

"The care system is a daunting place for a child to grow, controlled by corporate parents who are fundamentally strangers to you. It's possibly the loneliest place for a child to grow, we come from homes of abuse and neglect, and although we escape the abuse, we are repeatedly neglected and overlooked.

The ECLCM team have a strong campaign for raising the residential care leaving age from 16 to 21 and I passionately support this myself. In my time in care I lived in foster placements, residential and semi-supported accommodations. In each place I lived, I felt as if there was a countdown. It was never secure, it was always a question of "What am I going to do after I leave here?" and "Will I be homeless again?". These thoughts go through most children's heads daily in the care system, and you may not think that's important but the effect that has on a child is tremendous.

You're made to feel as if you're a burden, you'll be dragged from pillar to post until you're old enough to be dropped at housing ready to declare yourself homeless at 18. The aim of most Local Authorities is to treat their care kids the way they'd be treated if they still resided at home, to make us equal to every other child. You tell me, what child gets sent to declare themselves homeless on their 18th birthday? A day which is meant to be a huge celebration. The transition of child to adult. Let's be realistic though, when midnight struck on the day of your 18th birthday, did you feel this sudden independence? Did you magically grow into a fully independent adult?

No, I didn't think so... but this is expected from care leavers, whilst others would be at home getting ready for their first night out or a birthday celebration. Their biggest birthday, turns into a day of despair and misery, the anxiety of declaring themselves homeless, packing up their belongings with no hope or prospect of a future.

My last placement before I turned 18 was the one place I'd ever been able to call home. Years of moving from one placement to another, yet this placement happened to be my longest. 2 years. 2 years in a placement is extremely long for most care kids, to you or the outside world, it seems like nothing but when you're moved monthly or even weekly, anything over a year is a long time. I'd become settled and for once I felt somewhat 'normal'. Care is an extremely lonely place, a place of solidarity. I was estranged from my family, we never spoke after I was placed in care. The staff became almost role models to me. I looked up to them and trusted them, I guess it was the closest thing to family I'd had.

That's where I met Alex, another care kid, we were so different. Like every child, no one is the same and in care you come across so many different people and everyone needs to be treated as an individual because we are not the same, the only similarity a lot of kids share is the fact they're in care. We've all been through different childhoods and they shape you differently as an individual. When Alex first moved in, I referred to her as the 'good posh student', she was well-kept, smart and independent. She looked at me as if I was a chav, I'd been in care a long time, my clothes were of poor quality, my general appearance was shabby. Once getting to know each other we realised our first opinions were the complete opposite. She's grown up on a council estate with nothing, where as I had grown up in a nice area and I'd been well educated and well-kept before entering the system. I wasn't deprived as a child, not like everyone expects. Instead I'd been through trauma and abuse. It just shows, that you can't judge a person based on their care status, we're not all bad kids and each of our upbringings

are individual, the healing and recovery from them are also going to be different for each child. I think that's something that needs to be acknowledged a lot more, as a lot of us are branded the same and we're not seen as individuals.

Moving on, a year into my placement there, I was handed my 28-day notice, 6 months before my 18th birthday. Originally, this was down to funding, they said they could no longer afford for me to reside there and I would have to move to somewhere more affordable. Which happened to be some run-down bedsits they owned, they explained there would be less support there. There were no staff on site and there would just be some checks every now and then. I was petrified, this was my home and I didn't feel ready to leave and be alone yet. This is when it clicked inside me, the system was wrong and damaging and I knew I would do everything in my power to prove this.

The days following were full of phone calls and complaints, trips to housing options and signing on the homeless list. That's when I started some research and I found out that whilst a complaint was in process, they would be unable to move me. So that's what I did, I stayed up every night, researching and writing email after email to the Director, I would write maybe 2-3 a day. It was destroying my mental health, I wasn't eating or sleeping, my only focus was finding a way to keep my home, and that was at the forefront of my mind every single hour of the day.

Eventually, I made them crack and on Sunday morning days before the end of my notice, the placement was frozen. That meant that until the complaint was fully resolved the Local Authority couldn't move me, and there was no way I was stopping with my complaint. I'd gained my voice and I demanded to be heard. A few months later, we received a phone call off social services Alex and I were invited to a meeting the following day, I had become very sceptical of the Local Authority by this point, I had no trust in them. I knew that we were leaving, but no one listened. That night was possibly one of the worst nights I experienced, I was full of fear and doubt, I had no idea what was going to happen to us next. The following morning, our social workers arrived with a bunch of bin bags. We had 2 hours to pack up and leave. No explanation, no plan but just an immediate end to everything we knew. Within seconds, our lives as we knew them were taken from us.

Months on and we're doing a lot better, we'd both been moved to the bedsits that were ran by the Local Authority. They were dirty and damaged, the conditions were appalling, there was no way they were fit for people to live in, never mind the children in their care. I still to this day will never understand how they left us there, my bathroom had no ceiling or light, I had to shower in the dark, but they believed that was a suitable accommodation.

However, we were extremely lucky in one sense, because they did provide us a lot of support at first. It was on the basis that if you work with them you get helped and rewarded. Alex thrived from this, she got a job within the council itself and she just grew, it was incredible to watch. As for me, I got into University to do a Law degree but my relationship with the workers at the bedsits became very rocky and the help I received suddenly came to a stop.

The idea of the bedsits is a great idea, they prepare you for proper independence and they accommodated post 18's. They only work if you work with them though, but that's

not possible for everyone. Relationships break down and they're not forgiving, I tried to work things out with them, to continue accessing support but it's been months of being ignored now and now I don't have that support. They showed me how to bid on flats though, and now I have a new build flat and so does Alex. So now, although I'm alone and isolated from support again, I'm in a place I never thought I'd be and I'm just grateful to have a roof over my head that isn't controlled by the Local Authority.

Not every care leaver is as lucky as us though, not even in the sense of gaining these new build flats', but we had each other. The pain of being alone eats away at so many care leavers, it lowers their self-esteem and confidence and essentially, they can feel rejected and isolated from the rest of society. We were so blessed to have met each other, everything we went through we shared the experience together, we helped each other when no one else would help us. It's been difficult, harder than you'd ever believe but we knew how much it hurt to be given up on, so we never gave up on each other. Today finally we can say we've reached the point where we're happy. She'll cook dinner every now and then because I can't cook to save my life and we go out to the cinema, shopping, for food and we just do things we could never do back then. We saved to go to Malta next year, and we just generally appreciate everything we have. We came from nothing and now we can do anything we put our minds too.

This isn't the case for every care leaver though, and I couldn't imagine not having Alex there by my side throughout it all. I doubt I'd be where I am now without that.

To any Care Kid or Leaving Care Child out there just know that however bad things are now, and however bleak your future seems, things do change. It might not be now, it might not be for years yet. I spent so many years wishing I wasn't here anymore and now, I'm grateful for the life I have and if I could have seen a future for myself I would have never risked my life because once you're gone, there's no coming back. You may think your voice won't be heard or acknowledged but you need to use it, we use our voices until we're heard and the more people that help stand up to the governments legislation and the Local Authorities themselves, then the more chance of change there is. Change will come. Just hold on in there."