
Call to Action

TACT's Manifesto for Children in Care
and Care Leavers 2017 – 2020





Introduction

Children and young people who leave the care system can go on to have positive and successful lives. But far too often their life chances are disrupted because the state is not a good enough parent.

Stability, consistency, care and love are the vital ingredients of family life. They are the essential foundation for academic or vocational success.

The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT) is the largest fostering and adoption charity in the UK. For the last 24 years, TACT has helped provide loving homes for vulnerable children, and has served as a voice for children in care.

That is why we have issued this manifesto, which asks policymakers and public servants to bring the needs of children in care and care leavers to the forefront of social policy.

TACT works with its children, young people and foster carers, and with its colleagues in the voluntary sector, local authorities, and local and national politicians, to develop and implement policy.

The following proposals were shaped by the children, young people and foster carers at TACT, and are designed to help the state fulfil its responsibility as corporate parent to so many vulnerable children.

The voice of children and young people should always be heard in the design of policy for children in care.

TACT's 10 policies for Children in Care and Care Leavers

1. Children's assessments should be asset, not deficit, based
2. Improve placement stability
3. Fully funded non-selective education services and free university tuition
4. Make mental health support more available and accessible
5. Extend the 'Local Offer' to asylum seeking care leavers
6. Children before profit
7. Invest in, and respect, foster carers
8. Improve the personal adviser service for care leavers
9. Extend equal support to all options for permanent placement
10. Give 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote

TACT POLICY #1

Children's assessments should be asset, not deficit, based

At TACT we have been consistently surprised at the way children and young people are described when they are referred to our service.

Too many children and young people are referred with deficit-based accounts of who they are. They haven't got this, they won't do that, they simply aren't what they should be. Contrast this negative – and frankly dispiriting – approach with the adoption service, which positively promotes the child or young person they are trying to find a permanent home.

It is important that children and young people are assessed in a balanced and asset-based manner. That would allow potential foster carers to be aware not only of the challenges a child may bring, but also of their passions, their resourcefulness and their potential.

- **New guidelines should be set for local authority assessments, involving input from the children and young people themselves, with a requirement to focus on strengths as well as needs**



TACT POLICY #2

Improve placement stability

Having a stable place to call home is important for the development of any child or young adult. But children in care are notoriously susceptible to frequent placement moves.

At TACT children frequently report their experience of multiple moves. One young person reported he had gone through eight placements in four years. Children complain of getting less than 24 hours' notice of a move and no information about where they are going.

Steps should be taken now to improve the chances of children and young people getting the right placement first time.

One starting point is monitoring local authorities and fostering agencies for their ability to deliver stable care.

The Children's Commissioner launched in April 2017 a Stability Index to measure the stability of the lives of children that are looked after by local authorities. Consideration should be given to involving looked after children in the assessment and recruitment of potential foster carers.

Problems also arise when children leave foster care. To smooth transition the Government has promoted 'staying put' arrangements, enabling care leavers to remain with their former foster carers after they turn 18 and until age 21, helping prepare for adulthood and limit the risks of social exclusion. But young people questioned about Staying Put frequently asked for it to be extended to age 25.

The current high cost of accommodation presents special difficulties. Sufficient quality affordable local accommodation needs to be commissioned for care leavers. Local authorities need commissioning strategies to find accommodation local to the area that care leavers have grown up in, so that already slender family and community lifelines are not weakened still further.

- **Fully fund Staying Put and extend it to age 25**
- **Implement the Stability Index**
- **Involve looked after children in the recruitment and training of foster parents**
- **Commission good quality local accommodation for move on**

TACT POLICY #3

Fully funded non-selective education services & free university tuition

When we interviewed 82 children and young people and over 90 foster carers about education, one key finding was just how frequently children in care experience significant gaps in their education.

And, while the Pupil Premium can help address deficits with extra tuition, IT equipment and books, we found that knowledge of the Pupil Premium was patchy, with some young people not even aware of its existence or what it can be used for.

What is more, children in care are likely to be among those pupils hit by the Government's new Fair Funding for Schools formula. We anticipate that looming pressures like inflation and extra staff costs will drown regional increases from the 'fair funding' proposals, whilst local authorities that lose out under the fair funding scheme will get a double whammy with the Government's funding freeze.

Per pupil funding is likely to go down in real terms over the next parliament, so those that benefit most from extra-curricular activities, breakfast clubs, afterschool clubs, day trips and extra support will be the hardest hit of all.

The proposals to lift the ban on new Grammar schools in favour of schools selection will work against children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, not least those who have missed prolonged periods of time at school as a consequence of care proceedings and placement moves.

Finally, when children in care work harder and catch up, conversations about choosing a university typically focus not on their educational needs or the reputation of the institution (Oxbridge, Russell Group etc) but on the willingness of the universities to waive a proportion of the tuition fees.

For those young people leaving care there are also obstacles to getting employment or even accessing national programmes like the apprenticeship schemes.

- **Abolish the Fair Funding Formula**
- **No return to selection**
- **Waive or pay university tuition fees or a guaranteed apprenticeship for every care leaver**

TACT POLICY #4

Improve placement stability

The mental health of looked-after children is significantly poorer than that of their peers.

The reason is not hard to find. Looked after children and care leavers are some of the most vulnerable groups in our society. Most looked after children have experienced either abuse or neglect, and many have suffered both.

Children entering the care system will still be living in the immediate aftermath of these traumatic early experiences. Too many foster families are dealing with the outcomes of this trauma without the proper clinical support

- **Introduce priority of assessment for children in care with emerging mental health issues**
- **Consider merging CAMHS into local authority children's services**
- **Provide more psychological support for foster parents to give them strategies for helping children recover from trauma**
- **Increase the availability of tier four Mental Health support for children in care across the UK**

TACT POLICY #5

Extend the Local Offer to asylum seeking care leavers

The Children and Social Work Act has improved services to care leavers, enabling continued support to the age of 25 through the development of a 'Local Offer'. Yet if you are an unaccompanied asylum seeking care leaver, then you will not have an automatic right to this continued support.

You will not qualify for the Staying Put scheme, benefits, or student loans. If you go on to higher education, you will be treated as an overseas student and charged fees which are three times higher than for others so university is not available to you.

Without meaningful support post 18, yet not granted a final immigration decision & not able to work or attend higher education we are making unaccompanied children vulnerable and open to exploitation. The immigration system is a mess and not fit for purpose. Vulnerable children should not be left without support because of this.

We want to reopen the debate on support for asylum seeking care leavers and improve their outcomes, whether they remain here or return to their country of origin.

- **Care leaving services should include unaccompanied asylum seeking care leavers in the category of care leavers eligible for the 'Local Offer'**



**TACT POLICY #6****Children before profit**

Recent research shows that in 2014-15, eight commercial fostering agencies made around £41m profit between them from providing foster placements to local authorities, after allowances for foster carers, staffing costs and support services.

Who did this money go to? Well, according to Corporate Watch, one company, Graphite Capital, made £14.4m on shareholder loans from the National Fostering Agency (nfa.co.uk), which it owned, and then sold it on. The Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan accrued £13m from its ownership of Acorn Care and Education. And Sovereign Capital took £1.9m in 2014 alone from company Partnerships in Children's Services, a group that comprises several foster care agencies. Recently NFA purchased Acorn in a deal worth £400 million

In England and Wales the Government has made it illegal for child protection services to be run by private for profit companies. It makes no sense that profit making is then allowed in the provision of foster care placements.

• The government to conduct reform of the foster care market to end profit making from the care of vulnerable children

TACT POLICY #7**Invest in, and respect, foster carers**

Foster carers are the experts on the child they are looking after. They should have full delegated authority for all decisions about the child unless there is a valid reason not to do so. They should also be involved in all planning for their child, including care proceedings. It is bizarre that family courts make life changing decisions about children without hearing from the people who often know them best, their foster parents

The cost of raising a family under austerity is challenging. We must make sure that such costs do not become a disincentive for families with loving homes to become foster carers.

Many local authorities already offer their foster carers exemption from council tax. Yet there are many local authorities who are unable to participate in such a scheme as they can simply not afford the cost.

This all too often makes the council tax exemption unworkable, as many foster carers live outside the borough or council area they provide services for.

• Foster carers to be treated on the experts on their child and involved in all planning and decision making and heard directly from in care proceedings

• Free Council Tax for all Foster Carers to be paid for by Central Government

• Raise tax threshold to ensure all foster carers do not pay tax on fostering fees and allowances

TACT POLICY #8

Improve the personal adviser service for care leavers

Children and young people leaving should be given the option of having their current or former foster carer as their special adviser.

If a young person has a positive relationship with someone they trust, then why would we introduce a different professional into their lives?

The Children and Social Work Act has made it a requirement of legislation that care leavers can access a personal adviser up until they reach the age of 25.

In TACT's experience, once a young person leaves care they are highly likely to keep in contact with their foster carer. It makes sense for the former foster carer to continue their role as adviser. This would enable the foster carer and care leaver to continue this relationship with the financial support that will enable them to do this

There is currently no grant from central to local government to fund local authorities for the extension of support for personal advisers for care leavers.

- **Foster carers to be included in the category of personal advisers**
- **The Government should make provision to fully reimburse local authorities for their personal adviser service**



TACT POLICY #9

Extend equal support to all options for permanent placement

The most common permanence options for children who cannot remain with their birth parents are adoption, foster care, special guardianship or other arrangements within extended families.

For some children, residential care is the best permanence option. It is vital that these options are given equal attention and that we do not artificially separate out different options or elevate one above the others.

Multiple placements are toxic to children and generally lead to more outcomes. Regulations and requirements to reduce multiple placement moves are required.

- **All permanence placements, including adoption, residential care, foster care returning home or special guardianship, to have access to the same appropriate support**
- **Once a child has experienced 3 placement moves a panel should be convened to ensure that their next placement is permanent. This panel should be chaired by the DCS or the Cabinet member for children**
- **Gold-standard permanence to be achieved for all children in care or on the edge of care**

TACT POLICY #10

Give 16 and 17 year-olds the right to vote

Every one of the three main political parties tell us that the voice of children and young people is important to them when shaping children's policy. Yet these voices are rarely reflected in their respective electoral manifesto pledges. This has led some commentators to put this down to the fact that young people do not have the vote and therefore election pledges are directed to the older voter.

Furthermore, the UK has dropped from 11th to 156th in global rankings for children's rights on the Kids Rights Index 2017 receiving low scores across all six indicators, attributed to increased discrimination against Muslim, gypsy and refugee children.

Ensuring that young people can vote at 16 years of age will generate interest, a greater awareness of politics at an earlier age, and more engagement with democratic processes and structures.

The right to vote at 16 years of age will serve to empower younger people including looked after children and care leavers, with the right to influence decisions that will affect their lives.

- **All 16 and 17-year-old UK citizens to be given the automatic right to vote**





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