

Care Leavers' Experiences

From Care to Somewhere

Gina Larrisey



I first went into foster care at four months old and I was in and out of the care system including assessment centres and hostels up until I was eighteen. For many years I was extremely affected by my childhood. I believed it was my fault I was in care and was often told I had made my mother ill. I was told if I couldn't behave a certain way then I could not live at home. This was like torture. I grew up thinking the world hated me so I hated everybody back.

I was around twenty six years old when I reached a point where I started to need some answers about my life. I was fostered at a young age so my memory of it all was hazy. It felt like pieces of jigsaw that I need to put together to complete the picture. Without knowing about that part of my life I couldn't move forward. I had asked my Mum at some point who had fostered me but her answer was that she didn't know. I was shocked and upset that she didn't know where I had been and who was looking after her child.

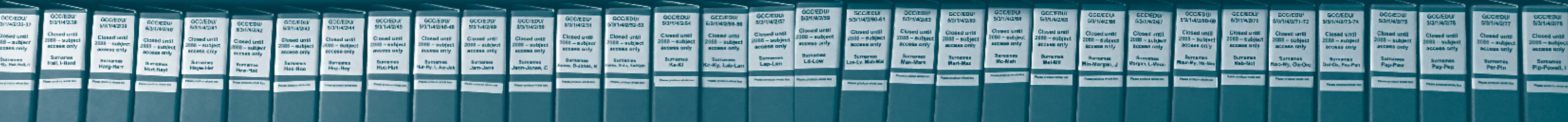
That is when I wrote to Social Services requesting my care file. I retrieved an address to write to them by popping down to my local council building and asking how I went about it. I was told it could be up to three months to hear back but it only took a few weeks whilst

the information was gathered. I was then invited to a day centre to view it. A lovely social worker sat with me, as did my partner who greatly supported me at the time. Two great big brown envelopes were brought to me containing my life. I sat down and read through a lot of it straight away but there was too much to read all at once. There were little yellow labels to mark the most distressing parts. Some things I already knew, some had been dormant memories, others were shocking revelations.

Reading through it confirmed to me what I needed to know. I was not at fault for what had happened to me in my life, however, I realised that it was no one else's fault either. The social worker who sat with me was very supportive and very sensitive. I have always appreciated her for that and never regretted receiving my file even though it was a huge thing to deal with.

We can choose to let our past beat us and blame it for everything that goes wrong in our lives. That would be easy but it is up to us to make the right decisions and not to let our past destroy our future. I know that despite all the wrong choices and messes I did make that I am a survivor.





Where was *my* life story?

Linda Whyte



I am 41 years old and spent five years in the care system. I use the word care with huge reluctance, as it was only in my last placement, a children’s home, where I did feel cared for.

I did not want to access my records to try to find answers, as I felt I knew the reasons for being taken into care. I was hoping there would be far more personal items, like photos, and more details about my identity. Instead it was all case reviews and negative information, which were everyone else’s opinions.

What did shock and distress me was the horrible tone of the language social workers used in the late 70s early 80s. I wish that someone had warned me. I don’t think I would have taken it so personally if someone had said that was how they wrote at the time. Now I would hope they write differently. Also, they misunderstood so many of my family relationships, particularly my relationship with my dad. This has a huge impact on how decisions were made about me, and shaped my whole experience. You need to get the right information about family connections, as what you write can have the power to influence other people’s opinions. My memories of things in my file are not the same as what is written.

The life story work that was done with me was not my story, only that of my social worker’s opinions. So it was of no value to me, and in fact it was harmful. If you are doing life story work, which is good practice, it needs to be meaningful to the child and something they can connect with. The child should decide how they want to do it and be involved. It doesn’t always have to be a book, it could be a memory box to put things in that mean something or relate to something. It could be going to visit important places. It’s a very individual thing. Once you’ve had a negative experience with life story work it’s hard to engage with it in the future.



A long and arduous search

Rosie Walter



I went into the care of the National Children’s Home (NCH) at the age of two. I was placed in a Children’s Home in Swansea, and stayed there until I was twelve. I then returned to London to my mother’s care for three months, before being placed in another Children’s’ Home in Alresford in Hampshire. I remained in the care of the NCH until I was thirteen and nine months, after which time, I was placed in the care of Lambeth Social Services, where I remained until I was eighteen.

As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to know more about my life. I especially wanted to know about my Father, whom I had never met, and who was rarely spoken about, either by staff in the Children’s Home, or by my mother.

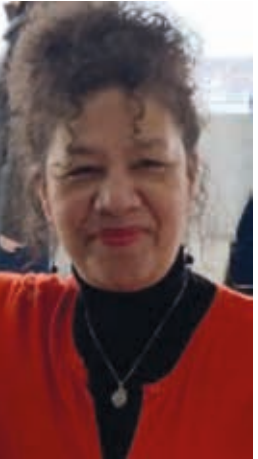
At the age of about twenty three, I requested to see my NCH files. I was told they would be brought to a local Family Centre run by NCH, in Clapham. I was not offered any advice, or support, in terms of what type of information the files may contain, and any possible impact this may have on me. The social worker who brought the files to the centre said that he was concerned about some of the language used in the files in terms of my ethnicity. There were four very large black folders. I sat in a room for a couple of hours, and read what I could. It wasn’t possible to read all the information as the social worker had said he would be returning in a couple of hours to collect the files.

Years went by, and I still had a yearning to want to read more of my files. About ten years later I again approached NCH to request access to my records. I was told that the files were now in the archives in Scotland, and that I would need to complete a form and send it to them, which I did. I heard nothing back. A few years later I contacted NCH again. After several months I was invited to the then NCH head offices in Highbury, where ironically I had been taken by my mother, aged two, to be assessed to be placed in Swansea. I was asked to sit in a room with the same four big files as I had remembered from when I was twenty four. The man popped his head

round the door a couple of times during the two hours I was there. It was again time limited. I asked if I could have the files, and was told I should put post it notes on the pages I wanted, but I wanted all of it, everything. I thought about just walking out with them, but didn’t. I put post it notes on every page, even pages I hadn’t read. When I left Highbury that day, I felt very sad and low, far worse than I had remembered feeling when I had initially looked at some of the file when I was twenty four. I didn’t go to work for six weeks. It wasn’t that anything horrific had happened, it was just the fact that I had not been told the truth about many aspects of my childhood. I never heard from NCH in regards to them giving me copies of all the pages I had requested.

When I was aged about forty eight, I again contacted NCH. By this time I knew more about what I was entitled to, and was more confident, having worked as a social worker for a good few years. I said I wanted copies of my files and was told again that the files would have to be requested from the archives in Scotland. There was a social worker who was assigned to follow my request through. It took another four months or more before I was given an appointment to attend another office in Stockwell, and I had to call on a number of occasions during this period. This time it was clear that the files had been heavily redacted, as there were no longer four very large files. I was again unable to read all the information, and to be honest I didn’t want to read it in such a rushed and uncomfortable environment. Approximately three months later I received a copy of my records and what I was sent fit in to one cardboard box, only about 6 inches in depth. This in itself was upsetting, especially given that there had initially been four large folders.

Since having the records, I have still not finished reading them, and I probably won’t. The process of accessing my records took years and was an arduous task. More recently I have been involved with the Lambeth redress scheme. During this process, my files have been requested from Lambeth Social services, as I was in their care for four years. I was asked would I like to read them. My reply was no.



Fragmented fact and fiction

John-george Nicholson



I remember that day. The darkness and the rain. Bumping into the postman as I raced out the front door. I shoved the big brown envelope in my bag and ran. I made the bus just in time, the 126 that dragged itself from Dudley to Birmingham to get me to work. As I sat at the front of its top deck I remembered the envelope. Sweating, I pulled it from my bag and tore away the thick brown paper to reveal a bright red A4 ring binder file. I opened it and on the first page was a chronological list of my moves in and out and around the care system. Foster homes, children's homes, back to mum and then back into the system again. Instinctively I pulled up my hood and started turning its pages. The sweat now pouring from my face was quickly joined by streaming tears. These pages telling a fragmented story about a boy I once was and in some ways still am.

I had forgotten about the work training session on data protection laws where the presenter had said that we all have the right to access personal data stored about us. That afternoon I had phoned Social Services and asked if they might have any information about me. The woman on the other end said she'd look. She took my address. I had forgotten all about it and now here it was in my hands. No warning, no phone call, no chance to steel myself. The power and weight of all these words like a sledgehammer. Ripping through time and space and dragging my twenty two year old self back into the times of those pages. Social worker reports, psychologist reports, carer reports, records of an arrest before the age of ten, but missing something: my voice.

Almost twenty years has now passed since that bus ride. Over time I've come to appreciate these 126 pages of fragmented fact and fiction. They've become gateways I sometimes pass through. I still keep the file by my bed. Now 41, the pages speak to me through all the characters that contributed to them. I wonder about all those people pressing keys and scribbling on pages. I'm not sure they always saw me. Instead a form to quickly complete. A train to catch. A box to tick. At times they missed the boy and I wonder if they ever considered the man that would one day read their words again and again. I wonder if they appreciated the written world that they were crafting, because it has now become a big part of me.



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