

'Bring back orphanages'

Larger children's homes had several benefits. Among them was the ability to accommodate siblings. A German model could provide the template for their revival, writes former Care Leavers' Association president **Phil Frampton**

The most appalling statistic about our modern care system is that 85% of siblings are split up in care. Most parents, on hearing this, are horrified but the sad reality is that those managing the care system can no longer provide accommodation large enough to viably keep siblings in care together.

Professor Juliet Mitchell, a leading authority on sibling relationships at the University of Cambridge's Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, says such a statistic illustrates that we underestimate the deep meaning of sibling relationships.

"It's a double whammy. You've lost your family home and your parents and then you go and lose your siblings. Children form enormously important sibling bonds in the absence of parents."

Children's homes today account for only 10% of care placements in England and can rarely take more than six young people. More than 20,000 places in children's homes have disappeared over the past 30 years, resulting in placement shortages that no amount of government campaigns on adoption and fostering have resolved. Most of today's homes are privately owned and cannot afford to sit half empty on the off-chance that a group of siblings may arrive.

Such shortages also mean that each child is put wherever a placement can be found and has resulted in so many temporary and unsuitable placements that, on average, young people in care are moved every two years, often to a different town. Each time they lose their home, siblings, friends and schooling.

Born in 1953, I was raised in "orphanages" that were home to between 20 and 40 children. In my time there, at least five

sibling groups passed through, being able to share most of their childhood together, as was the case for thousands of others.

I'm not saying the old-style orphanages provided the type of care we should be aiming for, but I do think we should be investing in larger children's homes.

In Germany, children's homes account for 50% of care placements. Last December I revisited Kinderhaus in East Berlin which currently houses 280 children, aged six months to 18. Many of them live with their siblings in family group apartments (akin to former Barnardo's villages). By chance, I came across a sibling group of five who had been there since my visit four years ago – something almost impossible in our system.

German child protection expert Professor Reinhart Wolff says: "What we find important is that you do not sever the links of a child to his or her local environment, so it's important that most of the kids, more than 80% living here, come from the area and

still keep their links to their schools and friends."

It is this stability of placement that allows the social pedagogy model to flourish. "If the child has an assurance that this situation will not be broken up by the school, or by the child welfare department, then of course the child can settle down and muster his or her resources and develop," Wolff adds.

It is also worth considering the fact that larger children's homes can take advantages of economies of scale. Kinderhaus has a residential family intervention unit, a mother and baby unit and a child protection assessment unit for a weekly cost per child of just €700, much less on average than a British therapeutic home, and less than charged by our fostering agencies.

Because there are so many children they can elect their own youth council, with powers to summon and reprimand staff and children, a key protection against abuse and bad management practices.

In our budget-constrained care system, a programme of recreating large complexes of homes (such as past Barnardo's villages) or apartments to keep sibling families together and help with placement shortages makes more sense than a care system with so many young people leaving care in a worse condition than when they entered.

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No one wants to see a return to old-style orphanages but larger facilities would benefit some children

