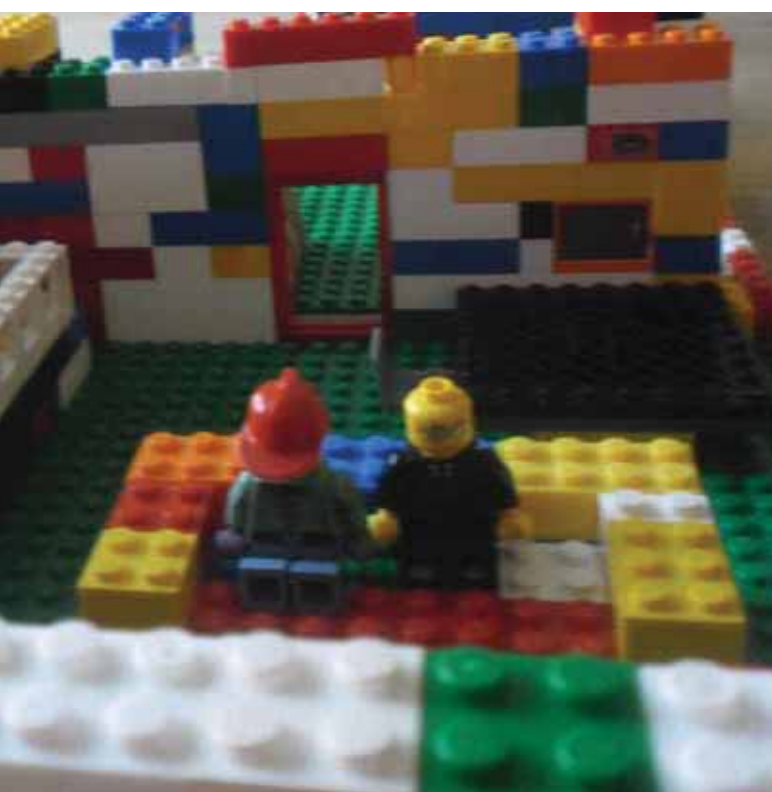



# Young People Creating Belonging: Spaces, Sounds and Sights



A person wearing a white t-shirt and dark pants is seen from behind, standing in a room. The room contains a bed with a patterned blanket and a framed picture on the wall. The entire image is overlaid with a blue tint.

creative sensory  
methods to explore  
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# Young People Creating Belonging: Spaces, Sounds and Sights



## The Sight and Sound Project

The '**Sight and Sound Project**' used creative sensory methods to explore how young people who are looked after feel that they belong, or do not belong, in the places that they live. In this project therefore, the concept of 'belonging', which is often used in relation to faith or ethnic groups,<sup>1</sup> is applied to home spaces. Research suggests that 'sensory experience can provide a strong sense of belonging',<sup>2</sup> and that sounds, textures and what people see in the places they live are important in terms of making a person feel 'at home'. For example, participants in studies of parental substance misuse did not feel at home in houses dominated by loud music and arguments, and often tried to make their bedrooms feel safer by playing music to blank out these sounds.<sup>3</sup> Research has also pointed to the significance of personal items in building and maintaining self-identity and relationships,<sup>4</sup> and of sounds – including music<sup>5</sup> – to making spaces feel safer. Feelings of belonging whether positive, negative or ambivalent therefore affect everyone in different contexts. Drawing on these key ideas, the Sight and Sound Project sought to explore how belonging, and the sensory experiences connected to it, were relevant to children who are looked after, and their carers.

This briefing focuses primarily on the relationship between the senses (visual, aural and touch) and participants' feelings of belonging (or not) while looked after and leaving care. It also outlines other key issues raised by the young people, including their relationships with various agencies, notably the police as well as further detail on the creative and sensory methods employed.

### Introducing the project

This two year project explored the links between the senses and belonging with young people who are looked after across Scotland. We worked with 22 young people (13 young men and 9 young women aged 10-23) from across mainland (14) and island (8) Scotland. In total, 22 young people took part in the initial

activity/interview, 14 in the second, and six were involved in creating films and music to disseminate project themes. We also remain in close contact with several of the participants. Each young person had different supervision and residential requirements and 25% of the participants moved between one type of living arrangement and another over the two years [Box A]. These transitions, in addition to exams and geography, affected participation in the second and third activities/ interviews. All of the names used in this document are pseudonyms suggested by the participants, all of whom have given permission for their comments, photos and drawings to be used.

### The complex nature of belonging

Our research indicated that belonging is very complex. The spaces the participants felt they belonged included places and people not conventionally associated with ideas of 'home' or 'family'. Personal items were of huge significance. Many participants worked hard to maintain connections across different spaces, but their access to important places was often fragile, dependent on strained relationships. Losing access to such spaces often affected their emotional wellbeing.

**Spaces and belonging** Ideas of 'home' are often related to one living space associated with a 'nuclear' family. Several participants described such arrangements. They spoke of strong relationships with their carers and with pets, access to comfortable, private bedrooms, and feeling at ease in shared rooms and with the environment around their homes. Maylak (12, kinship care) identified how '*happy*' he felt '*just going into my house*'; Tiger (10, foster care) identified his comfortable bed, his bedroom, 'his' seat in a communal room that he'd helped decorate and 'his' space in the garden as his favourite places. Several others spoke at length about how they'd decorated their rooms. Leah's room (20, adopted) reflected her love of bright, sparkly colours and objects, while Steven's (16, secure accommodation) posters

## Box A: Participants' places of residence during the project cycle

	Indep Living	Supported Accom	Home with Supervision	Foster Care	Part time foster care & home	Kinship care	Residential School	Children's Unit	Secure Unit
Initial meeting	3	0	2	9	2	1	0	3	2
Activity 1	3	0	2	9	2	1	1	3	1
Activity 2	4	0	2	8	2	1	0	3	2
Activity 3	4	2	1	9	1	1	0	2	2

of New York represented his dreams of future travel. For Plankton (12, foster care), emotional security came from living in small, tightly knit, rural community where she had come to know the local people well. She identified her bedroom, her foster carers, and their house, not only as her favourite spaces and objects, but also as her dream place to live.

Some respondents in residential care felt that generally they belonged, but were ambivalent about some aspects

of these units. Often shared spaces such as living rooms were associated with unwanted noise and conflict. Marissa (10, children's unit) feared another resident and avoided his room: '*You feel a bit cautious like a time bomb's going to go off*'. However, some residents associated workers' officers with comfort and safety, while bedrooms were particularly important. Marissa's bed and bedroom were among her favourite –and safest– spaces 'because I can go there any time and it's just me, nobody else.. and it's got all my books and my bed and

### 'My dream home', Marissa





### Teddy given to Bob by his foster carer

things in it..I just stay on the inside and there's a sort of lock which you can turn easily'. Security generally was very important. Like others, Marissa also highlighted the importance of small, private often 'secret' spaces, in which to be alone. For her, these included an alcove in her bedroom and a shed and tree in the garden. *'My space is the shed outside..it's really quiet and nobody thinks of looking for me there..sometimes I want to get away from it a bit'*. The importance of physical comfort (beds, rugs, smell box), privacy (secret bed, soundproofing), personal items (books), in addition to a desire for safe, communal spaces (chairs and tables for the friends she couldn't usually invite to tea in the unit) is obvious in Marissa's imaginative drawing of her 'ideal space'.

For secure unit residents with limited freedoms, such a sense of belonging was difficult (and potentially undesired). Thomas' (14, secure unit) favourite places were his mum's room, her house and garden and a nearby park where he met his friends, none of which he could access. He also *'took all the decorations down'* in his room at the unit because he didn't want *'to make*

*it homely or roomy..It's not my home'*. Several older participants (some of whom had left care) hated where they officially lived, preferring to move between different points of networks of inside and outside spaces. In the islands, friends' places provided a degree of privacy and shelter from the weather. In mainland Scotland, outside spaces were often important. In their networks of favourite places, Channel (17, foster care) included a beach and buses:*'I don't argue with anyone...all my feelings just go whoo..away from my head. I feel relaxed when I'm on a bus'* and Reggie (23, independent living) chose a park close to his former residential unit: *'I still go there every week, walk through, just spend time there, it's nice and peaceful..even when it's busy'*. These networks often included places with family connections (Channel's aunt's house near the beach; Reggie's mum's place), but also friends' flats, where they often slept. These networks were fragile however and by the time of the second interview, Channel had lost access to her aunt's and friend's places, and Reggie to his mum's, after arguments.

**Objects and belongings** The importance of 'transitional objects' has long been recognised in social work practices such as 'memory boxes' and 'life story work'. Our questions around 'important objects' produced a wide variety of responses. Teddies and other soft toys were often identified as important, even by older respondents, as someone to talk to and as sources of cuddles and familiar smells. They were also important visual mementoes of significant people, as were many other objects including photos (of birth family members, former foster carers, siblings), guitars, a family tartan, scraps of wallpaper and several (sometimes broken) clocks. Tiger had few things from before his placement but had taken up his 'adoptive' brother's hobby of collecting animal ornaments: *'I just like lions, I like big cats as well, ..all animals really'*. Participants' histories of moving between numerous placements over time, or between points in a network of places, made objects- which could be moved – especially important. Reggie didn't even like to have too many things: *'I think it's partly to do with the move-ability.. Having too much just slows you down'*. His tattoos which he saw as permanent, visual representations of his life story can be seen as the ultimate portable object.



**Charlie on my gaming chair, Penfold**

Many objects identified initially seemed less personal; however the importance of often multi-functional technologies (mobile phones, computers) became clear. Computer games were often used to calm down and to socialise (often over the net). As Penfold (14, foster care) explained *'you don't need to think of anything that's*

*worrying you, just get on Xbox and it'll calm you down... I play people from China, people from America'*; mobile phones allowed contact with siblings living elsewhere but also stored photos. Toni (16, part time foster care) emphasised that her phone allowed her to carry family photos around with her as she moved between foster care and home each week. Access to TV programmes, youtube, music and books, was also important. Five respondents were passionate readers, using books as a means to escape or as a way of processing experiences through empathy with the fictional characters. One girl (13) in foster care emphasised: *'I was always thick ... I couldn't read for anything until I was nine, and.. I got given this book by .. my therapist.. and I was like .. 'wow I want more', so I ended up getting addicted.. I felt like I was so there ..part of the family and I knew it all.. they have to move away cause the dad's abusive and that happened to us'*. Similarly, music was very important to most participants as a source of encouragement, to cheer themselves up and blank out upsetting thoughts, but also to explore complex experiences or feelings.

## **Building strong relationships and belonging**

Analysis of the young people's responses to our activities around spaces, sounds and objects illustrated often very strong relationships with current and former carers, as well as suggesting practices that helped to build such relationships in new placements. Some of these factors are discussed above; notably being involved in collective activities and decision-making around the decoration of communal spaces and bedrooms, and of being able to listen to music, play computer games, read or lie on their beds there. Having other quiet places to be alone was again important. The front porch was a place Penfold could think in the early days of his placement. *'Out on the front porch that's where I feel safe.. when I first came here I used to always run away and then eventually when I got brought back.. I wouldn't come into the house, I'd just sit there and I'd get used to it.'* Later his favourite place became 'his' corner of the conservatory where he had his gaming chair, computer and games and could calm down, alone or with a dog. Similarly, Liz (12, foster care) remembered: *'When I was at my first carers..whenever I got really stressed or angry they put a cardboard box in the front porch for me and I'd go and like step on it and ...vandalise it [laugh]...got my anger and stress out'*. In contrast, other respondents pointed to difficult placements where they had been unable to find or create such places or to listen to the music they liked.

Animals were often important in new placements, allowing respondents to give and receive physical affection. Mackenzie (14, living with mother) explained:



**Dylan's cat**

*'that's my favourite cat.. He's so cuddly and friendly..you can just pick him up and cuddle with him.. I just sit there and talk to him!'* Some animals also had biographical significance. Maylak talked to his dog which had previously belonged to his late mother. Penfold spoke of his carers' dogs in very human terms, describing them as 'his' and looking after them throughout the interview. He also liked the dogs being with him when otherwise alone in his corner of the conservatory. *'That gaming chair's exactly where I sit, and Charlie'll come up and sit on me while I play it...he'll just lie across me and I'll play the Xbox'*. None of the participants in residential or secure units spoke of pets, but Steven loved a new bee-keeping and gardening project in a secure unit.

**Transition** Several older respondents were dealing with transitions to semi- or independent living. The happiest of these were two respondents who lived in purpose-built supported accommodation. Although security was a problem (one had been burgled, the other kept a baseball bat handy in case of intruders), these young people felt relatively 'at home'. In contrast, none of the respondents who had left care felt 'at home'. Often they reported a lack of money and practical help to decorate, furnish, heat, deal with repairs and utilities. Kayden (16, independent living), interviewed a week after moving into a tiny council flat, had found a broken table, broken blinds, and a door he could not open - which later revealed a broken Hoover. His attempts to contact the council were hampered by the lack of credit on his phone. *'I've not got minutes to phone. I've only got text and you cannae text council'*. Reggie, who did not know where he would be living until the day of his move, found on arrival that a previous resident had left large debts to utility companies and then ran up his own. He had received a lot of advice prior to this move, but much less support once he had left and needed to deal with these debts and council tax and housing benefit forms. A foster carer emphasised angrily how she felt that successful foster placements could be undermined by young people being given information about transitioning to independent living on the basis of age, rather than any consideration of a person's emotional or practical ability to live alone, or of the type of living arrangements they were used to.



**Arriving at my new flat, David**

All four of the participants who were living independently hated where they lived, but felt obliged to stay due to housing law provisions on intentional homelessness. One respondent suffered panic attacks when alone in her flat, another was on medication for anxiety. After previous positive experiences of living in busy residential units, Dylan (18, independent living) and David both hated the silence of living on their own and spent most of their time at friends. Dylan tried to eradicate the silence with loud music and pet animals. David described a feeling of desolation – symbolised in his drawing by the lack of a lampshade after arriving at his bedsit with his belongings in plastic bags. After two years, he found he was still unable to decorate the flat: *'I think it's the isolation, I think it's being by myself but I hate the place. I hate it. ..I didn't decorate it but I know it won't help [laughs].. I just don't feel good there'*. Another participant told us *'I took a wee freak out/ black out sort of fit thing and chucked my bed out, so I've only got a mattress now [laugh]!.. I just hated everything in the house'*.

As a result of 'the local connection' test employed by local authorities, respondents were sometimes obliged to live in towns, or in Ned's case (17, part time foster care) on an island, where they did not feel they belonged. The location of flats could also be alienating; participants spoke of violence in surrounding streets or of keeping weapons hidden by the door for protection, while another disliked looking out on a landmark where young people who were in care had committed suicide.

## Relationships with significant agencies, especially the police



**My least favourite place: the police station, Thomas**



**Police Station Least Favourite Place, Toni**

Our methods prompted the participants to talk about their relationships with various agencies. Many paid tribute to the practical support, care and fun provided by a variety of statutory and voluntary sector workers. However, several respondents from Glasgow and the islands identified places associated with the police as their 'least favourite spaces'. Four islands participants felt targeted by the police. One young woman (16) explained: *'I'm known to them now..they just pick me up instead of anyone else'*. She also felt that the police were abusive: *'They throw you on the floor..they take your blanket and your mattress away..They take your shoes off, take your belt off, take your jumper off, and if you refuse to do it they'll pin you down, and they'll actually take your bra off.. they ask you ..'do you harm', 'no', 'have you ever self-harmed?' 'no' and then they do it anyway'*.

Similarly a Glasgow participant compared the police unfavourably with secure unit staff *'[The police] always try and hurt you..they don't care, they just pure squeeze yer heid down..In here [secure unit]..they try to keep you safe... They're putting you down on the ground but they're placing you down safely and they're just like that 'come on ..just calm down'..and they point out good things to point oot'*.

Jodie (15, children's unit) and Mackenzie, whose contact with the police came as witnesses to incidents that led



them into the care system, criticised how they had been left scared, tired, hungry and thirsty in police stations very late at night. Jodie felt as if she were the one in a cell. Mackenzie recalled that *'[the police] called the social work but it took them two hours to do that...and then after that it took about an hour for the taxi to get there, and then another hour to get to the place (emergency house) that I was going, so I was there at about three o'clock in the morning and I had school the next day.'* She also criticised the police's response to her contacting them on behalf of a friend who was thinking of committing suicide: *'they said 'we'll call you back' and I was waiting up until [2.15am] and they still didn't call me, they've still not called me now'.*

Several participants emphasised how they found the physical environment of children's hearings intimidating, while Daniel (16, foster care) complained that social work arrangements for contact with his birth family members forced him to return regularly to a local shopping centre, associated with drug use, that held bad memories for him. Further, some participants complained of worker turnover and heavy caseloads which prevented social workers and others from providing effective support when they needed it. Others, who were settled in their placements, found the periodic interviews they were required to attend with social workers intrusive.

## The advantages of creative, participatory methods

The project used a variety of different methods as a way of providing participants with enjoyable ways to discuss sensitive, often difficult issues. At three different stages of the project, they were invited to take part in several different activities including taking photos, recording sounds and music, drawing the places they spent most of their time, designing their ideal homes, writing and recording their own songs and making a film about their experiences of transition [see box B]. The participants told us (and their enthusiasm certainly suggested) that they really enjoyed using these methods. They further reported that the methods were fun; that they allowed them time to reflect on their personal situations; and that the focus on 'doing' activities in the interviews put them at greater ease than question and answer interviews. These methods also produced very rich data. We suggest that such methods could be employed in diverse practice areas to facilitate talk about difficult issues. The potential of these methods was also commented on by foster carers and keyworkers who found that the photos, sounds and music enabled them to begin to engage in conversations which the young people they looked after had previously avoided, or the carers had not known how to discuss.

From a research perspective, these methods helped us to make connections we were very unlikely to have made

in the context of a conventional interview without the visual or verbal prompts chosen by the respondents. In addition, the use of these methods transferred a degree



**Favourite object: My brother, Liz**

of power to the participants who could decline to do any of the activities, and whose photos and sounds directed our discussions. While some participants struggled a little with technical aspects of the camera and sound recorder, several needed little instruction and went beyond the project instructions discovering film and editing functions. A few respondents also used the equipment for their own purposes beyond the project. Channel, for example, took many photos connected to her friends to use in a college project. All of the respondents were extremely happy to receive copies of their photos after the interviews and a number were especially grateful as they had so few photographs and no access to cameras.

There were several advantages of the **visual methods** used. Taking photos of people important to the participants often led to interesting perspectives on these relationships. Liz took a photo of a wrapped Christmas present and card to represent her younger brother. Through the ensuing conversation Liz told us about her relationship with this brother *'I only see him once a month..., that's why we really get on'*. As the discussion progressed, transitions in her brother's living arrangements, and hence her reduced contact with him, also became apparent: *'I dinnae ken where he lives. He just moved too, so, and .. I normally see him once every single month right, but I couldnae see him in November.. because November they were moving house'*.

Looking at photos together in the interview also led to insights that would have been unlikely without these visual prompts. For example, Liz identified a tiny bike helmet as a memento of her first foster carers from eight years previously after being asked about its presence in a photo of her room. Channel's answers to questions about objects visible in the photo of her aunt's living room led to the realisation that this house (and the dog there) were particularly important to her as they had previously belonged to her late grandfather. The decoration of this room was also associated with her grandfather, and her photos of rooms she had decorated at her friend's flat revealed that she had reproduced this colour scheme there. These insights gained through the use of photos

further helped to understand Channel's disarray on losing access to both these important places.

Sometimes the visual methods led to discussions of **sounds**. Dylan's photo of a cat with a bell around its neck reflected both his feelings of insecurity in his flat but also his hatred of the silence there. Several respondents recorded silence; some as their favourite sound, others because it made them uncomfortable. Water was another commonly recorded favourite sound. For some, this related to a love of relaxing in hot baths. For Leah, rain falling outside created a sound of security and comfort and for Reggie, the sound of water generally or rain was both soothing and a reminder of the more natural life style he craved.



**Channel's favourite place, her late grandad's living room**



**Channel's decoration of her friend's flat**

**Music** was of great importance to many participants and, as such, our methods built on technologies and interests relevant to their everyday lives. The young people used music in different ways. Music was sometimes a source of identity; Reggie used it to disassociate himself from his birth family's tastes; Drab (12, children's unit) listened to musicians with geographical connections to his birth family, while Leah, Dylan and others, recorded music which evoked memories of their birth parents. Music was also used to create a comfortable, safe place; to cheer themselves up (Stereohearts 'Gym Class Heroes'; Cher 'Is it in his Kiss?'); as a source of inspiration (Wagner 'Ride of the Valkyries'; Jessie J 'Laserlight'); and motivation (Eminem, 'Lose Yourself' and Chumbawumba 'I Get Knocked Down..').

Sometimes lyrics were used by young people to work through and communicate difficult emotions. Like several others, Thomas carried a song around with him which enabled him to process the death of a close family member. Having had friends die through, or attempt, suicide, Vincent (16, living with his mother) used the Papa Roach song 'Last Resort' to express his powerlessness and frustration with agencies around self-harm and suicide, and to advocate for greater publicity and funding for services for young people. One of Drab's

musical choices combined the visual with the auidial. He filmed an excerpt of Professor Green's 'Read All About It' (ft Emeli Sande) which he used to reflect on his lack of relationship with his own father and siblings, and related sense of loss and anger. Drab was often encouraged to manage his anger. His discussion of this song and video suggested he wanted some acknowledgement of a right to his anger, but also emphasised that over the years he had become less angry, something he felt was less recognised by others.

Several young people were also very musical and played a number of instruments by themselves, with friends and key workers and in bands and orchestras. Steven was very proud of having built his own guitar. A few participants played instruments during their interviews, to relax and demonstrate their skills. Penfold had written music which provided the soundtrack for a game. Bob (13, foster care) played his guitar and wrote songs each day after school. His foster carer told us that this therapeutic process of song writing and playing was *'how you can understand some of his feelings..some of the songs that he does sing are quite sad but then they have happy endings, because he's making up his life journey, if something's happened to him, likes if he came in from school and he felt he was getting bullied, he sung a song*

about bullying'. Bob recorded himself for the project playing a song he had written called 'The Black Rose Song'. The song mirrored his journey through foster care. When he first arrived at his carer's, the song spoke of his heart being a black rose, symbolically dead. As the song developed, he sang about sitting on the beach (his favourite place) where his carer had taught him how to sit and process his thoughts and feelings. The song ends more optimistically with the words 'now my rose is turning red, my heart is no longer dead, anymore, anymore'.



## Box B: Activities offered to the young people

**All of the young people involved were offered three activities to be involved with.**

### Activity/Interview 1:

Take photographs of:

- Your 2 favourite places (any space inside or outside, from different angles)
- Your 2 least favourite places (any space inside or outside, from different angles)
- The door/ entrance to your favourite and least favourite spaces.
- 1 room which is used by you and by others where you live
- 3 objects or 'things' that are most important to you

### Make 1-3 minute sound recordings of:

- 3 sounds that are positive or make you feel good inside. Include at least one music track that makes you feel good or that you play the most
- 2 other sounds which are important to you or which you want to tell us about

### Activity/Interview 2:

My dream home or room

- Tell us what your dream home would look like. If you want you can make something in advance or, if you prefer you can do it with us.
- Music with a Message
- Choose 2 pieces of music with words which are important to you or with lyrics that you would like someone else to hear.
- The Place I Live
- Make a map of the place you live or spend most of your time. Add stickers showing where you like, don't like and the spaces you use and don't use

### Activity 3:

All the participants who had taken part in activities 1 and 2 were invited to take part in film making, song writing or art workshop days to communicate their experiences of being in, transitioning through and leaving care. The young people were supported through these days by the research team, three of the participants' key workers and SWAMP media in Glasgow.

## Box C:

**Top 5 Playlist** containing messages from young people to agencies, key workers and family members

- Prof Green Ft Emeli Sande - Read All About It
- NDubz - Papa
- Papa Roach – Last Resort
- Devlin Ft Ed Sheeran – Watchtower
- DJ Sammy - Heaven 9/11(Remix)

## Key Findings

Feelings of belonging:

- are complex, often ambivalent and undermined by frequent moves
- may be moulded by experiences of noisy residential homes or draw on networks of inside and outside places and as such may not reflect conventional ideas of 'home'
- are strongest in places which incorporate reminders of important people and memories and support the possibility of imagination, creativity.

Feelings of belonging and self-identity are carried through multiple placements by the presence (and often visibility) of personal items. These are associated with good relationships, memories and imagination and may include:

- *biographical items* connected to important people and places the young people may not always be able to contact or see (photos, cuddly toys, broken clocks, old bike helmets and various other unlikely objects)
- *comforting items* which provide comfort through physical texture and smell (cuddly toys, perfume)
- *social items* which provide access to music, film, you tube, computer games and virtual worlds (interactive gaming and facebook), to contact with friends and socialising at a distance, and to storing photos and music (mobile phones, computers)
- *reflective items* allowing reflection on personal experience (books, music)
- *escapist items* allowing escape from difficult thoughts (books, gaming, music)

Feelings of belonging to a place are supported by diverse factors including:

- access to private spaces in which to be alone and work through difficult emotions
- being able to personalise own places (involvement in decoration, displaying personal pictures and items)
- feeling integrated within, and able to contribute to, communal activities
- a sense of security (provided for some by locks on doors, for others by open doors)
- animals (associated with physical contact, affection and security)

The transition to independent living is difficult, and requires extended support

Certain agencies, particularly the police, are perceived by many as unsupportive and hostile

The severe financial pressure experienced by many excellent agencies supporting looked after young people seems to be having an adverse effect on them

Participative, creative, sensory methods can help young people to discuss difficult issues

## Recommendations

Practices of communication with young people should incorporate creative methods that do not rely on direct questioning or discussion but reflect young people's own cultures and provide them opportunities to control how they engage with difficult and sensitive subjects.

Placement planning should consider:

- the effects on young people of multiple moves
- the need to understand which items are of importance to young people and make sure they keep hold of them
- carers' support for young people's preferred means of escape and creativity (including technologies and books)
- young people's networks of friends and important places

Planning for transitions to independent living should take account of the young person's previous living arrangements and preferences, including geographical location, as well as the need for security

Greater provision of supported accommodation and other 'semi-independent' living options should be considered.

'Transition' should be extended to allow for greater 'post-move' support, the 'intentionally homeless' regulations should not be applied for a period of time, and specialist housing advice provided.

The police should engage in consultations and discussions about how they engage and communicate with young people who may be going through a difficult period.

More secure funding for statutory and voluntary agencies and carers is required.

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