

BORN HOMELESS

Phil Frampton was born in care and lived in eight different homes before he was 16. But he says he was one of the lucky ones

Children have the right to a roof over their heads. But sadly this does not give them the right to the *right* roof. Having spent all my parentless childhood in the care system, I am only too aware of what that can mean. Today, its shambolic state condemns thousands of young people to an 'almost homeless' condition.

I was born in care in Cornwall and was left with Barnardo's. I lost my first roof because I was too old to stay there, my second in Devon because my mother wanted me closer to her, and my third in Shropshire because she didn't want me at all. I lost my fourth roof in Bolton because they didn't want me either. My fifth in Southport disappeared because it was sold over our heads when I was six. I gratefully lost my sixth roof when I was 15 as the brutally abusive superintendent of the home wanted me out. At 16, I lost my seventh roof because the sexually weird people also wanted me out.

So I was still at school sitting for my A Levels when I found my haven in a dingy bedsit in Southport with older men who were down and out. When I left school, I had to get a live-in job in a hotel as I had nowhere to stay. At university in Bristol I watched as the students went back home

at weekends. I had no home to go to, I can't even remember where I spent that Christmas. Little wonder that at college I began assisting squatters to defend their homes and campaigning for gypsies.

On the move

I may have been moved through eight different placements, but my good fortune was that I was able to spend 12 years growing up in the same town. Tragically, this is not the case for thousands of the 60,000 young people in care today. Many experience 20 moves across cities and regions before they exit the care system.

Most children in care are victims of abuse, neglect or tragedy. Yet local authorities retain the right to split these young people from their siblings and move them away from friends and schools. I have met young care leavers who have had over 70 placement moves in 10 years. Moves take place because of shortages of adequate accommodation caused by the government's penny-pinching reliance on the fostering system.

Thousands of traditional children's homes have been closed down because of cuts in local government expenditure. The councils sold off the family silver – our homes – and now Britain is short by more

than 16,000 placements. Many residential homes are private so social workers will try and get young people back into foster care quickly to keep within budget.

Fostering resentment

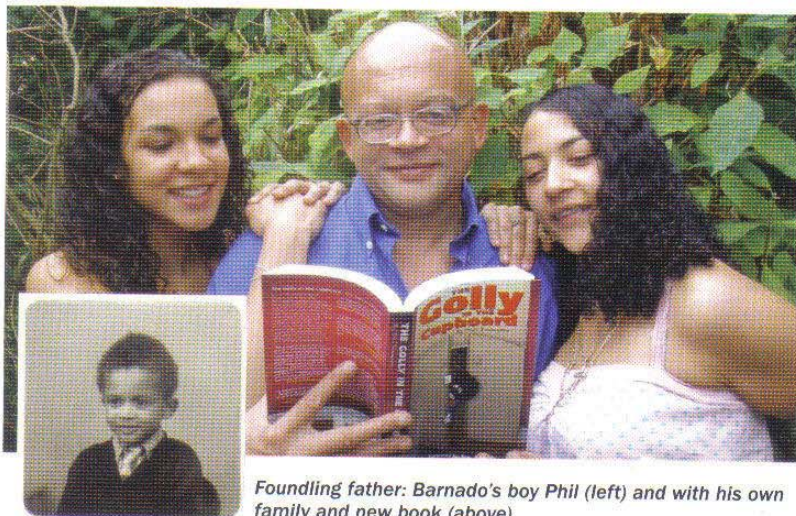
Many young people, especially teenagers, do not want to live with a foster family. A 2002 Save the Children survey in Scotland discovered that the majority of teenagers in care preferred to be in homes. Many entering care are still closely attached to their own family, others are sick of being moved around and some prefer to be with other young people in the same situation.

Placing a young person who has already suffered the trauma of being parted from their birth parents in another family is a risk, but the situation is compounded by government policies that leave young people festering in inappropriate and emergency placements. The result is that placement breakdown rates are extremely high. And they occur without dignity; young people are left sitting in social services with their stuff in a bin-liner waiting to be told where they are going.

Every time a placement breaks down it represents another failure for the child, and another rejection. Every time a new placement requires them to move area it means lost schooling, lost friends, lost security and lost self-esteem. The cumulative impact is often that the young person stops trying to make friends.

The fact that these children have the highest school truancy and exclusion rates shows how many give up on their education. Abused, even by the care system, many begin to abuse themselves through alcohol, drugs or self-harm. Despite government pledges, at 16 many find themselves dumped in a hostel and left to survive on benefits. Is it any surprise that care-leavers fill the mental health units, boost homeless numbers, and that a quarter of those in prison have been through the care system? Tragically, in the prisons I have visited, I have noticed a curious calm, as if many there have found peace in the knowledge they have a home.

Phil Frampton is a journalist and documentary maker



Foundling father: Barnado's boy Phil (left) and with his own family and new book (above)