something that young people with their own parents sometimes take for granted.

I don't think there is any other service that provides a service like we do.

Relationships between transitions and residential staff

Recognition and respect for the role of residential staff came across throughout these transitions staff interviews. It seemed that the development of the transitions service was seen as very much part of Break, rather than separated from it as other leaving care services are. This appeared to have encouraged a generally co-operative rather than competitive approach.

Transitions workers reported an increasing closeness in their working relationships with residential staff.

I think the units are exceptionally well run, the staff are all very helpful and they have not got a problem with picking the phone up and asking for help or talking to us. And we are getting more and more involved in the units, going along to team meetings, telling them where we are, who we are, what we can do.

But transitions staff were also very aware of the experience of residential staff around young people's transitions. Having become close to children during their time in their care, staff needed to know how 'their' young people were doing.

You want to know what the young person you have been working with ...how they are doing, because through all the rough nights, rough days, good times, bad times, you want to know how they have progressed, how they are doing out in the big world. And we are the link there.

It was also interesting to see how the existence of the transitions team rather than leading to a 'handing over' of the young people was seen as actually supporting a sense of continuity with Break. This led young people to stay more in touch with

residential staff and also 'gave permission' for residential staff to continue to feel involved in young peoples' lives beyond their stay.

A lot of the young people now, through the Moving on team, are feeling that they can actually get back in touch with their units, just phone them up and say, you know, 'Hello, how are you doing, it's me and I have just got my first flat' or 'I have just been offered a place at college' or 'I am about to be a dad or mum'. The units are saying that the young people are now feeling they can actually get back in touch and sometimes go back when it is appropriate and see them and have a coffee and just say hello again.

Although accounts of the working relationship between transitions and residential staff were generally very positive, there were also, as with any organisation, communications challenges; for example when a transitions worker felt they had not been informed in time of a young person's LAC review meeting.

There were also still times when clarification and negotiation around boundaries was needed in terms of roles and tasks. If asked by residential staff to take a young person somewhere, for example, a transitions worker sometimes needed to explain, 'We are not a taxi service'. But a request to take a young person to a job interview was positively welcomed, because preparing a young person for a job interview was a valuable part of their transitions role and skill set. Residential staff also commented on the need to be kept informed by transitions workers and to have clarity about roles - so this is inevitably a two-way process.

Relationships with other professionals and agencies

The relationship between transitions staff and other agencies became relevant at different stages. Initially the key professionals were within children's services, mainly the young people's social workers and leaving care workers. Transitions workers reported having some sympathy for social workers because of their large caseloads, but were aware that social workers were not able to see / were not seeing young people regularly nor were they as available to be contacted as Break workers. Social workers were said to be pleased when they realised that Break offered this service to young people.

More social workers are understanding the (transitions) role now because it is fairly new ...and they are quite thankful to have you working alongside them.

But it was also said to be essential that social workers and other support agencies were continuing to deliver the services that they were expected to deliver and that Break staff were not plugging the gaps in other services more than was absolutely necessary. This issue was said to need careful monitoring by the transitions team and the team manager because boundary issues might emerge that needed to be taken up at management levels.

Over time, other agencies such as housing, benefits offices, job centres and adult mental health services became important. At all stages the networks of help on offer to young people in the community were a key part of a young person's package of support – Break workers could not do it all. Some young people, for example, had key workers attached to their accommodation who provided a great deal of practical support.

The transitions workers' role was often not only to help identify services, but to enable and encourage the young person to seek out and use help from a range of sources. Sometimes this was at the level of supporting young people in attending GP appointments, but in other cases it might be ensuring essential antenatal care was being accessed or ensuring that young people were getting the help and treatment they needed for significant mental health problems, such as schizophrenia and severe depression. Mental health was mentioned repeatedly, and it was stressed how important it was for there to be better mental health assessments and services for all young people. There were concerns that adult services thresholds for support are high.

Views on the future of the transitions team

There was a consensus that the transitions team as part of the Moving On service was a lifeline for young people and had been a great step forward for Break as an organisation. But, perhaps inevitably, given the open ended nature of the offer to young people, there were some concerns among transitions staff about what was likely to be an increasing challenge to meet the needs of young people as their case loads grew. It was an accepted goal of the service to get to a point where young adults would become linked into personal and community based networks and so needed less time and involvement from Break. There was nevertheless a tendency for their existing caseloads to be quite demanding – at a time when they were already working with young people about to leave Break and anticipating the task of meeting their needs too.

We have got some sixteen year olds who will all leave care together. They are going to need a lot of time and attention to settle in anywhere, wherever they go, and the transition period is going to be quite difficult for them. So they are going to need a lot of time and it worries me that we do dilute it because of the number of people we have to see and also the amount of places we have to travel to.

The anxiety about a potential dilution of a service of which they were proud suggested that this is an important point in time for reflection on what realistically can be offered by Break in the coming years. Account may also need to be taken of the perceived risk that community services for young people leaving Break, which young people should gradually be transferring to, might be less available with the range of cuts in further education, adult social care and health.

5. Conclusions: providing a secure base that reduces risk and promotes resilience

For any young person to successfully move on from the teenage years into adult life requires a range of personal qualities, skills and resources from childhood, combined with a range of external relationship supports, networks, opportunities and resources available to them as a young adult.

For young people moving on from residential care into adult life, success will rely on the same personal and external qualities and resources. But for these young people, the challenge of moving on must be seen in the context of the likelihood that childhood included a history of abuse, neglect, loss and separation that will have increased anxiety and threatened the development of personal resilience qualities, such as self-esteem and a sense of agency. They are likely to have lacked a sense of themselves as loved and lovable in early childhood and moves in care may have affected educational progress and added to a sense of insecurity and lack of continuity and belonging.

The capacity to make the transition to adult life successfully for these young people will therefore depend to a large extent on whether the quality of care they receive while in residential care can reduce the impact of early harm and loss and provide opportunities to gain personal resources and increased resilience. During this period of transition and the early weeks, months and years of striving for independence in the context of employment, housing and a network of possible social relationships, young people need dedicated support. A secure base in attachment terms means a 'secure base for exploration' (Bowlby, 1988) and is relevant from infancy to adulthood, but especially in periods of transition when anxiety may be hard to manage but facing new challenges is required.

It is this pathway through early harm, residential care and a specialised, dedicated transitions service that has been the focus of this report. Here some conclusions about the different stages will be linked to implications for practice. In some cases the implications are stated in terms of recognising existing good practice in providing a secure base. In other cases, there are suggestions about ways in which practice might be further developed. Both sets of messages have implications for the wider provision of care in the residential sector.

Overall the aim of care for troubled children must be to reduce risk and promote resilience. In this report the focus has been on a number of factors that link to the concept of resilience (Rutter, 2013), all of which were in evidence to a varying degree across this group of young people and emerged from their interviews.

- *Connection*: the quality of young people's relationships e.g. with parents, relatives, children's home and transitions staff, peers and partners that provided secure base availability, acceptance and a sense of family belonging and identity.
- *Agency*: the extent to which young people felt they could exercise agency, make choices about their lives, influence events, solve problems by their own actions and feel effective.

- *Constructive activity*: how young people engaged with education, activities and the world of work, adding to their self-esteem.
- *Coherence of the narrative*: whether young people's life stories made sense to them - and indicated that past experiences had been processed and resolved to some degree so that they could think more clearly in the present and move on for the future.

Within this framework, it is important to learn lessons from young peoples' pathways to this point in their lives.

What children brought to Break

The backgrounds of children coming into a Break children's home clearly reflected the high levels of difficulty expected for children who are placed in residential care in the UK. With a few notable exceptions, children were managing a range of emotional and behaviour difficulties in the context of a range of past experiences, memories and losses which were not just harmful but were hard for them to understand. There was a range of experiences in terms of the quality of care giving / level of harm in their past, but also diversity in the age and stage at which they had first come into care and then come to Break.

Given these challenging, but also very varied histories, the quality of care received while in the residential placement was critical. It is the therapeutic nature of the care which can change the child's internal working model, the negative mental representations of themselves, other people and relationships, and enable them to regulate their emotions and behaviour. It can also introduce children to the range of skills and resources that they will need, through education, activities and developing a sense of agency to make the most of these opportunities. Connection, agency and constructive activities combine to help promote resilience and need to be the target from the beginning. We know that this is true from the developmental literature - but from this study it was evidently being enacted in a range of ways described by a number of the young people and by Break staff.

Given that context, the young people and staff agreed that the very first steps across the threshold of a Break children's home were important and required planning – and for this plan to be adapted to individual needs e.g. depending on whether a young person was coming from home, from a successful short-term placement or from a placement that was breaking down, and with a range of behaviours unique to that child.

Good practice in preparing for the arrival of the young person and then supporting their move into the children's home was described by staff and young people as including:

- Preparation of the staff for the new young person
- Preparation of the group for the new young person
- Preparation of the young person for the move while in the previous placement, including meeting the key worker, seeing photographs of the home and staff, feeling empowered through respect and making some choices
- Planned warm but relaxed / low key arrival and welcome
- Key worker role / individual relationships developed from before the move, at arrival and through subsequent days

- Careful decision making and planning of education, appropriate to the needs of the young person
- Careful decision making and planning /support for birth family contact
- Facilitating all valuable sources of continuity e.g. friendships

There were positive memories of these arrangements by young people. Sometimes the low-key ordinariness was the most helpful: 'We sat and watched TV and had a takeaway', as young people needed time and space to find room to be themselves.

Even with these arrangements in place it was recognised by staff that young people arriving may experience difficulties but also cause difficulties in the group. It was remembered by young people that even the idea of going into a new placement / residential care had prompted them to panic and run away- or for some, to be aggressive. The need for careful planning based on good information about the young person was seen as very necessary to reduce anxiety for everyone - staff and young people - and make the arrival as smooth as possible.

Additional lessons for practice at the point of admissions can be learned from this study but also from the analysis by June Thoburn, Break Trustee, of information relating to care leavers from Break. Even after some years in care there was only limited information on some Break files about key issues for the child, in particular information about their early history, about siblings and about parents. Staff also described wishing they knew more in some cases when young people arrived. Young people sometimes had only a rather vague idea about some aspects of their, admittedly complex, family histories but could not easily get answers to their questions.

It is important that as much information as possible about the child is gathered at the time of placement or soon after. The placement is commissioned from the voluntary sector by the local authority and Break staff do not have automatic access to the local authority files. However, this move into Break is a turning point for young people and whatever information is available at that point should be available to Break. Missing information should be sought out. Whether young people have a long term plan within a children's home or a plan to move to another permanent placement, *work with children* and *life story work* in an appropriate form for each child will be an important part of the therapeutic process of helping them to make sense of the past, crucial for later transitions. But *work with parents* and *facilitating positive contact* will also be assisted by staff having a knowledge and understanding of the past. As Break young people's stories illustrated, they will often try to renegotiate their birth family relationships in adulthood, sometimes when they are needy and vulnerable.

Secure base relationship experiences of young people in Break children's homes and during the transition to adult life

What emerged most strongly from this study was the shared appreciation by young people and residential and transitions staff of the importance of relationships and in particular the quality of relationships within Break that had the potential to transform young people's lives.

The young people captured the significance of their relationships with staff, talking about all the dimensions that are reflected in the Secure Base model (Schofield and

Beek 2014): the practical and emotional *availability* of staff meant that they started to build *trust*; staff *sensitivity* to their feelings helped them to make sense of and manage their feelings; feeling *accepted*, valued and becoming more successful in education, activities and employment raised *self-esteem*; and being consulted and empowered allowed young people to make choices in a collaborative and *co-operative* way, built their sense of agency and helped them to feel more *effective* and competent. All of these caregiving dimensions were reported by various young people to be operating within the children's homes, but also within the transitions staff group. Residential staff and transitions staff used very similar language and the stories they gave entirely reflected the young people's positive experiences and narratives.

The fifth Secure Base dimension - *family membership* providing a sense of *belonging* - was in some ways the most striking in the study, because seeing Break as 'family' was a less expected finding and yet was so central in young people and staff interviews and the focus group. In trying to communicate the significance of close and supportive relationships, young people very often used the language of family.

Given not only the language of family and belonging but the other positive experiences of 'parenting' reported by young people, it was possible to think about the residential placement as offering permanence. Break staff thought it was necessary to feel and think like parents- loving, caring, setting boundaries and protecting children - and giving children a family experience was an important goal of the small residential units. But it was equally important to understand how transitions staff were working hard to manage what is in many ways a more complex role - that of also playing a parental role /providing a secure base for young people who were living outside the children's home and were being expected to becoming independent adults.

Not all young people were able to resolve past experiences or to benefit from the care on offer - and those young people's accounts of Break were inevitably more conflicted. But for even the more troubled young adults, there were memories of support on offer by Break – and the role of the transitions workers for these more sad, angry and vulnerable young people could prove to be even more important.

Managing young people with challenging behaviour in Break children's homes – and through the transitions to adult life

Although there were many positive accounts of experiences in Break Children's homes, one area about which some young people raised particular concerns was their feeling at times that other residents were out of control. Staff also raised some concerns about the challenges of achieving a settled group, especially in relation to managing the arrival of new members in the group.

Given the histories of many young people coming in to Break and the fact that it has often been difficult behaviour that could not be managed in foster care that leads to a referral to residential care, it would be surprising if challenging behaviour was not an issue. However when it did occur, it was clearly a source of anxiety for some young people when difficult behaviours made them feel unsafe.

It was mainly those young people who were still vulnerable in early adulthood who named this as one of their memories. For young people who had unresolved feelings

of fear and anxiety about the aggression of others in their early childhood, and their own aggression, any sense that there were incidents when aggression was out of control would be overwhelming. The fear of what they themselves might do if they became out of control would, for some, be at least as anxiety provoking as the fear of what other people might do.

Messages for practice here inevitably affect residential and transitions staff in relation to supporting the most troubled young people at the point of moving on from Break – or reconnecting with young adults who had left Break's care a while ago. The assessment of young people as they leave and are offered the opportunity to engage with the transitions team needs care to understand the extent to which their feelings and sense of self are *resolved*. Some young people were still working on their difficult thoughts and feelings through their 20s, with parenthood and other challenges also providing opportunities for positive change, with the help of workers.

Reflecting on the different narratives that young people use may help staff think through the particular needs of each young person. A number of these more troubled young people also had significant mental health problems that transitions workers were aware of and for which they were trying to obtain appropriate support services.

The role of the transitions worker

Through this study it was clear that the *role of the transitions worker* is complex and, as it is still relatively new, continuing to evolve. The role is at its most demanding in building and maintaining a supportive relationship with young people with a wide range of needs and different ways of understanding themselves and their place in the world – as the varied pathway narratives showed. But it is also a demanding role in terms of managing that relationship in the context of a caseload of other young people and within networks of other professionals (inside and outside Break) who may also be in a helping role and /or who hold the key to resources that the young person needs.

One of the key messages of the study was that there were a series of inevitable tensions for transitions workers in their relationships with young people; between emotional and practical availability and promoting the young person's own networks in the community; between the need to act on their behalf and the need to encourage the young person to become more autonomous; and between the need to make allowances for their vulnerability while ensuring they understood and could face the realities of everyday living.

Not all young people needed very regular involvement and contact with the transitions worker, especially as they became more settled. Though even settled young people liked the idea of having a coffee with a familiar transitions worker. But for the most vulnerable young people, transitions workers were a life line as it was not easy to manage their own feelings nor to establish reliable networks in the community.

The transition service and the experience of transitions workers had undoubtedly been transformed by the formation of a coherent team, the appointment of a team manager and the benefit of supervision. The available research suggests that care

leavers rarely receive a continuously high level of support such as that on offer from Break, and are even more rarely offered support into their mid 20s.

But the special contribution of the Break transitions team was also in providing a 'joined up service', drawing on and enhancing the work of the residential workers while building the future with the young people. There were shared values and shared positive approaches to caring for vulnerable young people and a whole hearted commitment to stick with them.

The value and future of the Break transitions service

The scale and nature of the transitions service in the future (e.g. staff numbers relative to the growing number of young people who they will be supporting) will inevitably mean some difficult decisions about cost and about priorities, for Break and for local authorities with young people in placement. Outcomes seem encouraging for many young people, but the profile of young people at Break may change and the long-term nature of placements may also change. This would have an impact on the kind of transitions service that is needed, but also on the extent to which Break children's homes will have had time to offer the therapeutic level of care and relationships over time which had clearly been of great help to a number of young people in our sample.

There is no doubt that the development of the transitions service has demonstrated the value of the introduction of a service which is part of Break and provides both continuity and support in the community for young people leaving Break. The role of the manager, the team working together, the workers' relationships with residential staff, the organisational commitment to extending their sense of responsibility for young people into adulthood have all provided a very positive framework for the relationship based work with young people. What is more, the presence of the transitions service seems to have had a positive impact on the work of the children's homes, where it is now possible to contemplate young people's future with more confidence that support will be available. This has been an impressive and innovative development which increased the sense of continuity from childhood to adulthood.

Implications for permanence and transitions in residential care

The issues raised in the introduction regarding residential care remain challenging in policy and practice. The combination of uncertainty about the balance of risk and benefits in residential care are inevitably set in the context of costs and the increasingly challenging financial constraints on local authorities.

This means that for many children, residential care will be a short-term option. However, the nurturing quality of residential care and the continuity of care and relationships through the leaving care period described in this study are of wider relevance. All the following groups of children need to be taken into account in planning residential and leaving care services.

- For some children, short-term or relatively short-term placements for children will lead to a move to a permanent placement with a foster family or a birth family member. The quality of nurturing *relationships*, a secure base and a sense of security and belonging experienced while in residential care is clearly of benefit to children if it has enabled them to settle in school, in peer groups and in

relationships enough to move to a family setting. Similarly, this kind of *transition* may also be actively helped by sensitivity to young people's sense of loss and need for continuity, with the potential for residential staff involvement in supporting foster and birth families with the care of the young person.

- For some children placed at 15 or 16, those short-term or relatively short-term placements will be followed by a transition from a children's home to some form of semi-independent or independent living arrangement as part of the process of leaving care. As we have learned from the research on long-term foster care (Schofield 2003) and from this study, late placement during adolescence need not be all about the moving on / leaving care as it sometimes appears in care plans. A 15, 16 or even 17 year old who finds a place and relationships that enable them to feel safe and secure, to re-enter education or training, to resolve harm experienced from early childhood and, for some, harm experienced by moves in care, can achieve transformational outcomes - especially if the relationships and quality of relationships and support for engagement with pro-social activities, education and employment continue through into their 20s.
- And for some children, residential care placements beginning in early adolescence may last through to leaving care. We know from other studies (Dickens et al, 2014) that there are care plans agreed at LAC reviews for children to remain in residential care through childhood – or just to remain in residential care with no plans to explore other options. There will also be some children with a plan for birth or foster family options that do not materialise who also end up remaining in a children's home through to leaving care. For all of these children, growing through adolescence into adulthood, the children's home will be their home. Staff will be providing therapeutic parenting on a daily basis and children will need a sense of belonging, stability of care and love. Birth family members may be a significant part of the young person's life, but it is likely that continuity of care and a secure base to support young people's emotional and social development is provided by residential staff.

There are two key messages of the study for all young people having short or longer term periods in residential care. The first is that warm, loving, secure base relationships are necessary for children from backgrounds of loss and harm AND are possible even where staff work shifts, take holidays and share the care of children with a professional staff group.

The second is that continuity of relationships and care into early adulthood - both in terms of a transitions service that is linked to the residential home provider and ongoing relationships with residential staff can be a valuable option. Although 'staying put' in residential care in terms of continued residence or the provision of accommodation by the residential care agency should continue to be considered as an important option (National Children's Bureau et al, 2014), the model of an integrated transitions team in the context of a shared culture of long term commitment could be a positive option for young people.

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