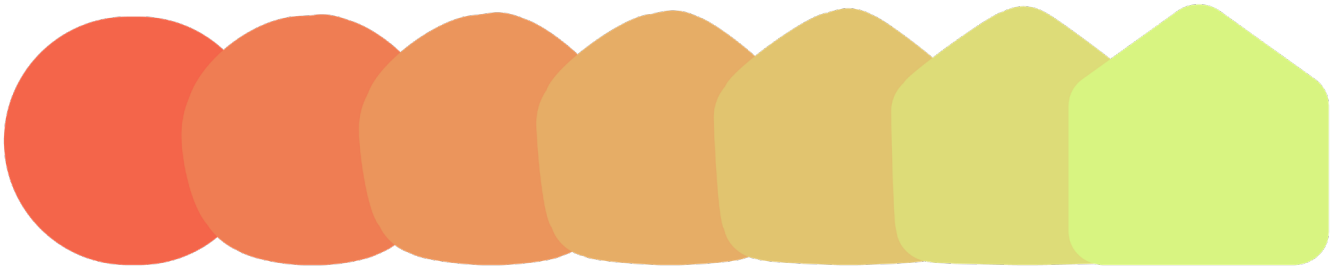
Beyond ‘Placements’

How the UK can build a care system children can call Home



the CHURCHILL fellowship

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Foreword

Some children cannot live with their birth parents. I have spent my professional life trying to understand and improve the experiences of those children, and the people who care for them. I started out as an independent visitor and in widening participation, where I saw early on how much the relationships around a child matter - not just the formal system, but the people who show up consistently and make a child feel they belong somewhere.

Training as a social worker was the natural next step, and it remains the hardest, most enjoyable and most important thing I have ever done. At its best, social work can reduce the number of children who need alternative homes altogether. Working with children and families was a privilege - but I grew increasingly frustrated by the gaps. The draconian step of removing a child. Parents desperately seeking help while the homes available simply didn't meet their needs. I moved into national government to try to influence that, leading the markets and commissioning team and working on the Independent Review of Children's Social Care. It gave me a higher vantage point and a deepening conviction: providing stable, loving homes to children who need them is the single greatest intervention we can make.

The Churchill Fellowship, supported by the Hadley Trust, gave me the space to learn how different people, systems and cultures create that sense of home. This report is what I brought back. I hope it is useful to policymakers, practitioners, commissioners and carers - and I intend to keep drawing on these insights in my own work to create more stable loving homes for children.

With thanks to everyone who gave their time and expertise so generously, and in particular to the Williams family in Canada and the Onajide and Ovia families in Nigeria, who created a sense of family for me while I was far from home.

Niketa Sanderson-Gillard

Executive Summary

The foster care system in the United Kingdom is under extreme pressure. Demand continues to rise, yet the structures designed to protect children have not evolved to help them thrive. In 2023–24, spending on placements for looked-after children exceeded £5.4 billion, almost £700 million more than planned (Department for Education, 2024). Despite this level of investment, outcomes for children remain poor: 39% of care leavers aged 19–21 are not in education, employment or training (Department for Education, 2023), and around one in three young people leaving care experiences homelessness within two years (Step by Step, 2022).

This report draws on insights from my Churchill Fellowship in Canada and Nigeria, combined with my professional experience in the UK. It explores how care can be understood and designed differently. Both countries demonstrate that care does not need to be delivered through one narrow model, nor can it rely on bureaucracy alone. They show that identity, culture, community, and relationships are essential foundations, not optional extras and that a wider range of family-based and community-based care can be supported safely.

The purpose of this report is not to describe a perfect alternative system. Instead, it challenges the UK to rethink how care is organised, who is empowered to provide it, and what children need in order to belong, develop and flourish. Incremental reform will not be enough. Our task is to build a system that finally fits the lives of the children we serve.

Introduction — Why This Matters

Fostering sits at the heart of the UK's approach to out-of-home care. Yet the system that surrounds it is struggling under the weight of rising demand, escalating costs and growing concerns about quality and stability. Over the last five years, the number of children entering care has increased by 7% (Department for Education, 2023), while the availability of suitable homes has not kept pace. Many local authorities now operate in a near-permanent state of crisis management.

The consequence is a system that makes decisions based on scarcity rather than children's needs. When there are not enough carers, the question shifts from Who is the right family for this child? to Who is available today? Placements break down not because children are "hard to care for", but because the system is stretched, risk-averse and unable to offer the steady support that stable relationships require.

The financial pressures are profound. In 2023–24, local authorities spent £5.4 billion on placements for looked-after children - almost £700 million more than they had planned (Department for Education, 2024). Costs continue to rise year on year, especially for residential provision, where some placements exceed £10,000 per week. Yet these rising costs are not improving outcomes. More than a third of care leavers aged 19–21 are NEET (Department for Education, 2023), and one in three young people experiences homelessness within two years of leaving care (Step by Step, 2022).

But the deepest cost is not financial. It is human. Too many children leave care without the stability, relationships or identity they need to thrive. They leave with disrupted education, fractured networks and a limited sense of where they belong. For many, adulthood begins abruptly at 18 or 21 - years before their peers, and with far less support.

This matters because the foster care system is not an abstract structure. It holds the lives of children who have already experienced loss, trauma or instability. A system built to protect children from harm must also equip them to live, grow and flourish. Yet the current model - shaped by bureaucracy, risk management and organisational capacity, often asks children to mould themselves to the system rather than the system adapting to their needs.

If we are serious about giving children the kind of lives we would want for our own families, we must look critically at the assumptions underpinning our current approach. And we must be prepared to rethink what care can be.

> "the deepest cost is not financial; it is human"

Expanding the Concept of Care

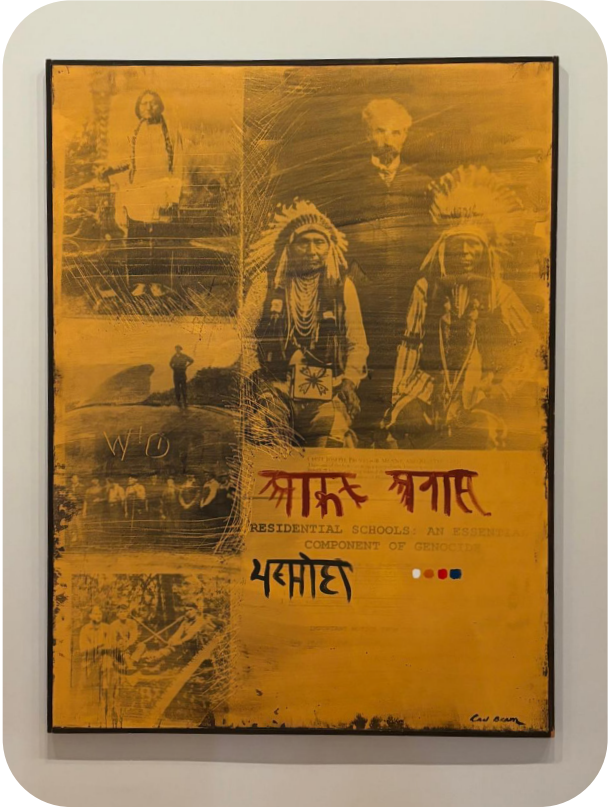
My Churchill Fellowship was intentionally framed around out-of-home care, not fostering alone. I wanted to understand how different societies create safety, belonging and stability for children who cannot live with their birth families — and what the UK might learn from approaches that look beyond a single, regulated model. Both Canada and Nigeria challenged my assumptions in ways that reshaped how I think about care.

Canada: Identity, Community, and Complexity

Canada's child welfare landscape is shaped by deep historical and political contexts. Indigenous children make up over half of all children in foster care, despite representing only 7.7% of the child population (Government of Canada, 2023). This profound disproportionality has driven major reforms, including federal legislation that gives First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities authority to design and govern their own child welfare systems (Government of Canada, 2020).

In Indigenous communities, customary care places responsibility for children within their kinship networks, with decisions guided by cultural continuity and community leadership. Early evidence suggests that culturally aligned care supports stronger identity development and psychological wellbeing for Indigenous young people (StatCan, 2025). These approaches highlight something the UK has not yet fully embraced: identity is not an "extra consideration" but a core component of safety and belonging.

Beyond Indigenous-led models, Canada's mainstream foster care landscape mirrors many of the UK's challenges. National reporting varies between provinces, but practitioners, carers and researchers consistently describe similar pressures: increasing complexity of children's needs, difficulties recruiting and retaining foster carers, and a growing role for private providers in some regions — despite comparatively higher levels of investment in child welfare. Carers I spoke with expressed concerns familiar to the UK: assessment processes that are intrusive and extensive, yet poorly predictive of what makes someone a good



carer. Research supports this, showing limited predictive validity in tools such as SAFE (Ott et al., 2019).

Canada demonstrates that even well-resourced systems struggle when bureaucracy is prioritised over relationships, and when identity and belonging are not consistently centred.

Nigeria: Community, Responsibility, and Long-Term Care

Nigeria offers a completely different model, yet one that raises equally important questions. Care is widely understood as a family and community responsibility, not primarily a state function. Extended family members, neighbours and trusted adults frequently take in children without formal assessment or approval. This creates forms of relational permanence that the UK's more rigid system often struggles to achieve.

Formal stranger foster care exists in legislation but is rarely used or trusted. When non-relatives care for a child, this is more often through adoption or long-term informal arrangements, where permanence, not temporary care, is the expectation (Nnodim, 2022). This sits in sharp contrast with the UK's model, where temporary fostering is normalised even when children would benefit more from stability.

Nigeria also recognises Kafalah, an Islamic guardianship model widely used across Muslim-majority contexts. It provides long-term, stable care without severing legal ties to birth families and is endorsed by the United Nations as a legitimate form of alternative care (UNICEF, 2023). Kafalah challenges Western assumptions about what family-based permanence must look like.

Nigeria's model is not without challenges; limited funding, inconsistent oversight and variable practice can leave children vulnerable (UNICEF, 2023). But it demonstrates powerfully that care can be relational, culturally grounded and community-led, even in systems with far fewer resources. It also reminds us that funding alone does not guarantee good care; what matters is whether investment strengthens identity, belonging and long-

> "care can be relational, culturally grounded and community-led, even in systems with far fewer resources"

Shared Lessons across Both Countries

Despite their differences, Canada and Nigeria offer several shared insights:

1. **Care is strongest when rooted in community rather than bureaucracy.** Whether through Indigenous governance structures or extended family networks, children thrive when surrounded by people who know them, understand their identity and have a stake in their future.

2. **Identity is a core developmental need, not an optional consideration.** Research consistently shows that cultural and racial matching supports placement stability and psychological wellbeing (LaBrenz et al., 2022). Yet the UK often treats identity as a balancing act rather than a foundational need.

3. **Assessment tools alone cannot predict stability.** Front-end tools such as SAFE have limited evidence behind them (Ott et al., 2019). Paperwork-heavy systems risk driving away the very carers children need.

4. **Transitions work best when based on readiness, not age.** In Nigeria, young people leave care once they have housing, education or employment in place — not at an arbitrary birthday. UK evidence shows that early transitions at 18 or 21 are linked to poorer outcomes (Barnardo's & IKEA, 2021; Step by Step, 2022).

5. **Sharing power changes systems.** Indigenous communities in Canada are reshaping practice by holding authority directly. In contrast, the UK listens to lived experience but seldom shares meaningful decision-making power. This limits the system's ability to evolve.

The Problem — A System Built for Protection, not for Thriving

The UK's foster care system was designed to protect children from immediate harm, not to support them into adulthood. Protection became the architecture, the culture and the dominant purpose. But protection is only the starting point of what children need. Stability, belonging, identity and long-term relationships are essential for thriving, yet these have been squeezed to the margins.

Over the last decade, austerity and demand pressures have hollowed out early help and the community-based services that once sustained families. As preventative support has diminished, the system has become increasingly shaped by crisis. Social workers carry high caseloads, decisions are influenced by organisational risk rather than children's needs and paperwork often substitutes for relational practice. Carers experience this too. Many describe feeling scrutinised but not supported, monitored but not equipped.

At the same time, spending on placements has soared. Local authority expenditure on looked-after children reached £5.4 billion in 2023–24, almost £700 million above what was budgeted (Department for Education, 2024). Residential placements now regularly exceed £10,000 per week, yet outcomes do not reflect this level of investment. Thirty-nine percent of care leavers aged 19–21 are NEET (Department for Education, 2023), and one in three young people leaving care becomes homeless within two years (Step by Step, 2022). The financial and human costs are rising in parallel.

The structure of care remains rigid and hierarchical. Kinship care is widely recognised as the best option when safe, but support for kinship carers is inconsistent and often inadequate (Family Rights Group, 2023). Foster care is positioned as the default alternative, yet recruitment and retention challenges mean many children are placed based on availability rather than suitability. Residential care is often described as the "last resort", even though for some young people it may be the right setting. These three forms of care operate in silos rather than as a coherent continuum that adapts to each child's needs.

The shortage of carers has a profound impact. When there are too few families, the system becomes driven by scarcity, not by fit. This leads to rushed matches, over-stretched households and preventable placement breakdowns. Children then move through multiple homes, each time losing relationships and stability. Carers describe assessment processes that feel intrusive but disconnected from what matters. Research confirms that there is limited evidence that common assessment tools predict which adults will provide stable, nurturing care (Ott et al., 2019).

A system that is built around risk aversion often interprets children's distress as "behaviour" rather than as a response to instability, trauma or unmet identity needs. When placements break down, the child is too often described as the problem, rather than the mismatch of support, environment or resources. This logic protects organisations but fails children.

The architecture of leaving care also remains misaligned with children's development. Young people are still expected to transition to independence at 18 or 21, despite overwhelming evidence that abrupt, age-based transitions are linked to homelessness, unemployment and poor mental health (Barnardo's and

IKEA, 2021). Most young people outside the care system leave home in their early to mid-twenties, supported by family, financial help and ongoing connection (ONS, 2022). Yet those in care are asked to manage the transition far earlier and with far less support.

Finally, the system listens to the care-experienced community but rarely shifts power towards them. Young people and carers are invited into consultations, but decision-making remains distant. This stands in contrast with Indigenous-led models in Canada, where communities are taking statutory authority and reshaping practice themselves.

The result is a system designed to manage crisis rather than build stability, one that protects organisations more effectively than it protects children. Without structural change, costs will continue to rise while outcomes stagnate. The current architecture cannot deliver what children need to flourish.

> "Without structural change, costs will continue to rise while outcomes stagnate."

What Could Be Different?

My Churchill Fellowship took me to Canada and Nigeria, two child welfare systems shaped by entirely different histories, funding levels and cultural expectations. Yet both countries illuminated the same truth: there is no single way to provide care. The UK has treated fostering as the default model for decades, but international practice shows that care can be organised through community, culture, extended family, shared responsibility and diverse legal frameworks. These examples challenge the narrowness of our current approach and offer principles that could help us design something more relational and more effective.

Canada: Identity, Community, and Shared Authority

Canada's system is decentralised, with responsibility split across provinces, territories and, increasingly, Indigenous communities. Despite this variation, practitioners, carers and young people describe pressures that feel familiar to the UK: rising complexity of need, difficulties recruiting carers, concerns about placement stability and significant regional inconsistencies. In some provinces, the role of private providers has grown to fill gaps, despite comparatively higher public investment in child welfare.

The most important lessons, however, come from Indigenous communities. Indigenous children represent over half of all children in foster care, despite making up less than 8 percent of the child

population (Government of Canada, 2023). This profound disproportionality is linked to a long history of colonial harm, including residential schools and forced assimilation. In response, federal legislation passed in 2020 gives First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities the authority to design and run their own child and family services (Government of Canada, 2020).

These Indigenous-led models prioritise identity, culture and relational continuity. Customary care, for example, aims to keep children within their community, supported by extended kin and governed by collective responsibility. Early evidence shows that culturally matched care helps young people develop strongeridentity, connection and long-term wellbeing (StatCan, 2025). Canada demonstrates that meaningful power-sharing can shift both practice and accountability. It also shows that identity cannot be an after-thought. For many children, identity is the foundation of stability.

Nigeria: Community, Responsibility, and Everyday Permanence

Nigeria offers a very different picture. Here, care is widely understood as a collective responsibility. Extended families, neighbours and trusted adults frequently step in when a child needs support, without expecting state involvement or formal recognition. This cultural expect-ation creates forms of permanence that are relational, not contractual.

Stranger foster care exists in policy but is rarely used. When non-relatives care for a child, it is more often through adoption or long-term informal care, where the assumption is that the child will remain until adulthood (Nnodim, 2022). This challenges the UK's reliance on temporary placements, especially for teenagers, and raises questions about why our pathway to permanence narrows so sharply after early childhood.

Nigeria also recognises Kafalah, an Islamic model of guardianship used widely across Muslim-majority countries. Kafalah provides long-term family care without severing legal ties to birth parents and is endorsed internationally as a legitimate alternative care arrangement (UNICEF, 2023). It demonstrates that permanence can be culturally specific and need not replicate Western legal frameworks to be effective.

Nigeria's system has clear limitations. Funding is constrained, oversight is inconsistent and practice varies widely. But it shows that care can be relational and culturally grounded even with limited resources. It also exposes a wider truth: money alone does not create stability; relationships do.

Shared Insights

Despite their differences, Canada and Nigeria share several principles that have clear relevance for the UK.

1. **Care works best when rooted in relationships and community.** Children thrive when surrounded by people who know them, understand their identity and have a stake in their future. Bureaucracy cannot substitute for belonging.

2. **Identity is a core safety need.** Across both countries, children do better when placed with carers who understand their culture, race or community. Research confirms that cultural and racial matching supports placement stability and emotional wellbeing (LaBrenz et al., 2022).

3. **Assessment tools do not predict relational capacity.** Front-end assessment systems, including SAFE, have limited evidence behind them (Ott et al., 2019). Paperwork-heavy processes risk driving away the very carers children need most.

4. **Transitions should be based on readiness rather than age.** In Nigeria, young people leave care when they have completed education, secured housing or achieved other milestones. In the UK, early transitions at 18 or 21 are linked to homelessness, unemployment and instability (Barnardo's and IKEA, 2021; Step by Step, 2022).

5. **Power-sharing changes systems.** Indigenous communities in Canada are reshaping practice by holding statutory authority. In contrast, the UK often listens to lived experience but rarely shares decision-making power.

This limits the system's ability to evolve in ways aligned with the lives of children and families.

Why These Lessons Matter for the UK

The purpose of looking abroad is not to import wholesale solutions. It is to widen our field of vision. Canada and Nigeria show that care can be designed differently, and that identity, community and culture can be central rather than peripheral. They challenge the UK to rethink what care is for, who can provide it and how systems

> "Canada and Nigeria show that care can be designed differently, and that identity, community and culture can be central rather than peripheral."

A Radical Rethink

The lessons from Canada and Nigeria make one thing clear: the UK does not need small adjustments or better versions of the same processes. We need a fundamental shift in how we understand and organise care. The current system is built to manage harm, yet children need systems that help them grow, connect and flourish. Incremental reform will not deliver this. A radical rethink is needed.

This begins with asking different questions. Instead of trying to make the existing structure function more efficiently, we should be asking:

- What helps a child feel safe, loved and rooted in their identity
- Who is best placed to provide that care, and what support do they need
- How systems could be designed around relationships rather than bureaucracy
- What would happen if we centred belonging, culture, readiness and continuity in every decision

A radical rethink does not mean abandoning safeguarding or lowering standards. It means redesigning the purpose and architecture of care so protection is the foundation, not the limit.

1. Reimagining who can care for children

Fostering is only one model of family-based care, yet we treat it as the only viable route. Other countries show that care can be provided by extended family, trusted adults, cultural communities, or legal frameworks beyond traditional fostering or adoption. The UK's narrow pathways leave many willing, capable adults unable to step forward unless they fit a specific regulatory mould.

We need a wider, more flexible set of options that reflect how children naturally find belonging: through relationships with family, community and trusted adults who already know them.

2. Shifting from professional ownership to shared power

In Canada, Indigenous communities are reclaiming authority over child welfare, reshaping systems by leading them. This demonstrates what meaningful power-sharing looks like. In the UK, people with lived experience are routinely consulted but rarely empowered. Many debates, including proposals to make care experience a protected characteristic, gain traction partly because they confer recognition without sharing decision-making power.

A redesigned system must place lived and learned experience side by side, shaping policy, practice and accountability.

3. Designing for identity, not erasing it

Identity is not an optional factor. It is a core part of safety, wellbeing and stability. Research shows that cultural and racial matching helps support placement stability and long-term emotional health (LaBrenz et al., 2022). Yet the UK often treats identity as something to be accommodated only if it does not complicate placement searches.

A better system would centre identity from the outset rather than treat it as a secondary consideration.

4. Building for permanence, not provisional care

Children thrive when adults make commitments that are relational, not simply contractual. Both Canada and Nigeria show that long-term care does not have to look like adoption. It can be achieved through community responsibility, customary care or ongoing relational commitments. In the UK, temporary placements remain the norm, especially for teenagers, creating instability that undermines children's development.

Permanence should be the expectation, not the exception.

5. Replacing age-based transitions with readiness-based pathways

The idea that children leave care at 18 or 21 is a bureaucratic invention, not a developmental truth. International evidence shows that transitions based on readiness - such as completing education, securing housing or building supportive networks, lead to more stable outcomes (Barnardo's and IKEA, 2021; Step by Step, 2022). Yet the UK continues to structure care-leaving around birthdays rather than milestones.

A redesigned system would treat the journey into adulthood as gradual, relational and supported.

6. Aligning funding with what actually helps

The UK spends extraordinary sums on placements, yet cannot guarantee that this investment improves children's lives. Nigeria demonstrates that care rooted in relationships and community can thrive even where financial resources are limited. This does not mean funding is irrelevant, but it highlights that investment must be used differently.

Money should support relationships, stability and long-term support, not bureaucracy, crisis responses and administrative performance.

Towards a New Purpose

A radical rethink is not about idealism. International models show that different architectures are possible. Our task now is to imagine and build a system shaped around the lives of children, not the constraints of the current framework.

A system designed for children to thrive would centre relationships, identity, belonging and readiness. It would distribute power more equitably, recognise diverse caring roles, broaden pathways into care, and invest in what truly supports children and carers. None of this is impossible. It simply requires the courage to see that the current structure is not inevitable.

Building a New Community of Carers

The recruitment and retention crisis is one of the clearest indicators that the current system is no longer working. The number of children needing care is rising, yet the number of approved foster carers is falling or static in many areas. Even where carers are approved, many feel undersupported, isolated or overwhelmed. A system designed around bureaucracy rather than relationships cannot sustain the people who are central to its success.

To build a stronger, more diverse and more stable community of carers, the system must change not only how it recruits, but how it recognises, supports and values the adults who step forward.

1. Ensuring financial viability and security

Foster care is skilled, relational work that carries significant emotional and practical responsibilities. Yet financial arrangements vary widely between local authorities and independent agencies, leaving many carers uncertain about whether they can sustain the role. If we expect carers to offer long-term, stable homes, they must have financial arrangements that recognise the demands placed upon them and allow them to focus on the children they care for.

2. Creating flexible pathways into caring

The UK's assessment pathway is lengthy and heavily procedural. While safeguarding and rigour are essential, unnecessary barriers prevent compassionate, capable adults from stepping forward. Many people who know a child well — extended family members, teachers, youth workers, neighbours — are deterred by a process designed around stranger care rather than existing relationships.

A reformed system would offer clearer, more flexible entry routes that reflect the diverse ways children find belonging.

3. Prioritising meaningful, relationship-centred training

Carers often describe feeling heavily assessed but poorly prepared. Much training remains compliance-driven rather than focused on understanding trauma, identity needs, adolescence, cultural competence or the relational work of caring. To retain carers, training should be practical, relevant and connected to the real situations carers navigate every day.

Training should also be ongoing, not a one-off hurdle at the start of approval.

4. Embedding peer support from the beginning

Carers frequently say that other carers are their greatest source of learning, reassurance and resilience. Yet many enter fostering without a ready-made network and must build community piecemeal. Starting peer support at the assessment stage, designing cohort-based models and providing structured opportunities for connection would reduce isolation and strengthen stability.

5. Recognising carers as partners, not resources

The current system often treats carers as a placement resource rather than as partners in a child's life. This affects trust, communication and decision-making. A new community of carers requires a cultural shift, where carers are included in planning, respected as experts in the children they care for and supported in ways that align with the complexity of their role.

Towards a More Relational Approach

Building a new community of carers is not a standalone task. It must sit within a wider rethinking of the system. Recruitment cannot succeed without better support; support cannot succeed without more flexible models of care; and flexible models of care require pathways that reflect children's real lives. A healthier, more sustainable community of carers is possible, but only if the system itself becomes easier to work alongside.

What Now?

The UK's care system must move beyond crisis management and begin building the conditions that allow children to experience home. Home is more than a place of safety. It is where a child feels cared for, where there are people who stay, where identity is supported and where belonging outweighs bureaucracy. Too many children in care grow up without this foundation.

A system built to help children thrive would look very different from what we have now. It would prioritise stability, relationships and identity at every stage. It would recognise that care is both emotional labour and skilled practice. And it would support carers, families and communities to create the long-term relational environments children need. Achieving this requires coordinated action from policymakers, professionals, carers and communities.

Below are the key areas where change must begin.

1. Redesign the purpose and architecture of care

We must shift from a system built to manage risk to one built to support growth. This means designing care pathways that are flexible, relational and centred on children's lived realities. It also means widening who can care, recognising the role of kin, community and trusted adults, and ensuring identity is central in placement decisions.

2. Invest in relationships, not just placements

Funding must support what actually helps: stable homes, relational continuity, therapeutic support and skilled carers. Investment should enable carers to stay, not push them to the edge. Money should follow the needs of children, not the structures of organisations.

3. End arbitrary, age-based transitions

Young people should leave care based on readiness, not birthdays. Transitions should be gradual, relational and supported. No young person should leave care without stable housing, a plan for education or employment, and people who remain in their lives.

4. Build a stronger, more diverse community of carers

Recruitment and retention require more than marketing campaigns. We need flexible assessment pathways, fair financial arrangements, ongoing training that is relevant and practical, and built-in peer support that starts from day one. Carers must be treated as partners, not placement providers.

5. Share power with those who live and deliver care

Young people, carers and communities must shape policy, practice and accountability. Consultation alone is not enough. Meaningful power-sharing improves decision-making and brings systems closer to the realities children experience every day.

6. Create a coherent continuum of care

Kinship, foster and residential care should work together, not in isolation. Children's needs change over time, and their support should adjust with them. A coherent continuum makes movement between types of care intentional, not reactive.

Pausing to Take Stock

These are not small changes. They require courage, leadership and a willingness to let go of outdated assumptions. But they are possible. Other countries are already demonstrating different ways of organising care. The UK has the talent, experience and commitment to do the same.

> "A system built to help children thrive would look very different from what we have now"

Conclusion — The cost of doing nothing

The current system is unsustainable. In 2023–24, local authorities spent **£5.4 billion** on placements for looked-after children, almost **£700 million** more than planned (Department for Education, 2024). Yet outcomes for children remain far below what any of us would accept for our own families. The financial pressure is immense, but the greater cost is human. Every year, thousands of young people leave care without the stability, identity or relationships they need to thrive.

A system designed primarily for protection cannot meet the wider needs of children. It can keep them safe from immediate harm, but it cannot, in its current form, offer belonging, continuity or long-term connection. These are the foundations of a good childhood. They are also the foundations of adulthood. Without them, too many young people face disrupted education, isolation, homelessness and early transitions into independence that they are not ready for.

If we want a system that works, we must be prepared to rethink foster care and the broader architecture that surrounds it. This means ending arbitrary transitions, creating flexible and family-based alternatives, supporting carers with the training and financial security they need and dismantling the silos that separate foster, kinship and residential care. It also means recognising that lived experience is not an advisory add-on but a source of leadership that must shape decision-making.

This report is not a blueprint for perfection. It is an invitation to think differently and a challenge to act. Other countries show that care can be designed in ways that honour identity, empower communities and put relationships at the centre. The UK can do the same, but only if we choose to confront the limitations of the current system and commit to meaningful reform.

The cost of doing nothing is too high. Without bold, structural change, financial pressures will continue to rise while outcomes for children stagnate or worsen. Every delay means more young people entering adulthood without the support they need and more money spent on crisis rather than prevention. We can build something better. The question now is whether we will.

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