



My name is Sian Baker, I work at The Voice Project as a Consultation and Engagement Coordinator, and over the last several months I have been working with our young people to gain insight into their care experience. The young people who have spoken to me as part of this project have been open and honest about what being in care has meant to them and their lives for their past, present as well as their future.

With their permission, I would now like to share their stories with you...

Marissa's Story

Marissa is a twenty-year-old, who, at the time of this discussion had been living in supported accommodation for the last two years. I spoke with Marissa straight after a forum group she attended, and despite the fact that going from a group session into an in-depth 1-1 chat which must have been taxing, we spent a couple of hours talking about her care experience and the journey she had been on as a result. Under the pseudonym of Marissa, she also discussed and reflected on what life as a 'Care Leaver' has been like and the support she has received as well as her hopes and aspirations for the future. Throughout the conversation we spoke about the impact Marissa's care experience has had on her past, present and future, as well as what advice she would give to her younger self as well as a young person entering care for the first time.

'It's like starting your life again'

Before coming into care in 2014, Marissa recalled moving around a lot within her family; staying with different family members for a couple of weeks before moving on to the next. However, when she came into care, Marissa said that she moved to a 'completely different family' feeling that she had to start her life again, not knowing anyone in her new area. From Marissa's comments, this seemed to be the biggest impact on her at this time of her life, with her telling me that she could not go and see her friends but instead had to make new ones. Marissa recalled this being especially challenging because of moving at age 14, just starting year 10 of high school. Despite this Marissa claimed that

she felt lucky compared to others saying, 'obviously you get kids that are like in completely different areas to where they were beforehand'. When speaking about her time in foster care, Marissa shared that she lived in one foster home but that despite them being 'lovely people' she did not 'give them the chance they wanted or deserved' at the time, and often acted up in front of them.

'I loved my Independent Reviewing Officer! Like I couldn't have had a better one'

Marissa reflected that in general her experience of working with Social Workers has been positive, sharing that her first Social Worker would 'be in contact with me all the time and make sure everything was good for me'. She went on to say that the second Social Worker she worked with was also good but that she did not connect with her on the same level as the previous Social Worker. When looking back, Marissa recalled that both Social Workers left their job to go on maternity leave, which led to a third Social Worker being introduced to Marissa during her last review meeting shortly before her 18th birthday. She shared that she 'met her once and that was it'. Whilst reflecting on her last review meeting, Marissa shared that she 'loved' her Independent Reviewing Officer; 'I couldn't have had a better one'. Marissa described that her Independent Reviewing Officer 'made sure everything was alright', challenged when things could be better as well as giving clear timescales for when actions should have been put into place and when this would be reviewed. Marissa said that her Independent Reviewing Officer 'made it clear what she wanted' which was a real positive for her and her experience.

When asked working relationships with other professionals, Marissa shared that the support she received when living in semi-independent accommodation was positive, saying that she had support to 'make sure I budget and they showed me stuff, like how to cook' which was clearly important to Marissa when she was making the transition to independent living. Marissa also reflected on her relationship with her Personal Advisor saying that she has not got on with them as much as she had the Social Workers she has worked with in the past. Overall, Marissa shared that she has 'never had a bad experience', and the biggest challenge she has faced has been 'not getting on with people as much as another professional'.

"There is definitely stigma around being in care"

When reflecting on the positives of her care experience, Marissa shared that it has allowed her to meet other people who were also in care, including a friend she had known for a number of years, but never known they were in care. This shared experience gave them another level to their bond. Another positive was school, and in particular the way that teachers treated Marissa; she felt they were nicer to her. Although this could not be said of her peers at school. Marissa told me that 'nowadays you can tell people... that you're gay or transgender and stuff like that, but Care Leavers is still a really taboo subject I think'. As we discussed this more Marissa shared that this was not an experience she had with her friends, telling me; 'I was still as much a part of their friendship group as

I would have been', but rather that it was her other peers where this was more of an issue. Marissa told me that in her experience school peers 'would see it [being in care] as a weakness 'cos high school is horrible'. Marissa spoke of other challenges she has experienced in relation to her care experience, which often centre around the conversations she has had to have in the past, and example being seen with her Foster Carer and being faced with questions of whether that was her parent saying; 'it's a bit annoying 'cause then you have to go out of your way and say that you're not related'. Similarly, Marissa shared that she has been asked for details about her parents at the doctors, saying that can be 'really awkward' for her.

Marissa also spoke to me about her experience of being labelled as a 'Looked after Child' and now as a 'Care Leaver'. She shared that she has different feelings towards the two labels; when considering the label of 'Looked after Child', Marissa told me that 'it put a lot of pressure into me thinking 'Okay, you're not normal 'cause you don't associate with your family', you're looked after by someone else and stuff like that'. Marissa said that among other young people she knows who have had care experience suffered with bullying in their formative years as being in care was seen as a weakness. She said that 'there is definitely a stigma around being in care'. When considering the period of time where she changed status from a 'Looked after Child' to a 'Care Leaver', Marissa said she felt no effect from this, but that now she finds it much easier to open up to people; 'I can say 'Oh yeah, I'm a Care Leaver'. Marissa went on to say that she feels much more open and able to talk to people about this now rather than when she was in care, but that it is hard to explain why this is. As she contemplated this, Marissa said 'it feels like the term Care Leavers feels like 'yeah this happened, but I'm coming out of that stage now', which feels 'liberating' to her.

Marissa was also able to reflect on some of the opportunities her care experience has afforded her, telling me 'it's given me loads!'. Marissa spoke to me about some of these experiences, saying that 'they're opportunities that I could never have been a part of if I wasn't a Looked after Child in the first place'. Not only this, but Marissa also reflected on the additional support she received in school, including the Pupil Premium which afforded her extracurricular activities, and which said that she 'probably would never have passed my Maths GCSE' without.

'Once the novelty of having friends round all the time has gone, like it definitely gets a lot more lonely'

As our discussion moved towards her experience leaving care, Marissa shared that she feels that she moved 'a little bit earlier than most people'; three months after her seventeenth birthday. Marissa candidly shared that because she had issues with her Foster Carers, she 'wanted to get out as soon as possible', and because this happened before she turned eighteen, she moved into semi-independent accommodation. When reflecting on this transition, Marissa told me that it was more difficult than she first anticipated, saying that at first she had the 'excitement on having your own flat' but that there was also the risk of being taken advantage of. She reflected on the time soon after she moved into semi-independent accommodation and would 'have my friends until 3 o'clock in the morning', which although luckily not the case for her, can be where some people have gone wrong when moving into independence. Marissa shared with me her knowledge of people that have 'realised that they can have their own flat, they can have their friends round and partying all the time and then get kicked out'. Despite the shock moving into semi-independent accommodation

provided to her system, Marissa said that there were a lot of positives to this move, including that there were no rules and curfews that she had to abide by, and that she was 'free' to do as she pleased. Despite the freedom this allowed Marissa, she did reflect that after a while 'the loneliness kicks in' and that once the novelty of 'having friends round all the time' had worn off, this is the feeling that she was left with. Alongside this, during this time, Marissa also became more aware of the additional responsibilities she had gained when moving into independence. Marissa gave examples where she had to become more dependent on herself rather than others, including making sure she got up at a certain time in the morning.

In terms of the support she received throughout her care journey, Marissa reported this to be positive, sharing that she went from having the support from her Foster Carers to the support from Support Workers when living in semi-independent accommodation, to now having continued support as she is currently living in supported accommodation. When discussing this with Marissa, she gave a very well-considered reflection of the positives of the support she has received over the years, but equally why this may make it 'a bit more difficult when I actually move into a community'. Because of always having support on hand when needed, Marissa shared that she is very nervous of the move to full independence, where she will determine her own success, for example Marissa shared that she will have to remind herself to 'make sure your flat's clean, make sure you've got electric all the time'.

Marissa shared that she has not found it easy to start working with another professional in her life, and that she has struggled to get on with their Personal Advisor at times, sharing 'I don't feel like I can talk to them a lot'. Marissa reflected that she has got support from her Personal Advisor when needed, but that she has felt 'awkward' when seeking this, feeling like she cannot talk to them about 'anything and everything'; whereas this has not been the case with other professionals that have been in her life. Generally speaking, Marissa says that she will ask other people in her life for support before she approaches her Personal Advisor. Marissa shares that as she knows a number of young people who have a varied level of care experience, she knows that this is sometimes the case and that there are some young people who have less positive experiences with the professionals they work with, giving the example of where multiple Social Worker changes can be disruptive to building and maintaining good working relationships with those that are there to support you. Overall Marissa shared with me that she doesn't think she has had any major issues with the support she has experienced since leaving care, and that her Personal Advisor is good at their job but that she has struggled to 'emotionally connect' with them as she would have hoped.

When asked about who Marissa would go to for support, she told me that she will 'usually go to her Aunty and Uncle for advice'. Her relationship with her Aunty and Uncle has been constant in her life and has spent time with them over the years, sharing that now she lives independently she has more control over when this is, saying; 'I can arrange to see them or go over whenever I want to' rather than having this set for a specific weekend which was the case when she was living with her Foster Carers. Marissa says that although she doesn't see them as often as she used to, she speaks with them on the phone which she prefers, and this control has allowed her to maintain the relationship on her terms as she is often busy with other commitments.

'A lot of the time like there's a stigma around like "ah it's your fault why you're in care" but it's not. It never is. It's never their fault'

When asked what one piece of advice she would give to her fifteen-year-old self, Marissa replied 'don't be so cocky', quipping that this has, on occasion, gotten her in to trouble. If speaking with a young person who was coming into care for the first time, Marissa said that she would tell them that being in care is not a bad thing and that it is not their fault. She said that 'a lot of the time there's a stigma around 'it's your fault you're in care' but it's not. It never is. It's never their fault'.

Marissa shared with me that in five years' time she hopes to be living in her own flat 'maybe with a cat' and that she hopes to find opportunities to work within Children's Services, saying; 'I just want to make things better'. When summing up her care experience, Marissa told me that it was not what she initially expected, which was that it was going to be like 'Tracy Beaker', but that it had also been an empowering experience which had been nice in parts.

'Empowering, nice and not what I expected'

I would like to thank Marissa again for spending a couple of hours with me and for sharing her story and experiences with me with such openness and honesty. She gave me a real insight into her care journey and, in doing so, demonstrated how she has adapted in challenging circumstances and hopes to use this experience to improve future services. I wish her all the best for the future.