**The potential negative impact upon the ‘life chances’ of young people of extensive privatisation within social care in the UK**

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**Introduction**

Private sector ownership and control of support services for looked after children (LAC) and young people in care (YPIC) within England, Wales, and most parts of the United Kingdom (UK) now dominate provision and control within social care. As is well versed in supporting studies, the past thirty-five years have witnessed a momentous and relatively swift transfer of ownership from the public to private sectors within social care (Harris, 2003; Jordan and Drakeford, 2012). Among other outcomes, this has led to much more fragmentation of provision, an abundance of often inefficient and expensive outsourcing and the commissioning of support services, alongside the transformation of previous roles for local authorities (LA’s), associate professionals, and key staff such as social workers. A discursive and ethical privileging of business and contractual ideals has led also to embedded structural and geographical inconsistencies forming regarding the quality and efficacy of care provision for LAC and YPIC. Some evidence also suggests that many children are becoming ‘invisible’ within largely bureaucratic, risk averse, and ever more forensic care proceedings and fragmented networks of support (for example, Ferguson, 2017; Green and Moran, 2021). Moreover, the traditionally diminished ‘life chances’ of many young people in long-term care appear to be depreciating further, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, including disabled children and young adults who seek asylum (Morris, 2005; Petrie, 2015; Humphris and Sigona, 2017). This article seeks to briefly offer some context and analyse privatisation in relation to its potential negative impact upon the life chances of children and young people in care.

**Privatisation and trends in young people’s care**

The 1980s initiated a neo-liberal inspired ideological switch to a mixed economy of social care in the UK, with competition and the supply-led commissioning of services ‘independent’ of local government control forcefully promoted. In principal, the Children Act (1989) had sought to prioritise voluntary and third sector care for LAC and YPIC above business and profit-based support. Nevertheless, despite receding budgets, many LA’s working to support children often emulated the NHS and Community Care Act’s (1990) legal remit of extending private sector services for adults. Moreover, despite gaining access to ringfenced funding streams, the voluntary sector was not always able or willing to accommodate social care provision for children and young people. Indeed, throughout the 1990s and beyond, larger charities especially moved away from providing services such as residential care for young people to instead focus much more upon supporting families (Petrie, 2015; Jones, 2019).

At present, 84 per cent of early years provision including nursery care in England is led by business and for-profit service providers. This is unique in Europe, as the likes of Germany (3 per cent) and France (4 per cent) - among other examples - continue to restrict the role of ‘for profit’ care for early years support (Williams, 2012; Petrie, 2015; Hall and Stephens, 2020). In the most utilised service of foster care, there was a 342 per cent expansion in the proportion of foster care days purchased from the private sector from between 2000/01 to 2012/13 by LA’s. Indeed, at present, an oligopoly of a few, large, independent fostering providers supplies more than three-quarters of foster care placements commissioned in England, and three of the largest single providers of such placements are owned by private equity firms. Together the three companies account for 45% of the total spend on independent foster care by LA’s in England. (Berg, 2019). Challenging the initial arguments by governments that competition and choice for service users remain central to marketization, monopolies have again formed in residential care for LAC and YPIC. For example, ten companies own a third of children’s residential homes in England whilst one company *Care Tech Holdings PLC* now owns a total of 185 homes (Jacobs, 2019). Meanwhile, between 2001 and 2017, state owned residential homes for children in England reduced from 61 per cent to 20 per cent. Moreover, by 2017, over two-thirds (57 in total) of residential special schools were owned and run by the private sector, compared to just 3 LA owned homes (LaingBuisson, 2016; Department for Education, 2017).

Despite the expansion of private sector care services, the state through LA provision and central government legislation still carries most of the legal responsibilities for the care and protection of LAC and YPIC (Jones, 2019). The political alignment to a consumer-based and contractual discourse has nevertheless curtailed welfare professional and public sector dominance in decision making, and there has ensued an associated drive to promote the principles of accountability, performance management, economic efficiency, and behaviouralist influenced evidence-based practice. In tandem, service users and family members have been expected to engage with managerial dominated co-production and participation initiatives, and internalise the equally hegemonic principles of resilience, strengths, and autonomy (Rose, 1996; Cowden and Singh, 2007; Fenwick and McMillan, 2012). Despite some advocates, such market-based responses and expectations placed upon young people and families in need have been critically reinterpreted as symbolising various types of objectification, commodification or abandonment (for example, Jones and Novak, 1999; Petrie, 2015; Featherstone et al, 2018; Webb, 2020). For example, some evidence indicates that increasing numbers of LA’s are seeking to move LAC and YPIC to other authorities, often leaving young people at a base out of reach from familial or other established social networks. The financial cost of property has remained one influence and has led to an abundance of children’s residential care homes in some Northern areas and far fewer elsewhere, especially London and parts of the South (Williams, 2012). Within a market discourse the role of professionals such as social workers have reconfigured to focus much more on technical, bureaucratic, and scientific approaches to practice, including commissioning and the forensic evaluation of ‘needs’ rather than direct provision of care. This has often sat uncomfortably alongside intense safeguarding, investigative and risk management roles, and chiefly among families living in poverty (Jordan and Drakeford, 2012; Parton, 2014; Bywaters et al, 2016).

**Reduced ‘life chances’ of children and young people in care**

Historically LAC and YPIC have tended to suffer significant social, health-related and educational disadvantages leading many to experience diminished ‘life chances’ throughout their life course. Such outcomes often merge with disadvantages already faced by many children from economic deprived backgrounds. Together this not uncommonly leads to a life beset with restricted educational and employment opportunities, poverty, impaired social mobility and long-term health, and elevated risks of crime, substance misuse and reduced life expectancy (Jackson, 2013; Prison Reform Trust2017; Datta et al, 2017). By age five, around 40 per cent of the total educational attainment gap of sixteen-year-olds from the most disadvantaged and least deprived fifth of families are set, and associated gaps in attainment, confidence and opportunities typically widen as LAC and YPIC grow older (Datta et al, 2017; Hall and Stephens, 2020). Only 14 per cent per cent of children in care secured five or more GCSE passes in England in 2015, for example, compared with 53 per cent of children in the general population. During 2014, 22 per cent of young women under 18 who left care become mothers, in comparison to a total conception rate of 2.3 per cent for under 18s in England and Wales. Young people who leave care represent just over a quarter of the adult prison population, despite the total proportion of under 18s entering LA care each year being less than 1 per cent in England and 2 per cent in Wales. Moreover, 49 per cent of young men in the criminal justice system have previously been in care (Jackson, 2013; Office for National Statistics, 2016; Prison Reform Trust2017; Gov.uk, 2021). Although the impact of pre-care neglect or trauma can influence outcomes such as those regarding learning for children and young people, even when these factors are controlled – evidence, including internationally - suggests that LAC and YPIC too often fall substantially behind the attainment levels of their peers not in care (Jackson, 2013; O’Higgins et al, 2015).

**Some market-related challenges in social care which can affect young peoples’ life chances**

More studies continue to imply or detail a link between marketisation and reduced life chances for young people in care. The *Prison Reform Trust’s* (2017: 1-4) co-produced study with YPIC who had fallen into the criminal justice system, for example, has emphasised the crucial role of the state in providing long-term stability, security, and emotional support, alongside an ‘unyielding commitment to give the child the best start and hope for the future’. These ideals, however, can quickly become out of reach for some young people in a fragmented and bureaucratic care system in which residencies, foster carers, education facilities, teachers and other support networks repeatedly change. One participant, a boy aged 15, detailed how his offending only began once he entered care, and noted how so far he had attended 16 different schools and 15 separate placements around England as part of his care. At the time of the study in March 2015 the report highlights how half of the 1,000 children in custody for offences were either in care or previously had been. This is despite only a small proportion (3% average) of children in England and Wales demonstrating ‘socially unacceptable’ behaviour prior to being brought into care.

Many of the young people interviewed in custodial institutions as part of the study articulated anger and frustration and suggested to the researchers’ evidence of impaired social and educational skills. These traits were identified as often resulting from long-term neglect and trauma. As part of the conclusion the report highlights that change in where young people live and who looks after them, where they are educated, and who offers emotion or practical support will often have a significant impact on any potential to participate in crime.

In another report the *Howard League for Penal Reform* (2016: 3-8) underline that in England LAC from between the ages of 13 to 15 years old are now around 20 times more likely to have contact with the police then children not in care. Moreover, they stipulate that ‘bad practices’ are not being ‘rooted out’ and addressed in many of England’s children residential homes run by private sector providers. There were, for example, 10,299 crime related incidents involving 16 different police forces in 2014-15 concerning young people in residential care. The report stresses that rather than receive support many children in such homes are instead being tipped into the criminal justice system.

Some recent studies examining the poor educational outcomes for children and young people have identified an almost disregard for young people’s education among professionals and support staff. This is alongside low expectations and wider stigma attached to any LAC or YPIC status. In addition, numerous associate influences including poor information sharing and working relations between professionals’, support staff and carers; frequent placement and school moves; delayed enrolments at any new schools; ongoing care related meetings including during school time, among numerous other examples, may all magnify longer established forms of exclusion (for example, Walker, 2017; Mannay et al, 2017; O’Neill et al, 2018).

For some time, the pivotal role of support in the early years of a child’s life have been documented, which typically play a central role in determining a child’s opportunities in later life. However, as part of their critique of the prevailing dominance of markets and private sector provision within nursery care, Hall and Stephens (2020: 3-7) suggest that such evidence appears to be increasingly ignored by policy makers. Alongside early years support now being dominated by the private sector - alongside ever more diminishing pay for childcare professionals - nursery provision in England is now amongst the ‘most expensive in the world’. Indeed, with increasing costs and reduced meaningful state support, Ofsted has indicated that more than 500 nurseries, pre-schools and childminders closed between April 2018 and March 2019. Poorer families and parents have tended to be the most effected by such reforms, and the authors argue that early year’s provision should become a Universal Basic Service, with a strong emphasis placed on the meeting of social goals.

**Conclusions**

Social Care and associated supporting services for children and young people in England, Wales and most other parts of the UK are now dominated by a wide range of private sector providers. This outcome is unique in Europe, and indeed many other parts of the world, with most nation-states and governments still restricting the involvement of business sectors in the support of vulnerable social groups within social care, especially children and young people. Numerous practical and ethical problems have been identified by a wide range of studies over many years (for example, Williams, 2012; Petrie, 2015; Jones, 2019). Among many other examples, these include the lack of accountability of many private sector providers, the limited experience of delivering social care of numerous such providers, as well as degrees of financial opportunism which can at least initially motivate involvement, including private equity firms. Moreover, factors such as the often inefficient and high relative financial cost of outsourcing and managing multiple suppliers have been identified. This is alongside the emergence of acute service fragmentation and numerous other practical difficulties associated with a purchaser/provider split and related instrumental and reductive approach to professional support. These and other factors often generate significant problems in attempts to offer consistent support to promote the life chances and well-becoming of young people in care.

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