There is much evidence of instability in the care system and poor developmental outcomes for looked after children, but looked after children are far from being a homogenous group. Their lives, needs and experiences vary immensely. Harriet Ward, Tricia Skuse and Emily R Munro present the findings from a recent study of children’s views of the care system in England (Skuse and Ward, 2003). They explore what children and young people did and did not like about being looked after, why some found it a beneficial experience while others did not, and discuss the reasons for their largely positive responses. Ordinary features of everyday life that peers would usually take for granted, such as having someone to talk to or doing ordinary family things like going to the cinema, were identified as benefits of the care system. These views and the expectations of looked after children need to be considered in the context of their past life experiences.

Introduction
It is not difficult to paint a negative picture of the care system. There is some evidence of abuse (Utting, 1997; Waterhouse, 2000) and much evidence of insensitivity to children’s needs (Fletcher, 1993; Fever, 1994; Shaw, 1998; Skuse and Ward, 2003). Developmental outcomes are still notoriously poor: children and young people who spend a year or more placed in care or accommodation are nine times as likely as their peers to reach school-leaving age with no qualifications, and three times as likely to have committed an offence in the previous year (Department for Education and Skills, 2004a). Many children’s experiences are also coloured by the instability inherent in the system: the most recent national figures show that in the year 2002–3 15 per cent of looked after children experienced three or more changes of placement (Department for Education and Skills, 2004b, p 6). This means that within that year 6,735 children each changed their carers on average once every four months. Numerous research studies have also shown that hidden among these figures will be many who moved far more frequently (see Jackson and Thomas, 1999; Ward et al, 2004; Ward et al, forthcoming). The national statistics all show positive changes since the introduction of two major initiatives aimed at improving the life chances and experiences of children in care or accommodation – Quality Protects (1998) and Choice Protects (2002). Nevertheless, they demonstrate that there is still much to be done to improve the quality of care that children and young people receive when placed away from home.

It may therefore come as a surprise to find that when the children are asked their views about being looked after they are often extremely positive. It is not unusual to come across comments such as:

The staff were brilliant . . .
I absolutely loved it there.
I loved it – they got me back into school and I was doing well – we used to go out on day trips and that . . . and all the kids got on with each other and the staff were great.
It was more than happy, it was fantastic.
It is better than home and it is a happy place to be. I love being in care.
(Fletcher, 1993, p 77)

Similar findings are apparent in studies undertaken outside the UK: Schiff and Benbenishty’s (2003) study of care leavers in Israel found that 80 per cent thought that they had benefited from residential care; in the USA, Courtney and colleagues (2004) found that over 50 per cent of young people who had aged out of foster care considered that they had
been lucky to have been placed away from home; in Canada, Kufeldt found that 71 per cent of a cohort of care leavers now in their 20s and early 30s felt that coming into care had been the best possible solution for them at the time the decision was made, and that a number thought they should have been placed away from home earlier (Kufeldt and Stein, forthcoming).

This paper presents some of the findings from a recent study of children’s views of the care system in England (see Skuse and Ward, 2003, for a full report). It explores what children and young people did and did not like about being looked after, why some of them found it a beneficial experience while others did not, and discusses the reasons for their largely positive responses.

One of the most important messages to draw from the findings concerns the interpretation of children’s views. ‘Listening to children, young people and their families when assessing and planning service provision’ is now a key requirement for the development of policy (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p 4), and this paper shows how different types of consultation may elicit very different responses, depending on the timing and context of the exercise.

Methodology
The young people in the study were part of a large cohort of 242 children and young people, all of whom spent at least a year in care or accommodation in one of six English local authorities between April 1996 and March 1998. Their needs, experience and progress were all followed at least until September 2000; some children were followed for a longer period (see Skuse et al, 2001; Skuse and Ward, 2003; Ward et al, forthcoming). During the study period, 61 young people aged ten and over left the care of the authorities; the original intention was to interview this group at annual intervals so that their experiences could be compared with those of the group who remained looked after. There were considerable delays and the research team eventually managed to trace and interview 27 (44 per cent) of these young people approximately two years after they had ceased to be looked after (2000–2001), and a smaller number (10/27) on a second occasion about a year later. The difficulties experienced in gaining access to young people eligible for interview are discussed below.

A further purpose of the interviews was to ascertain young people’s views of care or accommodation after sufficient time had elapsed for them to be able to consider the experience within the context of their lives outside the care system. This paper draws on interview data from this subset of children and young people and explores this issue.

Although the young people were given the option of inviting a relative or friend to accompany them, in the majority of cases they chose to be interviewed alone. Most interviews took place in the child or young person’s home, although a small minority were held, at the participant’s request, in a room provided in a social services office. One young man was interviewed in prison. Interviews were semi-structured, following a written schedule. They were designed to last approximately one hour, but often took much longer, as many interviewees were very eager to talk about their experiences. All interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. The data were subsequently analysed and emerging themes explored further.

A small follow-up study was also undertaken in which the key themes and issues identified by those young people who had been interviewed were summarised in a leaflet distributed through Who Cares? magazine. Although primarily intended as an accessible means of disseminating the findings, a brief questionnaire was included to enable other looked after children to comment on what they liked and disliked about being in care and their hopes and aspirations for the future. The responses of the 38 young people who replied to the follow-up leaflet have also been analysed and are referred to in this paper.

Would it have been better to have stayed at home?
The children and young people who were interviewed had experienced many of the
negative aspects of the care system: placement breakdowns, frequent changes of school and difficulties in maintaining contact with friends were common. One of the most interesting findings from this study is therefore that, approximately two years after exit, only four of them (4/27: 15 per cent) rated their time in care as having been unhappy, or fairly unhappy, and only three thought that it would have been better for them to have stayed at home. Nearly three-quarters (15/21: 72 per cent) thought that it was a ‘good thing’ that they had been placed in care or accommodation. Even some of those young people who viewed the experience as an unhappy one still thought that they had been better off in care.

Children and young people’s positive perceptions tended to come from an appreciation that the experience of care had improved their life chances. Comments such as the following need to be set against many of the criticisms frequently directed at the system:

*I think it was a good thing and I’ve come a long way . . . I just feel I’m a better person. I don’t think I would have gone back to school or done as well in school and wanted to go on to college, as what I would have if I’d stayed at home . . . I wouldn’t say that if I could go back I would change anything about it at all.* (Girl interviewed; looked after from age 15 to 17)

Young people also thought that the separation had offered an opportunity to address those factors that had precipitated the admission. They could appreciate that there had sometimes been a breakdown in family relationships, to which they might have contributed:

*If I’d stayed at home I’d have ended up hating my Mum and vice versa. And since I’ve moved into care, we’ve built a much better relationship.* (Girl interviewed; looked after from age 12 to 13)

Young people could also accept that, even if they had not enjoyed their time in care or accommodation, their parents might have benefited from a break in which their own problems could be addressed. Two brothers, whose final placement disrupted with ill feeling on both sides and whose main hope when they returned home was that they ‘would never go back into foster care again’, nevertheless thought that it was a ‘good thing’ that they had been looked after:

*Because of Mum. If I was still at home my mum probably would have had a nervous breakdown and I would have probably gone in foster care more.* (Boy interviewed; looked after from age 9 to 12)

The majority of young people interviewed had positive comments to make about the experience, had happy memories of it and tended to regard it as having improved their life chances. Why were their responses so positive?

Was this a biased sample? It is important to note that these young people were likely to have been a biased sample. This is true not only of this group, but also of almost any other sample of vulnerable children and young people who can be accessed for interview. Both their status as children and their vulnerability as looked after children mean that, quite rightly, ethical issues have to be carefully addressed in the process of selection (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Thomas and O’Kane, 1998). Although the evidence suggests that, in general, participation in research brings benefits such as ‘improved confidence and self-esteem and . . . feeling valued and respected’ (Lightfoot and Sloper, 2003, p 283), giving due weight to ethical considerations means that the most vulnerable children cannot be approached for fear of causing unnecessary intrusion or upset. Some researchers have suggested that certain children are unnecessarily excluded from participating, and have argued that those working with young people need to constantly review ways in which a wider group should be included. Connors and Stalker (in press), for instance, have successfully included children with disabilities not only as research participants, but also as advisers to the research team.

The number of gatekeepers encount-
ered in conducting research on looked after children tends to be particularly high, including not only parents but also social workers and foster carers (Heptinstall, 2000), all of whom may ask that particular children be excluded from the selection. On gatekeepers’ advice, a small group of children and young people were not invited to participate in the study under discussion because of the severity of their disability, extensive family difficulties or ongoing legal proceedings.

The sample was likely to be further biased because the young people were volunteers. Lack of motivation or low self-esteem may well have prevented some from agreeing to take part, and the sample was necessarily restricted to those who could be traced a year or more after they had left care or accommodation. Only five potential participants actively declined the invitation, but many more had no known address or did not turn up for the interview. The 27 young people who formed the research sample were just under half of those who might have taken part.

Those young people who are both accessible and willing to take part in a study such as this are likely to be those with better outcomes. Young people who are contending with major difficulties such as criminality, prostitution and/or addiction will be harder to trace, less well organised and therefore less likely to keep interview appointments.

Extensive data had been collected from the case files from all the 242 children and young people in the main cohort and it was therefore possible to compare the interview sample with those who met the criteria, but who had not been found. The data showed that, on average, the sub-sample of 27 young people who were interviewed had better educational outcomes, fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties and fewer placement changes than those who were not (despite the fact that one participant actually had the highest number of placements recorded for the entire cohort). Interviewees were therefore more likely to have had a positive view of their experiences than others in the main study. This point is reinforced by Heptinstall and colleagues (2001), who also suggest that young people with more positive experiences may be more inclined than others to take part in research.

**Questionnaire responses**

The question of bias can be further explored by looking at similar studies that used a different methodology. In general, the 38 questionnaire responses in the follow-up of the study identified greater dissatisfaction with the care system than the interview data revealed. Seven of these young people (7/38: 18 per cent) could not identify anything they liked about being looked after and disliked everything. Only one participant had not been able to identify anything he liked.

As Fine and Sandstrom (1998) emphasise, age and power differences between adults and children may prevent young people from expressing dissent or dissatisfaction. This could be one reason why so many of those interviewed apparently regarded their experiences in care or accommodation in a positive light. Certainly some of those who completed anonymous questionnaires felt free to express their views in no uncertain terms. In response to a question about what was likeable about being in care, the following views were expressed:

*Nowt. It’s crap . . . social services they do [my] head in.*

*Nothing . . . [I wish] social workers would stick their noses into someone else’s business.*

*Nothing, nobody cares. They pretend to though.*

The follow-up questionnaires were only returned by a very small group of children and young people. Much larger studies of a similar nature provide a slightly brighter picture. Fletcher’s (1993) study of questionnaires completed by over 600 children and young people in foster and residential care found that 15 of those in foster care and 34 of those in residential units said there was nothing good about being looked after, a dissatisfaction rate of about eight per cent. Shaw’s
similar study of over 2,000 questionnaires, undertaken five years later (1998), found the same proportion (eight per cent) of young people who said there was nothing good about the experience. Both these studies identified numerous areas where the system required improvement.

On balance, therefore, young people who responded to questionnaires were less positive than those who were interviewed, both in this and in other studies. However, the bias inherent in questionnaire studies is somewhat different from that in the interviews, with the result that the responses are not really comparable. Perhaps of most obvious significance is the finding that nine (24 per cent) of the 38 young people who responded to the follow-up questionnaires were placed in residential units – more than twice as many as one would expect in a normative sample of looked after children. This factor probably reflects the distribution of *Who Cares?* magazine, but young people in residential care are likely to have the greatest number of difficulties and perhaps be the least satisfied with their experience. A further and equally important point is that the questionnaire responses were from young people who were currently being looked after. The interviews were undertaken with those who had left care or accommodation at least a year previously and could therefore reflect on the experience in the light of subsequent events. Finally, there was no gender bias in the interview sample (13:14), while the overwhelming majority of responses to the follow-up questionnaires were from girls (31/38: 84 per cent); both Fletcher’s (1993) and Shaw’s (1998) studies also found a similar gender bias. At the same time, there is no specific evidence to suggest that girls are more likely than boys to be dissatisfied with their care experience.

So far we have largely focused on the negative views expressed by some questionnaire respondents. It is also important to note that others were extremely positive: three young people said they liked everything about being in care and six did not identify any particular aspect that they disliked. Clearly the finding that care is viewed extremely positively by some young people is supported by the questionnaire studies, although the picture they provide is somewhat darker than the interviews alone suggest. A closer look at what young people say they like (and dislike) about being looked after makes it easier to understand why some are so enthusiastic about the experience.

**Likes and dislikes**

Participants were asked to name three things that they had liked about being looked after and three that they had disliked. The three most popular features were:

- improved material circumstances (33 per cent);
- individual members of residential staff or social workers (33 per cent); and
- the family environment offered by some foster carers (30 per cent).

The three most unpopular features were:

- homesickness and missing family and friends (33 per cent);
- the rules and structure in some of the residential units and foster homes (30 per cent); and
- what was perceived as the disparaging attitude of some staff in residential units (26 per cent).

One young person did not name anything specific that he had liked, although he claimed that his care experience had been fairly happy; two could think of nothing they had disliked. Broadly speaking, the issues that mattered were material circumstances, relationships with social workers, foster carers and birth families, and life in residential units, including relationships with staff members. The responses to questionnaires identified very similar issues, although safety and love were more openly expressed as positive factors:

*My carers were more of a mum and dad than my real parents.* (Girl, follow-up questionnaire; aged 15 in residential care)

*Feeling safe knowing someone is always there for you.* (Girl, follow-up questionnaire; aged 15 in foster care)
Material circumstances

Although the most recent data only identify low income as a primary reason for fewer than one per cent of admissions to care or accommodation (see Department for Education and Skills, 2004b), poverty is, nevertheless, endemic in many of these young people’s lives (see Bebbington and Miles, 1989). Even with national figures showing a reduction in the number of children living in poverty, there is still compelling evidence of the material deprivation experienced by many young people coming into care or accommodation. The young people interviewed had notably few personal possessions at entry to care or accommodation, and these few belongings had often acquired a symbolic significance (see Skuse and Ward, 2003, pp 120–30). It is therefore unsurprising that for many the improved standard of living was perceived as a major benefit of becoming looked after:

Everyone you meet, they feel sorry for you and you feel like saying, ‘I’m OK. I get better opportunities than I would have living at home with my grandparents.’ I got taken to Florida which could never have happened in my own family situation. (Girl interviewed; looked after from age 15 to 17)

A similar point was raised by some of the questionnaire respondents:

Everything I get to do, go horse riding, dancing, football, go on loads of holidays abroad, being a bridesmaid. (Girl, follow-up questionnaire; aged 10 in foster care).

Foster carers

While some young people spoke of the material advantages of being looked after, other benefits were also important. Foster homes were liked because they offered opportunities to experience ‘normal family life’, to be ‘treated as part of a family’, to be taken on holiday or to ‘do family activities things’:

She used to cook for us and it was just a nice family, it was just normal family life and it was nice. I never really had that with my mum. (Girl interviewed; looked after from age 15 to 18)

Conversely, those foster homes where young people were not fully included as part of the family were disliked:

They didn’t tend to make you feel as if you fitted in because they had two daughters of their own and you got treated differently… So when they went to family parties and things like that I wasn’t invited, so you felt a bit left out and hurt really. (Girl interviewed; looked after from age 12 to 13)

The placement described above was by no means the only one where looked after children were discriminated against, or made to feel excluded. In one foster home the looked after children had to watch television by themselves in the box-room while the family sat in the living room; in another they had to spend Saturdays watching the daughter ride but were not allowed to try themselves. There was one foster home that appeared to be overtly abusive, and which the research team notified to the authority, following a protocol agreed at the start of the study and clarified with the children and young people before interviews took place. There were also many others that could not be called abusive, but where carers seemed to have been insensitive to children’s needs.

Very few young people experienced continuing practical or emotional support from foster carers for more than a short time after the placement had officially ended, a finding that replicates that of Biehal and colleagues (1995). However, the young people did not identify this as a particular problem: what appeared to matter was being made to feel that they belonged in the family at the time when they were placed.

Social workers

Young people were very clear about what they valued in social workers: the ability to act as an advocate on their behalf, the quality of the support they offered, and, most of all, the ability to listen and to communicate with them at an appropriate
level. Social workers were disliked if they failed to display these attributes:

*I really didn’t like her... ’cos every time I tried talking to her, she always butted in. Wouldn’t let me talk.* (Boy interviewed; looked after from age 9 to 12)

However, those who did succeed in building up a good relationship with the young people, in listening to their views and empowering them, were very much appreciated:

*We were like friends. She was there for me when I needed her help. She also left me alone to be able to fend for myself and to get on with things. But the main thing was that the support was there when it was needed.* (Boy interviewed; looked after from age 14 to 18)

Some social workers remained in touch with young people after their professional responsibilities had ceased; they sent Christmas or birthday cards, or dropped in occasionally for an informal visit after the case was officially closed or they had ceased to be employed by the authority. These continuing contacts, and particularly, perhaps, the conversion from a professional relationship to an informal friendship, however superficial, were a source of immense pride to the young people concerned:

*She’s actually left now. She’s going to come and see me later on. She’s finished work and she’s going to come for a drink, just to say Hi. To see how I am.* (Girl interviewed; looked after from age 14 to 16)

Residential staff

Several of the children interviewed had experienced the culture of delinquent behaviour, bullying and low staff morale known to exist in some residential units and well documented in other studies (Department of Health, 1998; Sinclair and Gibbs, 1998). The lack of empathy displayed by some residential staff was identified as one of the three most unpopular aspects of being looked after. Nevertheless, there were wide variations in children and young people’s experiences. As other studies have also found (Brown et al, 1998; Anglin, 2003), well-functioning homes had developed a culture in which the staff group could be extremely supportive of residents. Relationships with staff members in these homes were greatly valued – and for much the same reasons as those with social workers. Young people particularly appreciated staff who could communicate well with them and understand their feelings:

*The staff were good... They were friendly and had excellent attitudes towards you. They were just there for you.* (Girl interviewed; looked after from age 13 to 15)

Conclusion

English, and to some extent British, child welfare policy is currently focused on the *Every Child Matters: Change for children* agenda (Department for Education and Skills, 2005), with its emphasis on achieving the five key outcomes of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well being. The findings from this study identify the diversity of young people in care and accommodation; they show how each young person’s story is unique so that professionals will need to understand a range of needs and experiences if they are to help plan and support better outcomes.

The study also demonstrates that there are numerous small steps on the way to attaining the five key outcomes, and that not all significant gains are quantifiable. For example, the young people’s likes and dislikes revealed that many of the features of care that were most appreciated were the humdrum aspects of everyday life: having someone to talk to, doing ordinary, family things like going to the cinema or eating a meal together. A ‘substantial number’ of those who responded to the questionnaires in Shaw’s study made a similar point, when they replied that ‘having someone who cares’ was the best thing about being looked after (Shaw, 1998, p 72). The absence of such ordinariness was also a source of resentment in the more insensitive foster homes or dysfunctional residential units.
These ordinary features of everyday life would be taken for granted by many children and young people living with their families. One reason why they are identified as such strengths within the care system is because many looked after children contrast care favourably with their previous experience. This is evident from Fletcher's questionnaire study (1993) where, in spite of numerous criticisms, many young people thought that being looked after was 'better than what had preceded it'. The point is reinforced by some of the interviews that revealed, often incidentally, factors that demonstrated considerable differences between standards of parenting in birth families and those expected from local authority care:

I thought he [father] would not be over-violent. I expected to be hit if I had done something wrong, but not for fun. (Boy interviewed; looked after age 9 to 12)

The interviews also showed that, although young people often missed their families, they were nevertheless frequently relieved to be looked after because it meant that they were removed from abusive situations, a point also noted by Fletcher (1993). Comments made by interviewees demonstrated that some of the most vulnerable young people are those who are left in or returned prematurely to damaging family circumstances because of a reluctance on the part of social services to place or retain them in care or accommodation, a point raised by other studies (eg Farmer and Parker, 1991; Biehal, in press). This is a longstanding issue that has major implications for policy and practice. All local authorities are under pressure to restrict the numbers of children in care or accommodation, largely because this is regarded as an expensive service, the outcomes of which have often been criticised. However, children's well-being will not be adequately safeguarded and promoted unless policies designed to raise the threshold of entry to care are accompanied by substantial investment in family support services (Ward et al, 2004).

The long-term perspective provided by the interviews gave young people extended opportunities to compare their experiences before and after the care episode with their time in care or accommodation. This may have led them to view care in a more positive light than those who responded to questionnaires during a care episode. Interviews showed, for instance, that some of the negative features of the care system are also apparent when young people are living at home. Many of them had experienced frequent changes of domicile and school when living with their birth parents both before and after the care episode as well as when placed by the local authority. Some experienced greater stability while looked after than they did at home, while others' lives were characterised by transience wherever they were situated. Children's long-term experience of transience both within and outside their birth families is an issue that policy and practice urgently need to address.

Some young people interviewed may have had more positive views of care because it could be contrasted with their experiences after leaving. Perceptions may sometimes have been coloured by discovering that the often longed-for return to parents did not necessarily mean that longstanding difficulties had been resolved:

I hoped that I would get on with my mum and her boyfriend . . . But it only lasted three days. (Girl interviewed; looked after age 13 to 15)

None of this is to argue that we should be complacent about local authority care and accommodation. There are well-documented and long-standing difficulties within the system, many of which were reiterated by the young people who were interviewed or answered questionnaires. Frequent changes of placement and school, bullying in residential homes, the impersonal nature of some foster homes and poor communication skills of some social workers are long-standing issues that need to be addressed. The young people's perceptions would also have been affected by their own low expectations, another notable characteristic of
those interviewed, who frequently treasured minor displays of attention or small presents which their peers might well have taken for granted. This may well be one reason so many rated the care system so highly. The bottom line for any evaluation must be that, as this study found, the majority of service users agreed that the experience of care or accommodation had improved their life chances. Otherwise there is no point in placing them away from home.

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