

## Care Leavers' Stories project

Chris Appleby

Interviewed by Khatija Hafesji

C1597/16

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# Social Care Institute for Excellence

## Interview Summary Sheet

## Title Page

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**Title:** Mr

**Interviewee's  
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**Sex:** Male

**Occupation:** Postgraduate student

**Date of birth:** 1990

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## Track 1

*Hello. Can you tell me your name and something sort of about yourself?*

My name's Chris Appleby. I'm 23 years old. I live in Taunton, Somerset. I'm currently a sort of student and working part time.

*What are you studying?*

I'm studying – I'm doing a Masters degree in social work. I've just finished my first year, so I've one more year to do and then as long as I pass everything I should qualify and be a social worker and hopefully find employment in a fulltime position.

*So did you do an undergraduate degree in social work as well?*

No, I did an undergraduate degree in public services, because – originally when I was in school I wanted to join the military, 'cause my sort of family's got a strong military history. But then with everything that was going on in Afghanistan and Iraq, I didn't really agree with that so didn't think I could be part of that, so I sort of decided to – thought the police would be another sort of interest. So I went to college, did a sort of two year sort of diploma in public services there and then did the degree in public services. I had a year as a special constable, working for Avon and Somerset Police. And I finished my degree and they announced recruitment cuts and freezes [laughs]. So I thought, oh, I need to sort of change where I want to go, 'cause the chances of me getting in were very slim because of my age and I recognised that. So I decided I – well, I thought social work might be interesting, because I spent a number of years in foster care and had lots of contact with social workers and other sort of professionals. So recognised I needed to get some more experience. I managed to get a position sort of – as a sort of support worker role, working with sort of care leavers and young offenders and sort of supporting them in the transition from care to sort of independence, helping them with sort of life skills, etc. And then I also managed to secure a position on an independent fostering panel and also help out with some of the

training that they do, and then started the degree in September. So that's where I am now, at the moment.

*What was the support worker role like?*

Well, initially – I mean, 'cause it was a new company that was sort of formed, had their first referral across and they asked if I was interested. And it was just this one child, so it was a sort of sessional ten hour contract, and I would sort of see the child on a daily basis and provide sort of two hours' sort of support a day. Various things, sort of – either sort of trying to sort of take him to college, getting him – doing his sort of food shopping with him and just general sort of building his sort of life skills. And yeah, so thoroughly enjoyable. Obviously at times can be challenging, but I was sort of used to a lot of abuse from when I worked in the police, so ... but yeah, it was good. And I sort of – I'm still doing work for the same company sort of in a part time capacity at the moment again, which I'm sort of enjoying.

*And the foster carer interview panel you were on?*

So it was – so it's an independent fostering agency and it just happened that – when I had the interview for the support worker role, the manager was off sick and the director was interviewing me. And I mentioned that I was in foster care and he said that they're just creating an independent fostering agency and as part of the foster panel they need a central list of people. And one of the people on the central list they need is an ex service user /child in care. Asked if I'd be interested, so I asked what would be involved and said yes. So I've sort of been – and I really enjoyed that. And I'm sort of still doing that at the moment. Erm ...

*Do you interview foster carers?*

So basically we get given sort of assessment reports on prospective foster carers. So anyone who's looking to become a foster carer will go to a sort of skills to foster week, and if they're still willing to sort of go through the process, a social worker will be assigned to them and go round and do home visits and interview their sort of – the

applicants and sort of their sort of family, and then compile a report, which can sort of be up to 150 pages long. So basic information and all sorts of stuff in it, CRB checks. And we have to read through the report, every panel member, and then come to panel, discuss each report, sort of strengths, weaknesses, and sort of talk amongst the panel and direct questions – invite the social worker in, ask questions directly to the social worker about the report. Perhaps ask anything that might have been missing from the report. And then invite the prospective foster carers in and direct questions to them. And they will then go away and then as a panel we either sort of – we'll make a recommendation for approval if appropriate.

*How have you found that?*

Really interesting, because the amount of information on the report is massive, from sort of – people sort of opening up their whole life onto a piece of paper, you know, detailing, you know, sort of tragic events and sort of incidents throughout their life. You know, and to be able to sort of see that and for them to share that with you, it's quite a big thing. But I love it, 'cause I just find it really sort of interesting and also sort of nice to see that there's people out there that want to help other sort of people and sort of give them a chance. So yeah, I thoroughly enjoy it.

*Have you gained anything from that process, from doing that work?*

Erm, I don't know, sort of – so as I said, I really enjoyed doing it. So I help out with some of the training, whereby I just sort of go to one of the training days and talk to prospective foster carers about sort of my experience of being in foster care, to just give them an insight. And we always seem to get sort of good feedback from the people on the course. So that's been a continuing thing, that I'll go along and sort of do that. And, you know, I think sharing information and knowledge with anyone is always going to be a good thing. So yeah.

*Okay. And the social work Masters, is that different from a social work undergraduate degree?*

No. The only sort of difference, in a sense, is that it's just a postgraduate qualification rather than an undergraduate qualification. Obviously I've already done my undergrad in public services, with a view to getting into the police, but that wasn't going to happen. And then obviously I was interested in social work, saw the Masters degree. Saw there was sort of some funding available from the NHS through a sort of social work bursary – I mean, 'cause if it wasn't for that, I wouldn't be able to afford to do it, simple as that. So – because if the Masters wasn't there and your only other option was to do another undergrad, I wouldn't get any finance for that and there's no way I'd be able to fund that myself. So that's sort of why I'm doing it there. I wouldn't say I'm naturally sort of academic, so it's been a bit of a struggle [laughs]. But it's alright.

*Is it a very academic course?*

Very academic. And I've – I find it really interesting because maybe – I'm the youngest person on the course. I mean, there are other people in their twenties, people in their thirties and forties, and I just think I get really frustrated sometimes in some of the lectures and seminars because I just see them as sort of wasting sort of learning time and talking about things that I don't really see relevant. So for example, I remember we had a seminar on sort of social workers' art. And I was thinking, well, okay, you can have this discussion, but are we ever going to have this discussion or use it with anyone we're going to be working with? Probably not. I mean, there's sort of little things that, I guess, frustrate me about the course. Like there's a module on ethics and values, which I recognise is important. You need to be sort of ethical in your decision making, obviously, the amount of people that are involved and it's going to effect. But when we're spending sort of weeks and weeks looking at sort of Aristotle and sort of Platon and Socrates, while I sort of, you know, sort of recognise that, you know, that's sort of, you know, it's interesting, I don't particularly see the relevance to the course. Because again, if I'm thinking about when I'm working with someone, will they care what Socrates and Platon thought? Probably not, you know. I don't know. And I just think there should be sort of more sort of practical with it, because I – sometimes, you know, when we're writing a 3,000 word essay on something like that, I don't see what I'm getting from it and how it's making me a

better social worker. So I think there need to be changes there. But I made my feelings heard [laughs].

[09:15]

*Did you? How?*

Well, I just sort of – at the end of the year, I just sort of said to my tutor that I just don't really see sort of, you know, I think, because there, you know, there's limited time on the course, it could be better spent on looking at another topic. For example, we had to do – sit a law exam and looking at sort of family social work and adult mental health, etc, and I felt we were really – everyone was underprepared for the exam. And considering, you know, that's the sort of legal framework we're working from, it seemed very weird to me that we spent more time on ethics and values, looking at Socrates and Plateau, than we did looking at the law aspect. And I felt there should have been more focus on that. But that's just my opinion.

*Is it a year long or is it longer than that?*

So it's a two year course. I've finished sort of one year but I've got – I need to wait – I should be getting some results later this month about whether I passed placement or not. At the interim stage I was, so hopefully I'll still be passing. I've got two resubmissions to do, so that's fun. And then second year, I'll go back, another dissertation to do and I'll be on placement for 135 days.

*Where will you be, in the same area?*

I don't know where I'll be on placement. My placement in the first year was 65 days, it was only a short placement, and that was working for Action for Children, in a sort of family support worker role. And I was based at three different children's centres in the sort of Devon area. And I'm from Somerset, so it cost me a fortune in fuel, which wasn't ideal. And there's been discussions about possible placements for the next year and we need to sort of say where our interests lie. And sort of they've talked

about, again, sort of placements in Devon, which, you know, I'll have to – I'll do it if I have to, but again it's going to cost me an absolute fortune to do. And I can remember at the start of the course they sort of said, you know, really this is a fulltime course and we don't recommend that you work, but I think that some people forget that not everyone's in a situation where, you know, they're able to be supported by other people. You know, I need to be working 'cause I've got bills and such to pay, you know. I don't have the choice of moving back home, so ...

[11:50]

*And do you want to be a social worker at the end of this?*

Erm, yeah, I'd like to sort of be a social worker, ideally working with sort of children within the care system or sort of leaving care. But at the same time, since I've been on the course, my sort of interest in sort of politics has increased massively, just because I feel that maybe – even if I become a social worker, I'll only be able to maybe affect things on the sort of micro sort of level. And there's so many things that just – I read and see that just annoy me and frustrate me, and then, you know, when you sort of see just sort of ridiculous decisions and policies sort of being – it just annoys me. And I think that the sort of normal average person in the country isn't represented. I mean, you're sort of looking at sort of Westminster and it's made up of, you know, a large number of sort of white sort of men from very well off sort of backgrounds. And I don't think that properly represents the country and it annoys me [laughs].

*Are there any policies in particular that frustrate you?*

Well, erm, I guess sort of – I've got passions towards sort of children in care and care leavers, because I find it really interesting how – so, for example, in my situation, where I was in my foster placement and then – with my sort of twin brother, and we sort of got to sort of seventeen and then we were introduced to our sort of leaving care worker and they were talking about sort of leaving care and what's going to happen next, sort of thing. And then when we were sort of seventeen and a half, it was

discussed that there was leaving care accommodation available, they're really nice flats, if you don't take them you'll probably be in something really bad and dingy. So we thought, well, I don't want to be living in a dingy poor flat, so okay. But both myself and my brother were happy to stay in our foster placement, our foster carer was happy, but the sort of decision was made, if you like, and we moved. Looking back, it's simply all financial, you know. In my view, it'd have been much better for myself and my brother to stay in the placement, while we were sort of still in education and to finish it rather than moving around, but the decision was made by someone who doesn't know what's going on and is just crunching numbers. And then moved into the sort of leaving care accommodation, was in there for three months and then once – about three months and then I reached eighteen, at which point I was classed as an adult and they said, oh, we're stopping funding the sort of placement. So I had to go down to the council with my leaving care worker with a letter saying I was homeless, essentially, and then my local council gave me an offer of accommodation. If I refused it then they would have no obligation to house me, so I had to accept it. And then as it went – so I've been sort of living in my sort of council flat ever since. And I don't know, it just sort of seems crazy because I would say, in a sort of normal situation, when a child reaches eighteen or sort of whatever, Mum and Dad don't turn round and say, 'Right, you're eighteen, get out.' But effectively the sort of local authority, who have sort of got sort of, you know, responsibility towards that child, is sort of saying, 'Right, we can't afford you any more. Get out.' But then – I know they're coming from a different part, but when you've got, you know, research shows that children in care, care leavers, are more likely to be unemployed, more likely to suffer mental health issues, more likely to be involved in crime, more likely, you know, there's lots of negative statistics available, so surely it's more beneficial to keep that child in placement, where, you know, there's no issues in that placement and they're able to be supported by the foster carer, to help them, you know, in education or whatever and try and increase their sort of life prospects, rather than saying, 'Right, you're eighteen, we're cutting your funding. You're on your own.' Because although some in a, you know, potentially you might be paying housing benefit, council tax benefit, you know, so surely it's better off to keep that fund, you know, in a – I think it's always looking at the short term rather than the long term. They don't see a big picture, you know. And I sort of think, you know, with

my sort of friend groups – you know, a lot of my friends, they might have, you know, the majority of them probably still live at home. Some of them might have moved out, been made redundant, moved back home. Might have moved out, moved in with a girlfriend or something. That didn't work out, moved back home. But for a child in care, they don't really have that option, you know. If it sort of goes sort of tits up, if you like, you think, oh, I'm in the wire here [ph]. So stuff like that annoys me. So when I see sort of cuts being made to sort of supporting sort of care leavers and sort of forcing them out of placements at an early age, I just think it's ridiculous. And especially when you've got, you know, the general cost of living going up and people staying living at home longer because they can't afford to move out because the cost of renting's so high and wages aren't high, you know. It's just generally difficult for young people at the moment anyway. You're making, you know, a sort of – another area who are sort of perhaps more vulnerable, struggle even more. And it doesn't surprise me that, you know, I think as a result of that, sort of young people within the care system, from the care system, are often involved in crime, because it's sort of fight or flight and you're sort of – if you have to struggle so much from such a young age, I think you just get to a point where you think, why do I bother. So ... [Laughs]

[17:37]

*Okay. So this is where you're at sort of now. And you've mentioned not having home to go back to and that being like a source of insecurity. What was home like when you were younger? So where were you born?*

Okay. I was born in Barnstaple in Devon – no – yeah, that's right, yeah. My dad was in the RAF and I can remember sort of, at a young age, we sort of plonked around a number of RAF sort of bases, sort of Brize Norton, Ruislip, Carterton, lots of different sort of bases. And then when I was five years old, I remember my sort of dad left home and then myself and my brother moved down to Taunton with our mum, 'cause our mum's side of the family was sort of living in Taunton. And then when we were eleven, our mum died. And most of the time our sort of dad was sort of totally out of the scene. At first he was sort of like a weekend dad and that turned to every other weekend, then every month and then he just sort of – didn't hear from him for years,

and then turned out he'd sort of started a new family elsewhere. So yeah, so our mum died when we were eleven, so then our nan sort of looked after us for a bit. And then unfortunately, because I think my nan saw a lot of my dad in my brother, that caused a number of difficulties, so we couldn't live with our nan sort of any – any longer. So we stayed with our aunt and uncle for some time, but they used to sort of live in a bungalow, so we were sleeping on sort of camp beds and stuff. And they had sort of two children of their own and they were struggling financially and they weren't provided with any assistance at all from the local authority to help look after us. So then sort of – obviously there was a social worker involved anyway and it was discussed about sort of foster care. We didn't go into the care system – although we had sort of involvement with social services, if you like, we didn't actually go into care till we were fifteen, so relatively late. But we were at an age where we sort of understood the reasons sort of why. Looking back at it now, I think if I was in the same position, I would have probably questioned, well, why can you not provide any sort of financial support to help us sort of stay here. But that's hindsight. So yeah, so we were fifteen, both moved into a foster placement in Wellington in Somerset. And then we only had sort of one placement that was fairly successful. Erm, sort of there from the age of fifteen up until we left and, yeah, it sort of proved to be okay, although I can remember sort of – very much trying to sort of – I don't think I accepted that I was sort of in care, if you like. So, you know, getting magazines through the door and I would sort of – no, I'm not interested in that. You know, I was sort of – I wasn't keen to have the sort of label, because a lot of negative stigma, you know, surrounds it. So yeah, and placement sort of happened and did college and everything and then had to move out and – yeah.

[20:51]

*That's a very clear sketch. If I take you back to your sort of earliest memories of life, kind of what would they be?*

Earliest memories, erm ... [Sighs] I can remember just at a young age, my brother getting locked in the toilet and the fire brigade had to come out and get him. But I don't know.

*Is he older than you, your brother?*

Twin brother, we're twins. So I don't know, I sort of remember ... I don't know, really.

*What was the house like where you grew up?*

Where I grew up?

*And the area.*

Erm, I can remember the sort of house in one of the RAF bases. It was near a field. There was a garden with a tree and a sort of lane round the back and we used to sort of ride our little tricycles sort of round and stuff. That's all I can really remember there, like, we were sort of really young. But the place we spent most of our time is when we eventually moved down to Taunton. Then we were in that property from the age of five to twelve, thirteen, or something like that. And that was a – on a sort of council estate. I mean, it was – it was fine. Sort of, you know, lived there for ages, sort of went to school. You know, there was obviously issues – not directly affected us, but sort of further sort of down with regards to sort of crime and drugs, etc. But it was alright.

*What was your – what's your dad like?*

Erm, a bit of an idiot. Obviously – the, obviously, relationship with my, obviously, mum and dad obviously didn't work out and he left. And then obviously started a new family elsewhere that I wasn't aware of 'cause we didn't have contact with him for – for years and years and years. It wasn't till I was sort of – I think there'd be an odd phone call perhaps at birthday or Christmas, and it wasn't till I was sort of eighteen that he sort of made, like, contact, if you like. And then he sort of wanted to meet both my brother and I, so he came down to meet us both and he brought with him his sort of – his sort of new partner and his sort of little girl. And I don't know, it

was – obviously it was weird. I hadn't seen him in ages and I was sort of like, well, I'll give him a chance, sort of thing. But I can remember sort of just, like – when I was in the car on the way to meet him, all I kept thinking of was, you know, I wonder how much hair he has, because, you know, I didn't know who he was. So then we sort of went out for a meal and – and then sort of – and that was that. And then he sort of made contact a little bit after. But again it sort of died down and it was sort of like – I don't know. I just find it sort of really weird because I like to think if I was, you know, had a child and sort of had disappeared for a number of years and started a new family, and then perhaps thought, actually, I should have supported you in some way, you know, and it's just – it just seems – I don't have, you know, much time for him because he's had plenty of opportunity to – to make the effort, to make something happen, you know. I've sort of had, you know, been sort of going to college, uni and been working and, you know, paying the bills and whatever, and I think it's down to me to try and chase him. You know, I've sort of managed to sort of get where I am now without him and I just find him an interesting character.

*Describe his character.*

I don't know, sort of just awkward sort of socially. I don't know, sort of difficult to describe, sort of – I find him sort of – I struggle to understand it, I guess, how sort of someone can have a child and sort of forget about them and then sort of want to be part of their life again and then not want to be. It just sort of – it doesn't really make much sense. So, you know, and my brother sort of recently got engaged. He's sort of been with his sort of partner for, like, five years. And he made the decision, with sort of, I think, pressure from his partner, to sort of invite our dad to sort of the engagement party. And I know from my point of view, if I was sort of – if I was in that situation and I was sort of the dad, if I had been invited to that, I would have sort of been, you know, very thankful and grateful that, you know, he'd invited me to sort of the celebration, you know. And I don't know, it just seems weird that ... I don't know, it's just awkward.

*Did he come to the –*

Sorry?

*Did he come?*

It hasn't happened yet. It's in a few weeks' time. But I don't know, it's just weird.

*What did he do in the RAF?*

He was, erm, sort of like a – what's the sort of term? An air sort of steward. And he would do the sort of royal flight service with sort of Princess Anne and, you know, members of the royal family. And that's how he met my mum, because for a period of time our mum was sort of personal dresser for Diana and she would sort of go round with her and be responsible for sort of getting her outfits ready and – and whatever. So yeah. And that's why I always find it really weird, sort of looking back on my life, to think that, like, when I was, you know, a lot younger, sort of my dad was in the RAF, my mum was sort of working sort of for Princess Diana – sort of she came to, like, our christening and stuff and, you know, we've got like pictures and whatever, sort of me as a little kid, which is, like, really weird. And then to think that later down the line, you know, we sort of – our mum dies and we ended up in care and everything. And it's just sort of really – I just find it really weird, you know. And sort of – it obviously makes you think, you know, the what ifs. So ...

[27:57]

*So your mum was living in London then, was she?*

Yeah, she was living in London, yeah.

*But you've never lived in London?*

I've never lived in London, no. I lived sort of, I guess, sort of near London, in, like, some of the RAF bases as a child, but I can't remember them all off the top of my head.

*Were you too young to remember moving around to different RAF bases or ...?*

Erm, yeah. There's only sort of – yeah, I don't really remember it too much. It's all a bit of a blank, really.

*Do you remember your dad leaving?*

Erm, not really. I just sort of remember being in one place and then moving to another place and then seeing him on weekends, and then for that to slowly sort of disappear.

*And was your mum still working for Princess Diana at this point?*

No. So she – well, she was working for Princess Diana and then she stopped working because – so if I go back. She had – she stopped working 'cause she had developed cancer, so she was sort of too ill to work. And then sort of – she sort of – I can't remember all the dates and the ins and outs of it, but, yeah, she had cancer before and that's why she stopped working. And then we sort of moved sort of down to sort of Taunton and – yeah, and she didn't sort of work for – again. But I remember sort of her sort of receiving sort of Christmas cards from her in the past and stuff. That was really weird.

*Did she tell you about life in the royal world?*

Erm, I guess I was at an age where I didn't really sort of ask about it or know exactly, you know, sort of – so not really, you know. All I know is that she, you know, went around the world with her and, you know, was sort of good friends with sort of Diana and, you know, she had sort of gifts and letters and stuff from her. And that's all I know, really. But it's a bit weird, a bit surreal, 'cause not many people can say that.

*And then you were seven when Diana died, or slightly younger?*

I can remember that actually, 'cause I remember I was in – I was in Newcastle, seeing my dad's side of the family. And I remember sort of being in the lounge there and it sort of came on the sort of TV. And yeah, that was sort of – I can't remember, but I remember sort of it happening and obviously knowing that my mum used to work for her. I remember then going back down to Taunton and then I remember sort of – I think my mum got interviewed by the sort of local paper and she was in sort of something – sort of interviewed for something. And I remember she had an invite to the funeral. I don't know if she went or not, but I remember – because I remember seeing and having the sort of invite with the documentation for the funeral and stuff. So again, that's weird. So ...

[31:15]

*Okay. And so at this time you would have been starting school. Do you remember your first school?*

Yeah, I can remember primary school, sort of – when I sort of moved down here, we sort of started when we were sort of, I don't know, what, five? We started in Key Stage 1. I can remember absolutely all the names of my teachers and stuff. And I can remember – I always remember when we were sort of – before we moved up in Key Stage 2, so I don't know how old that is now, but, like, really struggling with sort of maths and my times tables. And I can remember the – I asked the teacher and the teaching assistant, I couldn't get it. I remember my brother explaining it to me and all of a sudden I got it. And then at the end of sort of each class there'd be like a sort of sand timer and there'd be like a sort of quiz, times tables, and you had to go through it and when you'd finished put your hand up. I remember one day my hand was up first and I couldn't believe it 'cause I'd beaten my brother and my friends. And then it was sort of – I think being twins, you just get a real sort of strong competitiveness, because you want to beat the other, you know, other one. But I can remember sort of going up to Key Stage 2 and we specifically asked if we could be put into different classes because, you know, when you've got the same friends group, you're in the same class, you live together, you share the same room, you know, for anyone to spend that much time with someone, it's going to cause arguments. And I can

remember sort of, again, as a child, like, every other weekend I would go off and stay with, like, my nan and my granddad and my brother would stay with my mum, and then the other weekend it would swap, so we'd get a bit of a break from each other. And then again, when we went to secondary school, we were put into the same tutor group and we asked again, can we put separated, please, so we weren't in the same tutor group. But we still had, you know, the sort of same friends groups and we were in a lot of the same classes, 'cause we were sort of the same ability at most things. But yeah, sort of school was – school was fine. It was sort of – I think – I think my primary school was really good. It just seems like a sort of good – it seemed like a good school. And I can remember sort of doing – doing art. I can remember sort of in Year 5 I was doing sort of comprehension with Year 6s, so I was, like, real – like, yes, thinking I was sort of really good. But then I remember I got into Year 6 and then I had to sort of redo what I'd already done. And looking back at that, that seems a bit, you know, if they challenged me and made me do something else, what effect that could have had. And I can remember in – when I was in Year 6 in primary school, we sort of – me and my brother and a few others did something like a maths challenge at a private school. We lost, but still ... [Laughs] And then we sat the, like, level six SATs paper. So, you know, I like to think at that time I was sort of pretty good at sort of maths and English, whatever. And then we went to sort of secondary school and then sort of – I think – I mean, league table wise, I don't think they rate that highly, but it was sort of like the local school. And where we were living, in our catchment area, it was either a choice of that school or another school that was worse, so – and, you know, all of our friends were going there, so we went there. And I can remember sort of, like – as soon as I got into Year 9, my maths teacher changed. Like, I was starting to really sort of fall out with maths and just – it would annoy me and sort of frustrate me and I sort of wasn't getting it. And, you know, I think that's partly down to the teacher that we had. And I asked if I could move down – down a set to set two, because it was – because it was a better teacher and everyone knew he, you know, and I said, look. But I couldn't move because the size of the class was too big and so, like, I had to stay where I was. But again, sort of I look back and I think, you know, if things – what could have happened there, blah, blah, blah. But I finished and I got – I passed my GCSEs. I got a B in maths. I got – well, I got a C in English literature, B in all my other subjects and A in religious studies and a sort of merit in

my IT, so it was alright. But I don't think I would have done as well if it wasn't for my brother, because I was so determined to beat him in everything. And again, I don't think I would have done – I think, you know, sort of our foster carer was quite good at sort of making sure that we were revising and we had like a revision schedule. You know, he was – I think he was quite good in, you know, helping us achieve and get the sort of grades and get onto the next sort of step, if you like.

[35:56]

*Where were you living when you moved back to Taunton?*

Where was I living?

*Mm.*

So I was living in an area of Taunton called Priorswood. So yeah, so I lived there for sort of – I lived there all the time when I was in primary school and then most of the time of secondary school, until obviously I went and moved to my auntie and uncle and then to foster care, which was in Wellington.

*And you were living with your mum?*

Yeah.

*And your brother?*

Yeah.

*Anybody else?*

No, no.

*What was the house like? Was it a council house?*

Yeah, it was a – it was a housing association house. Yeah, it was sort of – it was alright. And it had a sort of garden out the front, garden out the back, a driveway, but obviously we didn't have a car. And obviously we had our own room that we shared, a little bathroom. It was alright.

*What was your mum doing at this point? How was she doing?*

I sort of look back and I sort of go – I find it really interesting now 'cause I – I was never really – I'd never really sort of thought about it before. But I assume that she must have, you know, been in receipt of certain sort of welfare benefits, because I know there was a small period where she was working at like a nursing home, doing something. But, you know, as a child I remember her always sort of – always being there. So yeah, so she was always sort of around. The house was sort of immaculate. And I guess sort of, you know, she – we were, I would say, immaculate [laughs], she was sort of, you know, all our clothes would be firmly ironed. I guess that's sort of part of, you know, what she did before. So yeah, but, you know, she was always sort of around. And I sort of – and I think that, if perhaps, you know, 'cause I recognise that a lot of children come into the care system at a younger age and they might not have had like a strong attachment to their mum or dad or whoever and they might not have had sort of certain boundaries instilled in them. And, you know, I'm sort of thankful that I did have that because, sort of – perhaps I might sort of have turned out slightly different. But, you know, that's not – not any fault of the child. That's just part of, you know, the life of what they've – what they've been through. And again, sort of going back to the whole sort of policy and funding thing, the thing I find sort of interesting about it is that, you know, no sort of child sort of chooses their parents, sort of chooses sort of to be, you know, sort of where they are. And if sort of, you know, their parents can't sort of care for them anymore for whatever reason, it seems crazy that, you know, the local authority will sort of care for them up to a point and then say, alright, that's enough, you've had your lot, sort of clear off. You know, and I recognise that obviously there's lots of sort of pressures with, you know, sort of cuts everywhere and savings have to be made, but I think, you know, the sort of services could be perhaps run more efficiently and perhaps cuts could be made in other areas,

sort of rather than, you know, I guess sometimes – I think sometimes politicians purposely just try to annoy people in the country. For example, you know, the high profile thing with the whole expenses scandal and then sort of more recently with the sort of independent sort of parliament commission saying that they don't earn enough and they should have a pay rise. I was thinking, well, you know, in a sense I might agree that perhaps they're not paid enough and maybe they should be paid more for what they do, but at the same time there's millions and millions of people in this country that, again, in my opinion, aren't paid enough for what they do. You know, there's soldiers fighting on the frontline, who are risking their lives trying to help other people, and for the hours they're working, you know, they're on less than sort of minimum wage, you know. And it seems very wrong to say, in a time of austerity, where, you know, everyone else is having sort of cuts and freezes to their sort of – their salaries and, you know, their pensions being changed, that sort of politicians can turn around and say, you know, well, this commission said we're not paid enough so we should have an increase. It just seems ridiculous. And then they're sort of turning around sort of in children in care and saying – I remember – I can't remember what council it was, but I read somewhere that they were trying to get children in care to leave placements earlier than eighteen because it would save them 1.5 million or something. And I was like [sighs], ridiculous.

[40:29]

*You mentioned your attachment to your mum. Did you have a strong attachment to her?*

Yeah, I would say so, definitely, 'cause she was always around and just sort of, you know, sort of, you know, obviously we didn't have much as children, but she provided for us, you know, as best she could. There was always sort of, you know, dinner on the table and, you know, we were clothed and whatever. Obviously she, you know, loved and cared for us.

*Did you do things with her?*

Erm, I can't sort of, you know, there wasn't a lot of, you know, money around, you know. So we'd sort of go to the park and sort of make the most of sort of free events and stuff. But, you know, as a child I sort of, you know, we might sort of go into town and, you know, go round town and get a little sort of 99p Lego toy for, like, being good or something. You know, there was no sort of, you know, holidays abroad or – there wasn't – I didn't go abroad till I was – yeah, 'cause my mum died, what, when we were eleven, and then when we were twelve we went to Australia to see our auntie and uncle, so our mother's sister. So went – yeah, so went out there for sort of like the sort of Christmas period, which was a totally sort of new experience 'cause we'd never been on a plane before. Well, I guess we had when we were smaller, but not, you know, abroad. And that was the – I think our auntie sort of came to sort of visit a few times from Australia but that was the first time we'd ever been out there to see her and see our sort of uncle and our sort of cousin. So yeah – but, you know, sort of – we had a relatively sort of good childhood, you know, for – within its sort of limitations of sort of financial sort of stuff.

*Did you feel at the time that there wasn't enough money around?*

No, not – I guess I was sort of used to it. And I think, because of maybe sort of the area I sort of grew up in and the friends that I sort of had, you know, they weren't going on sort of lavish – it's not like they would sort of come back to school and be like, you know, 'I've just been away to blah, blah, blah. I've got this. I've got that.' You know, 'cause a lot of my other friends sort of lived on, you know, council estates or sort of lived, you know, in a sort of – in a home but, you know, sort of with mum or sort of dad or whatever. But, you know, I can't remember any of my friends being massively in a situation where they'd be able to have a sort of lavish lifestyle. You know, I think the area sort of – the South West generally sort of – I mean, earnings wise is sort of less than the sort of national average. But it wasn't, you know, an issue at all. You know, we sort of used to go out with our friends and play down the park and, you know, jump over streams and stuff.

*What was your mum's health like at the time?*

Erm, she was very sort of – obviously she had – after, you know, after the first bout of cancer, had sort of, you know, sort of chemotherapy and all the treatments and stuff. She was a very sort of thin lady, a sort of weak lady, so I think obviously that affected her ability to work. Obviously I don't know the exact ins and outs of it. And she used to have sort of – take a sort of specific – 'cause she had sort of throat cancer, so she used to take a specific sort of mouthwash sort of thing. I can remember sort of one day – I can't remember what age we were, but we were at the sort of dinner table and sort of she said that, 'I've sort of got cancer again.' And, you know, we – I think that was sort of weird. And then sort of slowly just sort of saw the sort of cancer sort of eat away at her face and sort of, you know, she had like a – she had like a big sort of bandage there [demonstrates] sort of, you know, to cover it up. And then sort of she sort of was really weak and fragile and sort of – be sort of fed through a sort of machine and stuff. It wasn't particularly nice, so ...

[44:56]

*Was there anyone around helping you?*

So our nan was about, so her mum, and then her – obviously and our sort of granddad as well and her brother, our uncle, and our auntie, they all sort of came round and were sort of helping her when they could. So ...

*Did you understand what was going on?*

Erm, I sort of – I guess I sort of knew, you know, knew that she had sort of cancer and I knew that cancer isn't a good thing and that, you know, she was likely to die at some stage. I guess I didn't at the age – at that time, didn't think it would actually happen. Erm, it was – yeah, it was sort of – it was weird. And I can remember for – for years, I sort of just tried to sort of forget it, that it sort of even happened. And that might sound bad, but, you know, for a long period of time I couldn't even – even tell anyone what – what was the date she died and how many years it had been because I just tried to sort of eradicate it from my memory. Because I don't know, I sort of felt that if I was to sort of keep on looking back and focus on that then I might struggle to sort of

get sort of through life. So I sort of tried to sort of look forward rather than back and – and sort of keep going and get – and then sort of get to an age where perhaps I was sort of able to understand it better and deal with it better sort of emotionally and – and everything else. So yeah, but it was – it was weird. And I can remember sort of, you know, it'd be sort of quite sort of common, just, you know, for sort of children and staff to sort of, you know, sort of general comments. You know, someone might say, 'Oh, your mum,' but – and then all of a sudden they would sort of know what they said, but it wasn't – they weren't specifically sort of doing that because they knew what happened, it was just general sort of kid speak, if you like. You know, I guess I could've sort of turned round and, you know, 'What did you say?' And become aggressive, but I just sort of – blank face, didn't say anything, and they, you know, knew what they had said and it was sort of just ignored, 'cause I just sort of didn't want to bring attention to it. And normally, you know, before, when someone would sort of, you know, I wouldn't want to talk about it, wouldn't want to, you know, discuss it with anyone. I think we were sort of – one day at school we went in and then we sat in a room with, like, these two people and they were offering, I think, counselling or something, and I was just like, 'I'm fine, I don't want to talk about it,' sort of, 'can I go now?' So ...

*Is that still your position now, that you want to look forward and not –*

Well, I think I'm sort of, you know, I like to focus and look ahead rather than sort of look back. You know, sort of – pardon my French, you know, shit happens. Sometimes more of it happens to other people and sometimes you've got to deal with it and move on as best you can. You know, and I guess another way to look at it is that there's always someone else who has got it a lot worse, you know. So although it's sort of, you know, our mum died, some people, their mum and their dad died, you know. And although sort of, you know, in a sense we didn't really have a dad 'cause he was never there, he was still alive. Although he was useless, he was still alive. Erm, so yeah, I just, you know, try and sort of – I guess sort of think positively and sort of look ahead and – and plan ahead. I guess I've always had – because of that I've always had some sort of plan. So, you know, initially I wanted to – I wanted I wanted to join the army. That was the plan. Then it changed, I want to join the

police. That was the plan. And then it was the whole social work thing. So there's always been a – I couldn't – I don't think I could go through life without knowing what the next step is. And I think that's partly because, you know, I feel that if I don't have that, then I'm going to – I need to plan things. And, you know, I've sort of been – you know, I'm twenty-three. A lot of my friends sort of call me the old man, sort of like a sort of stupid nickname, partly associated – because I've got apparently an old man laugh as well. But I think because, you know, I've been living in my sort of flat now independently for almost five years, you know, when there's not much money around, you learn to sort of be, you know, sort of budget and, you know, manage your money effectively and sort of shop around and use coupons. And, you know, when so many sort of things happen that sort of directly affect you, I think you notice it more when you're living by yourself than opposed to when you're living at home with Mum and Dad. Yeah, and I always say to my friends sort of, live at home for as long as you can. You know, you've got it good. You don't know – you've got, you know, dinner on the table, your laundry done for you. Some of you even have your packed lunches made for work, you know. You've got it extremely good. You're paying, like, next to nothing rent for all of these services, you know. Try and stay at home, you know, as long as you can, save up some money so you can maybe get a mortgage, you know, if the bank decide to lend it to you, which they probably won't. So ...

[50:25]

*But you've mentioned your dad's family as well at this time.*

Yes.

*So were you always in contact with them?*

Yeah. So I didn't see, you know, much of my dad, but I was in contact with my dad's side of the family, so his mum and dad, my sort of grandma and granddad, and his – his sister, my auntie. And they don't have contact because basically she just can't believe how he sort of treated me and my brother, so they don't have any contact.

You know, they don't speak or whatever. And yeah, so, you know, I was sort of – as a sort of child, sort of go up and visit them, sort of. I remember sort of, my grandma might sort of catch the train down from Newcastle to Taunton, stay the night at a hotel and then meet us at the train station, then go back up to Newcastle with us on the train and then we'd spend some time up there over the summer holidays. Excuse me. So yeah, and we'd sort of – I sort of tend to sort of go up and see them sort of – on the sort of Christmastime or sort of during the summer at some point. Excuse me. But yeah, so I try and, you know, and I've got no obviously problems, you know, we all get along, no problems with them at all, so ...

*Are they all in the army too? Is there an army background?*

No. They're not in it. My sort of – the whole sort of military background sort of comes from my sort of – my mum's side of the family. Obviously my dad was in the RAF, but my mum, before she was working for Princess Diana, etc, she was in the navy. My auntie, she was in the navy. Her partner, in the navy. My sort of granddad on my mum's side, in the navy. So it was always really sort of there. So I guess I had an interest in it because, you know, I guess you're interested in what your sort of – your parents and your family do, which is perhaps why that, you know, if you've got maybe a dad who's a lawyer, you might want to become a lawyer because your dad does it, you know. So ...

[52:33]

*Did you ever – do you remember talking to your mum about what you wanted to do when you grew up?*

Erm, I can remember being a kid and obviously wanting to become a professional football player, but then quite quickly realised I wasn't good enough [laughs]. And I think sort of – like, you know, when – I think when my mum died, like, my outlook sort of changed a bit and I thought I had to be a bit more serious and realistic, because I think that, you know, I would have sort of loved to go and tried to sort of do, you know, dance, acting, you know, something sort of creative like that, but I felt that, if I

was to do that, you know, what support have I got and what are my chances. So I felt I had to perhaps be more sort of sensible and try and go – look at a career path which was, you know, the army, you know, the military, it's always going to be there. They might have downsized perhaps now but it's going to be there, you know, and potentially you could have a long term career in that force, so ... And again, police, it's always going to be there, you know. You've got your sort of salary and pension, you know. So there's always – and again, so, you know, so rather than – but, you know, especially sort of being in sort of care, there's no way I would have thought, alright, I really want to sort of go and do dance or acting or anything, because I think if I did it, like, I would probably, you know, have struggled even more so sort of financially and everything. So I thought, oh, better put my sensible hat on, so I – 'cause I remember the time when we had to choose our GCSE options, so we had to sort of choose sort of two, and I was sort of – I've always been quite a sporty person, so I chose sort of PE because, you know, I love doing that. But then, you know, I sort of thought, I'll choose sort of drama. I remember my drama teacher wanted me to do drama, but I went for geography 'cause I thought that was a more sensible choice. So ... but yeah, so originally I wanted to be a footballer but then decided to be more sensible.

*And you thought about the army but then Iraq and Afghanistan –*

Well yeah, 'cause I just thought, this is ridiculous, why are we, you know, when you're, you know, oh yeah, they've got WMDs and they don't find any, and then you're sort of in the country, it's just – it just seems – I don't know, I didn't really understand it. Obviously I understand that, you know, obviously Saddam Hussein was an idiot, you know, and because of him a lot of people had very poor lives, but, you know, when you're sort of going to sort of the UN and the UN are saying sort of, no, you know, don't do it, and then we sort of go and speak to our pals in America and go, yeah, let's do it, it just seems stupid to me. Like, I just don't agree with it. I think, you know – I think people need to be more respectful, that, you know, England is, you know, the UK is just one country in the world; people live differently, there are different cultures, different traditions. You know, if people want to live in a certain way, you know, perhaps sort of let them. Don't force your culture on them, you

know. It's their sort of country. Obviously if there's, you know, a sort of mass sort of [inaud] and sort of killings, obviously something needs to be done, but you've got a united sort of taskforce to deal with that. You don't, particularly as one country, need to be the sort of self righter, you know. And I'm sure it had something do with oil and all other sort of stuff. But, you know, and I think that the amount of money that we've spent in Afghanistan and Iraq and the amount of sort of soldiers and people that have died, you know, that money could have been better spent and invested elsewhere.

*So you were thirteen or fourteen when this was happening?*

I guess so, yeah.

*Were you always so politically engaged?*

Erm, I don't know, sort of. I don't know, because I sort of – I guess – I think as a kid – I've always sort of been a bit of a worrier. Like I can remember sort of being, like, in a car that drove on the motorway and, like, seeing loads of cars driving the other way and maybe – like, only being a very cars driving that way, and thinking that there was a tidal wave or something and sort of the cars were driving away from it. You know, and I sort of – so I guess I sort of, you know, always look ahead and think, you know, what could happen, blah, blah, blah, blah. I guess because, you know, I don't have – although I've got sort of family, I don't have sort of Mum and Dad or whoever that I can sort of – sort of cling onto, return to the nest, if you like, do you know what I mean? So ... but yeah, I often have a political rant that my friends get annoyed with me at. But I find it interesting, 'cause I remember as a child, sort of Granddad and sort of parents would buy the *Daily Mail*. I would never buy the *Daily Mail*. I sort of – just because of some of the stuff they – they print. I think it's ridiculous. But no, I guess I've always had a sort of, you know, as a child I knew who was prime minister. I knew sort of important politicians. I guess as I've got older, I've sort of got sort of more interested in it. You know, and I'd sort of quite happily sort of – depending on sort of what happens with the degree and whatever, you know, like to sort of try and maybe perhaps carve a sort of career in politics and shake things up a bit, if I had the

opportunity. Because I would love to – I would absolutely love to go in there and just say, right, first of all, the whole second home thing, no, we're going to scrap that, you know. You choose to be an MP, you know what that involves. You know that, you know, you will have to spend a lot of time at Westminster, or whatever. We're not going to pay for a – you don't need that. You're saying – for example, you're saying a student can pay £9,000 a year for a tuition fee and live in, you know, have a bed – a little sort of box room and pay a ridiculous amount of rent, and that you can live in a big house and claim it off the taxpayer. I don't think so. If you, you know, want to, you can either commute from your constituency up to Westminster and your travel expenses will be covered, that's fine, or you can stay in sort of student style accommodation, you know, in London or near London. Like, it just seems crazy. And, you know, when – there was the whole thing about, you know, the pay and everything and it came out that, you know, they get a £15 evening meal allowance, why? Why? You know, and when they get sort of subsidised sort of food and drink and sort of – like any normal person has to, you know, buy, you know, prepare their own packed lunch or go out and buy lunch. Why should you as an MP have it subsidised? It's ridiculous, absolutely. So I'd just love to go in there and just annoy a lot of people who perhaps have sort of – sort of got – I don't know, just, you know, there's always things that go on and you think, oh, why is that happening. Oh hello, your, you know, partner's dad is, you know, the top dog of that company so that's why you want to give them a tax break, or whatever. It's just ridiculous. You know, I'd love to see someone go in there and just sort of say, 'Right, we're going to try and, like, help people, like, who are really struggling, rather than sort of making stupid decisions.' So ...

*FS: Sorry, can I let you know that you've had an hour?*

Okay.

*FS: So if you wanted to break now, that would be a good time.*

Okay.

*Okay, let's break*

**[End of Track 1]**

**[Track 2]**

*Okay, so I'm going to take you back to about the age of nine, if you can sort of get there. This is just sort of in the years before your mum died. And I wonder whether you can remember that time a bit better. So you were still living in –*

Yeah, still living in sort of the council sort of – housing association place in Taunton. Still at our sort of local primary school. I guess the only way I can describe it is life seemed to be fairly sort of normal, you know; go to school, sort of – I had a good friend group, would go out and play with a friend at weekends and evenings. And, you know, it was, erm –

*What was your school like? Is it an ethnically diverse area or is it –*

Not at all. I mean, Somerset is ridiculous. I mean, I was – as a guess, I would say ninety-eight percent of the population are white. Sort of over the years sort of, you know, there's been a sort of stronger increase of people from different ethnic minorities come to Somerset and Taunton, but I can remember as a child – like in our school, for example, in my primary school, I think there was – there was one – yeah, every child in the whole school was white apart from one child. And then when I went to my secondary school, I think, again, it was massive – the majority of the school were white children, bar maybe five. So, you know – and I don't think it's changed that much. I mean, there's been sort of a small change, but not massive. So – so yeah, and – sorry, what was the question? [Laughs]

*I was just asking about your local area, really.*

Yeah. So – yeah, so in terms of sort of the ethnic sort of demographic, you know, predominantly sort of white. And I would say you've got the sort of different – you've got the perhaps very sort of well off sort of areas, like all the little sort of villages and stuff and the sort of big sort of townhouse and stuff. And you've got sort of Taunton School, which is the sort of big sort of private school. So you've got that side of things. And you've also got Wellington School, which is another private

school, Queens and Kings, they're both private schools. So there's lots of sort of, you know, places there for people sort of with wealth, if you like. I mean, at the Taunton Somerset County Cricket Ground, there's sort of very expensive retirement style flats that look onto the cricket pitch. So you've got that side of it and then you've got the other side of it, where you've got – I think one of the estates in Taunton, called the Halcon Estate, which is a council area, I remember seeing something in the news, but I believe it's in the top five percent for most deprived areas in England. They are planning on doing some sort of redevelopment work. But I can remember ages ago, when I was in the second year of my public services degree, I was on a sort of little sort of placement over the summer. I was just working as a sort of family support worker in a children's centre in Halcon, in the Halcon area. And I remember speaking to one of the dads at a dads' group we ran and I had a little chat with him and we were looking out the window and he was saying that he was trying to sort of come off drugs, but it was so difficult, you know, 'cause I can look outside the window of this children's centre and see the homes of three drug dealers. So, you know, like any area, you've got your good areas, you've got your bad areas. Erm ...

*Is there much mixing between the areas?*

Erm ... no, I wouldn't really say so. And it's quite – I mean, I wouldn't say a sort of gang sort of culture, but I can remember as a kid, you know, there was talk of, like, Halcon sort of fighting club, the HFC and Galmington Massive and there'd be sort of the Priorswood Crew. So there'd be sort of – different areas would have their own sort of – and perhaps if someone knew you were from a different area and if they didn't like you for whatever reason, that might sort of cause some difficulty. I can remember there was a – it wasn't sort of gang related at all, but I can remember there was a kid that went to my secondary school and he got murdered on the way home from a party, sort of got hit with a sort of for sale sign. And I can remember there was a sort of – another kid that used to go to my school, who used to live down the road from me, who's been in and out of jail multiple times for various assaults and sort of offences. But, you know, it's like anywhere, you all have bad eggs. But, you know, Taunton – I've lived there for, you know, practically my whole life and, yeah, it's okay. I mean, where I am now, I tend to keep myself to myself because – I don't

know, sort of – I can remember before there was a car sort of parked across the road from my house and the window got smashed in. And ages ago I had to phone the police ‘cause there was an altercation with some people in the street and someone pulled out a knife. Erm, and there’s sort of been – quite normally a police car or a police van in the area, ‘cause of drugs or something’s going on. There was an elderly gentleman that used to live in the flat downstairs to the left of me, who was assaulted in his own home. So it’s not the best of areas, so I tend to sort of just keep myself to myself, so I don’t get involved with anything.

[06:14]

*You mentioned your mum instilled strong sort of boundaries -*

Yeah.

*At home when you were younger -*

Yeah.

*How was that?*

Well, as a kid, erm, both myself and my brother were sort of christened. And I guess we were sort of brought up on sort of traditional Christian values, if you like, although, you know, sort of – I can’t remember specifically sort of going to church. I might have gone to church on a few occasions, but I don’t think it was particularly through sort of choice, if you like. Or I did, you know, sort of – I had an interest in religion and I sort of did well in my sort of GCSE religious course, ‘cause I sort of found it interesting. But I think I sort of got to an age where sort of – with sort of science and everything and, you know, having – developing an interest in that and the whole sort of big bang theory, I was sort of, you know, my – not that I was a sort of a churchgoer, if you like, but my sort of – I started becoming less involved in sort of – you know, sort of traditional sort of Christian religion, although I still, you know, feel that, you know, I sort of keep to the sort of general roles and stuff, how to be, you

know, treat a person with respect. I would say, you know, all the normal things associated with, you know, being generally a good person. I don't think that's particularly associated with Christianity, you know. It can be associated with any religion. But, you know, I think, you know, it was sort of – our mum just, you know, made it very clear, you know, what was right and what was wrong.

*How did she do that?*

I don't know, just sort of – I can't remember specifically, but it always seemed really clear to me, you know, I can remember as a kid, you know, going, you know, going out with friends and, you know, perhaps someone might like the idea of sort of playing Knock Knock Ginger, and I'd be in their sort of friends group and I knew it was wrong and I shouldn't be doing it. So I can – I never once knocked on a door. And I always remember, as soon as that knock was placed by whoever, I was always halfway up the street already, 'cause the thought of sort of being caught and sort of, you know, being – I think times have changed, but I guess sort of, you know, if I was sort of, you know, the police brought me back and, you know, I had a telling off, that wouldn't – I think I would have been sort of ashamed and sort of, you know, I didn't want to disappoint my mum. And I can remember one time, someone had some eggs and thought it would be a good idea to throw some eggs at a bus. And I remember I was given my egg and I remember sort of, when everyone was running along, I just dropped mine on the floor, 'cause, although it was my friends, I just – I couldn't do it. I just knew it wasn't right. And I don't know, sort of – and I think – I guess maybe that's why I sort of, you know, going back to the army and sort of the police, something with sort of rules and boundaries, I like 'cause I, you know, I guess I sort of like right from wrong and whatever. So ...

[09:30]

*And you also had a strong family support network. So you had your dad's side of the family and your mum's side around.*

Yeah.

*And were they there when your mum died as well?*

Erm, I can remember when – yeah, when Mum died, I can remember sort of my auntie and uncle being there from my mum's side and – well, my aunt and my uncle, her brother and partner, and then my nan and granddad, so her mum and dad being there. So yeah, I can remember them sort of, yeah, being there. But again, I sort of just tried to sort of act as if I didn't need any sort of help or support and I'd be fine.

*Do you remember the day?*

Erm, I remember, we had stayed round – we had stayed round a friend's house to have a sleepover and I remember we sort of came back and – and Mum wasn't there. And then sort of we were told that she'd sort of passed away last night. So that was weird. But I can – I can remember, like, being told the news and I remember sort of not crying, like. I remember my brother did, like, but I can remember sort of not crying and just sort of – not really doing – I don't know, sort of – I guess because I'd – not necessarily didn't believe it, but it sort of didn't seem real. So yeah, it was weird. It was weird.

*Was it a shock to you? Was she ill before that?*

It wasn't a shock because I sort of – I obviously knew she had cancer and I'd seen her sort of progressively get worse and obviously being sort of fed from a machine and whatever and sort of spending most of the time, like, on a bed that was in the lounge. So I sort of knew it was going to happen at some stage, but I guess I sort of – I guess I expected it to sort of go on and on and on, so ...

*And did you have a say in how the funeral was going to take place?*

Erm, I didn't have a – I can remember sort of – I remember the sort of funeral, going to the funeral in our sort of school uniform, and sort of – I don't know if I read something, read a poem or some words. I can't really remember. And then there was

like a – and they always put like a memory book at the sort of – ‘cause she got cremated, at the sort of crematorium, and on the day every year you can go and visit it, so I remember sort of going and seeing the book and stuff. I don’t know, it was just – I guess it’s hard to describe because I think as a child you don’t expect, you know, a parent to die at that age. You expect to sort of, you know, maybe when you’re older, you know, they’ll die through old age, so ...

*And how was the school?*

What?

*In sort of helping you with this?*

Erm ... I can’t really sort of – I remember sort of coming into school for the first time, like, after she’d passed away and for, like, sort of – ‘cause I think our sort of nan or whoever sort of phoned the school to make them aware and I think a friend’s sort of parents – sort of close friends, that they, you know, knew. And I remember sort of coming into school and people being like, ‘Ah, are you okay?’ Blah, blah, blah. And I was like, ‘Yeah, I’m alright.’ Again, just sort of – just sort of ignoring it ‘cause I didn’t want to talk about it. I just didn’t want to talk about it, because I knew if I started talking about it I’d get upset, so I just sort of – ‘Yeah, I’m fine.’ You know, I just sort of – even though I probably wasn’t, but it’s allowed me to sort of get on with it.

*And did your brother deal with it differently from you?*

Erm, I don’t really know, like, because – well, again, it’s not something that we tend to talk about, you know, so I don’t really sort of – I would say he probably dealt with it in a very similar way to me, perhaps slightly differently, but I don’t know.

*And did it have any impact on your relationship with your brother?*

Erm, I don't think so. I mean, obviously we've been obviously twins, spent, you know, like, a lot of time with each other. And I think obviously we, you know, we used to spend weekends away at our sort of grandparents' and whatever, to give each other a break. I think we are very different people. We've got different interests and different personalities and, you know, which is why we wanted to be in different classes and everything. And I always remember sort of – eventually, when my brother sort of – when we were in foster care and a bedroom became available and he moved into another bedroom and I had my own room, and it was just like – I don't know, just sort of sharing a room with someone for almost eighteen years when you're so different – and, you know, two teenage lads as well, hormones and all the rest of it, it's going to cause some arguments. I – I can remember sort of – must have been relatively – I can't remember how old we were exactly. We were sort of playing a game on sort of a games console and he was getting pretty annoyed 'cause I kept on beating him. And I remember he sort of got annoyed and punched me in the leg and it really hurt, so I got up and went to punch him in the face and then he moved out the way, hit the bunk – hit the back of his head on the bunk bed, collapsed on the floor and then he went like that, touched the back of his head, and it was bleeding. And I was like, oh, I'm in so much trouble [laughs]. And then obviously went to hospital and he got glued up and obviously he was fine, you know. But I'm afraid it would just sort of annoy him by saying – I don't know, but I guess it's normal for siblings to sort of fight and argue. I think we're a lot better now that we don't live together, 'cause we're not in each other's space.

*And where did you live after your mum died? Did you stay at home?*

So yeah, we stayed in – in the same home. Obviously our nan came and stayed and lived there with us, until that didn't work out.

*Are you close to your nan?*

Erm ... It's – I guess that's another awkward one. Because of sort of what sort of happened, like, when our nan looked after us, it sort of – as I say, not being very nice to my brother, erm, and then obviously social services got involved and – so we

stayed with our auntie and uncle. And I think sort of she – that obviously caused some difficulty, I think. For a long period of time there wasn't much sort of contact and sort of talk and stuff. But I think as time sort of went by, sort of, you know, you know, I'll sort of see her from time to time, go in and see her and say hello and stuff, and sort of might pop in for lunch or whatever. I wouldn't say we're massively close but, you know, we've got a – we've got a good relationship.

[17:28]

*How did social services get involved then?*

I can't – to be honest, sort of – I was thinking about contacting the local authority to ask for my file, to get a clearer picture and indication on what actually happened, because it's all a bit of a blur. I can remember having – obviously there were things sort of that, you know, my nan sort of – I guess sort of did things that weren't appropriate and she was always slightly sort of nasty towards my brother. And I guess there were sort of concerns raised from perhaps maybe other family members. I remember one social worker came in and then they went and another social worker came in and they went. And then we had a third social worker. And this was in a space of hardly anything at all, so it was very much like, what the hell is going on. Erm, so yeah, so I can't – it's all a bit of a blur. And, yeah, I've been meaning to sort of perhaps get in contact with the local authority and request my file to have a look at, but I've sort of been busy with other things and it's taken a sort of backseat. And I think, because I'm sort of – my case has been reopened because I've gone back to university, I've thought I'll sort of leave it until I'm sort of – my case is closed again, 'cause I thought – just to sort of save any difficulty.

*And what did social services decide when they did intervene?*

Erm, they sort of – I can't really remember. All I remember is sort of moving from my nan's place to our auntie and uncle's place. Erm, and then staying there for some time before moving to a foster placement. Again, it's sort of, you know, a bit of a blur. Pardon me. It's partly maybe because, you know, I tend to, you know, look

forward, I tend to forget what's happened in the past, 'cause it sort of seems less important, so ...

*What was it like at your aunt and uncle's house?*

Yeah, it was good, you know, 'cause they're sort of, you know, really nice people, really great. And yeah, sort of, you know, couldn't have asked for, you know, anything more, you know, sort of, you know, originally we were sort of sleeping on camp beds, but then my uncle sort of cleared out the garage and did out the garage and we were sleeping – sort of made it into like a room for us, so we were sort of sleeping in there. You know, and they were – they were great, you know. And we sort of – they live locally and we see them. But it just, you know, it was simply because of, you know, financial sort of reasons and because I guess the local authority were idiots and didn't see the value of perhaps keeping us with our aunt and uncle and giving them some financial assistance. You know, I'm not on about giving them millions of pounds, but just enough to, you know, help towards the cost of keeping two growing teenage lads. And I can remember actually being in – when we went to our foster placement, our foster carer was really surprised by the amount of food we ate and managed to get an increased allowance for food for us, because we would just eat so much. So – but, you know, our auntie and uncle were great, you know, and we still have contact with them and stuff and see them when we can.

*Did you want to stay with them?*

Sorry?

*Did you want to stay with them?*

You know, me and my brother were quite happy, you know, to stay there. And I think, if there was some sort of assistance, we probably could have, you know. But unfortunately, you know, it didn't happen, you know. Things happen, you know, within sort of work where, you know, you're made redundant, you lose a job, whatever, and, you know, you've got – they've got another two children that they're

sort of putting through school and they've got other commitments and, you know, life isn't cheap. And when, you know, sort of, they kindly take on two teenage lads and sort of don't have any sort of support towards them, you know, it's not going to work, is it?

*Can you remember any conversations with either your uncle or aunt or your social worker or anyone about these decisions?*

I can – I can remember sort of vaguely sort of talking about, like, how would we feel about a foster placement. And, you know, I think me and my brother were quite sort of – we were like, yeah, open and, yeah, that's fine, whatever. I can remember sort of, myself and my brother went with our auntie and uncle to visit the foster placement, sort of do an introduction. And I think they wanted to visit and – and make sure that they were happy with where we were going and it was right. And then it turned out to be alright, so – so it was okay in the end.

*You say it was alright. How old were you when you moved?*

I was fifteen. So yeah, I came in the care system quite late. And it was – it was weird. And yeah, I don't know, really. It was just weird going and sort of, you know, living in some random person's house that you've met once before and you don't really know. Erm, so – it was alright [laughs].

[23:13]

*What was your initial meeting with the foster carers like?*

Erm, it was – yeah, it was okay. One thing I always remember, I have some – seeing the outside of the house and thinking, this looks like a – it didn't look very well kept from the outside, so I was like, oh no, what am I walking into. And I sort of walked inside and it sort of improved and then we were sort of going into the lounge, and as a fifteen year old lad, I was quite excited by the forty-two inch telly on the wall [laughs]. I think that sort of calmed me down a bit. There was a nice kitchen and

stuff. You know, he was friendly and welcoming. And we went – another little thing, I remember the lounge had like sort of lavender sort of paint on the walls and I was sort of – I just remember looking at it and thinking, that's a weird colour for a lounge. But, yeah, it was – it was fine. And so we did that and went away and said, yeah, it's alright.

*What were they like as people?*

Sorry?

*What were they –*

Well, it was just the one – it was one foster carer, sort of a single male. He looked – he's now a home based carer. He was – at the time he wasn't a home based carer but he looked after us sort of – I think he had a supported lodgings placement and there was another kid there, but he looked after teenage boys from like, sort of, ten to sort of sixteen plus, like the sort of top end sort of range. But yeah, he was fine. And I still see him on a regular basis, have regular contact with him. Like in terms of uni, he's been sort of proof reading my essays for me and stuff. So ...

*What did he do? What was his job?*

So he was working for the Charity Commission, sort of investigating – just making sure that charities were run sort of properly and investigating any sort of odd goings on. I can remember sort of – just sort of a general discussion he talked about a charity that Michael Jackson had that had to be investigated 'cause it was spending a ridiculous amount of money on furniture and stuff and money wasn't going where it should have been. That was quite interesting. But then, like anything, they had to restructure it to save money and it moved to Liverpool, so he took a sort of career break and then decided to sort of do home based sort of caring. And now he's also doing – looking after children on remand as well, so ...

*What's the difference between a home based carer and then supported lodgings?*

The supported lodgings was for sort of an older person and he was sort of, I think, in the care system and he was paying X amount towards sort of rent to stay there. And then sort of the home based was sort of – basically there was a sort of child placed with him and that's sort of his fulltime job essentially, you know, twenty-four, seven. You know, so all the sort of placements are, you know, he'll get a certain type of child, if you like. So, you know, before, you know, when myself and my brother were there, he was sort of – he would be working and we would go off to school and he would come back, but now he obviously doesn't go to work. He's there so that he can go to – for example, go to court with a young person or the youth offending team, or attend all the appointments and meet the needs of – of the placement, 'cause they tend to have sort of stricter conditions and need more supervision.

*How did he balance working fulltime and caring for you guys? Did you see a lot of him?*

Yeah, he was – he was always there. I mean, 'cause our – obviously we moved when we were fifteen, we made it clear we wanted to finish at our school. We didn't want to change school. So they made sure that we had sort of transport that would pick us up and take us to school. And we started school at half eight in the morning and the traffic was quite bad, so we would be picked up at half seven in the morning, or quarter to eight or something like that. So we were out the door before he was. And then normally we'd sort of – when school had finished, we would either be involved in some sort of sports club or – or something, so by the time we sort of – we'd get home, he would either be there preparing dinner or we might be walking in at the same time. Yeah, and he was always there in the evening and he was always there. And if we got let down from the local authority for whatever reason, you know, he would sort of take us to places, pick us up or, you know, do whatever, you know, take us to football and stuff, so ...

*Do you remember your first day there, sort of getting to the –*

I can remember, we went there – our first sort of day was like a – it was in the evening. We didn't get – I think we arrived at sort of like dinnertime and there was like a roast dinner on the table. Came down and sort of had that. When I do sort of training for the fostering agency, I always say to sort of people that I always remember that, because, like, for me, like, food was the way to my heart. Like I love food. So going in there and having, like, a nice sort of roast dinner and being able to sort of eat it and, you know, sort of – there being food and sort of very relaxed, you know, just engage a bit in conversation, just sort of slowly get to know each other. You know, and I would say that, you know, if you can, try and get an idea of what the young person who might be placed with you might like and then have the sort of – or if you don't know when they arrive, ask them what they'd like and prepare like a meal and stuff. So I think that's a good, like, introduction. So – but yeah, it was fine. I remember sort of – the first night, which was a bit weird, but – 'cause after a while I just got used to it, just – alright, we live in this house now. So ...

*And you and your brother had different rooms when you were staying there?*

No, we – so we – we arrived and we had the same room and it wasn't until sort of – we were sort of seventeen that the person in supported lodgings left and my brother went up into – into that room, which was nice.

*Did you have much interaction with the other guy?*

Not really 'cause he sort of was working and stuff, so I didn't see him that often. But I had interaction with other children that were placed in the foster placement throughout our time there.

*Were there lots of them?*

Erm, there was sort of a number of sort of different people. For me, it's quite interesting sort of to meet with people of sort of different sort of backgrounds. You know, people that I might not have contact with otherwise. There was a chap who was living with us on placement, who had sort of schizophrenia. There was another

chap who had dyspraxia. You know, there was another chap who was sort of, you know, involved in sort of – with the youth offending team. You know, so it was interesting sort of, you know, living sort of with those people, ‘cause otherwise I probably wouldn’t have, you know, lived with them. So it was – getting an insight into that and that sort of behaviour was a good experience.

*Did it feel like home?*

Erm, no. Yeah, it didn’t sort of feel like – it didn’t feel like home. It just felt that sort of – I don’t know, this is where I’m placed, this is where I am. I don’t know, it was sort of – I guess I sort of maybe didn’t know what was next, expected something to happen. I always remember sort of respite being interesting, because obviously you’d sort of go and stay with another sort of foster carer in a house that might be a lot different and it might be a lot different. So that was interesting. And it was always sort of, you know, when sort of I’d be talking with friends and they’d be like going, oh, you sort of – I think that’s one thing that, I guess, really annoyed me and frustrated me. When we were in sort of – after the first year social workers disappeared, the third social worker we had only worked sort of three days a week, Monday to Wednesday, so if sort of something happened on Wednesday evening, it was very difficult to get sorted until the Monday, which wasn’t particularly helpful. Not that, you know, there was any major issues. But it was always sort of very difficult, say if we wanted to, you know, do what sort of normal sort of teenage lads do and spend time with our friends and go round a mate’s house, you know, it was sort of, ‘Oh no, it needs to be cleared by the local authority, the parents need to be checked out,’ blah, blah, blah. And I started to get really frustrated and annoyed ‘cause I was like, how is this, like, normal? Any, like, normal kid can go and sort of stay at their friend’s house without – and at one point I sort of said, ‘Well look, why don’t I give you the names and addresses of all my friends’ parents and get them CRBed?’ And in the end, like, you know, we used to – we used to lie because it would prove such a hassle and difficulty and, you know, we couldn’t do stuff. It would be like, oh, we’re going round, you know, we’re going round thingy’s house, because they sort of knew who they were and they’d met them a number of times, and we would just said, ‘Oh, we’re going round there. We’re going round there.’ And,

you know, perhaps the foster carer knew that we weren't going round there, but we said it. So that was – that was fine. But, you know, sort of – it made us sort of have to sort of work the system, I guess. But it was annoying.

[33:16]

*Okay. And how often was respite care?*

Respite care wasn't very often at all. I can only remember, I think, two times. So I was there from fifteen till I left at seventeen and a half and we were in respite twice. I think that was for like – for whatever reason, it wasn't, you know, it wasn't an issue, only for like a weekend or something, or a night. But that was fine. But yeah, it sort of – it's interesting. And I always find it – sort of when I say to sort of people, you know, I'm talking to people and they say, you know, I say that I'm from care and they sort of say, 'Oh really, you're from care, are you? Wouldn't have thought so.' And – 'Oh, why is that?' And it annoys me that there's always a sort of, you know, as soon as someone says they're in care, someone automatically assumes that they're a wrong 'un or something, or they're in there because they're badly behaved or whatever. But, you know, children come into the care system for all different reasons, you know, and whether it is bad behaviour or whatever, that'll be linked to something. It's not, you know, because – and it frustrates me that, you know, some people don't have a sort of stronger understanding of it. And it always frustrates me just, you know, I've sort of talked before about policy and whatever. I found out recently that my foster carer helped out with the sort of local authority sort of recruitment campaign for foster carers, because there's a severe lack of foster carers, you know, nationally. And I was speaking to him about it and he told me that two applicants arrived. And I just thought, that's – and then when I asked about what marketing and advertising they had done, it was literally a small advertisement in the local paper. And I thought, like, this is ridiculous. Like if you're not paying, you know, and if you're not sort of investing in marketing and promoting of, you know, fostering services, then you're not going to get people to become, you know, interested and apply. And then, you know, because you don't have sufficient numbers of foster carers for the local authority, you will then have to place children with sort of private agencies, who will

charge astronomical fees and it's going to cost you even more. So again, it comes back to the thing, surely it's better to invest into, you know, your fostering, you know, rather than not investing and then not having any placements and then not having to pay these ridiculous fees, you know. And it just seems – again, it seems crazy to me. But, you know, unfortunately you always seem to get people at the top who don't have much idea of what it's like at the bottom. You know, and I think it's really important to involve people at the bottom in sort of decision making, you know. And I'm not saying, you know, just sort of say, 'Oh, what do you think?' And then ignore them. Actually inviting them to comment and valuing their response, because they're the ones on the ground, you know. That's another one of my bugbears.

[36:21]

*You're a local advocate for children's services now, but I remember at the start of the interview you said that there was a lot of stigma around the care system and you tried to disassociate yourself from it.*

Yeah.

*Can you tell me about that?*

I guess, because I wanted to be normal and I felt maybe by sort of being labelled, I wasn't. And I think sort of – for me, I guess the most sort of difficult thing would be, I guess, jealous if you like, going round a friend's house, you know, and there'd be sort of – Mum and Dad and everyone would be having sort of dinner around the dinner table, you know. And there wasn't, you know – sort of people would say, you know, 'Oh, is it – you need more money to be supported,' but that was one of the most, you know, things that I'd be most annoyed about, that you don't have that, you know. And that's something that no amount of money could give you. And because, I think, of our age, it wasn't like we might have gone to a foster placement at a young age and then sort of, you know, developed, you know, gone into the sort of – been in like a sort of family environment, you know. So that was sort of, you know, annoying. But yeah, I think I just sort of tried to disassociate myself with, you know,

and I'd be invited to certain events and be like, 'Oh no, I'm not going to that,' you know. 'I don't want to do that. I don't want to do that.' I guess it wasn't till I was sort of – I don't know, I don't know what changed. I sort of got older and I guess sort of did a bit more sort of reading and sort of research into sort of – the care system and stuff. I think – I guess it wasn't till I went to uni, university, that I was, you know, looking into sort of financial assistance and support to help me through my studies and whatever, because initially – I remember when I finished college, obviously I did my sort of public services course, I didn't like the idea of uni because I didn't like the idea of being in loads of debt and sort of the instability and insecurity of moving somewhere and then maybe having to move back and not know where I'm going to be. And then I think I've always sort of been very sort of money conscious and sort of, you know, I think at a young age it was sort of, you know, you try and save, you know, for a rainy day, and I've always tried to stick with that and, you know, you live within your means. You, you know, spend what you can afford. And I've always sort of tried to sort of live like that. So the whole uni thing – and I was like, well, what, do that and then come out in, you know, tens of thousands of pounds in debt, you know, and maybe not even get a job. Don't like the idea of that, you know. 'Cause some people, you know, are fortunate enough to be able to do a degree and then they might perhaps maybe – they might be struggling to get a – find employment, but they can move back home with Mum and Dad. But if I finish my degree, I have to move – either stay there or move back and find a place and find a job and there's a lot more to think about. And I can remember finding sort of the degree in public services and the first two years were at a local college, and because they were at a local college, the tuition fee was cheaper. It was only £2,150 a year, which seems crazy, considering what it is now. So – and, you know, I could stay living in my sort of flat, where I sort of, you know, I was sort of comfortable, I sort of, you know, with where I was, sort of thing. And I had a conversation with my leaving care worker, who said that, you know, it can be possible to arrange for me to have like a bus pass to enable me to get transport to my sort of college to do the sort of first two years of the degree. So that was good. And I went through student finance, looked at sort of what I could be entitled to. So when you apply, sort of like anyone, it takes into account your household income, 'cause my – I was working part time, but obviously 'cause my income was low, I qualified for the maintenance grant. So – and I could have got the

tuition fee loan and the maintenance loan, but I decided against it and took out just a grant, with the plan that I would use the maintenance grant to pay off the tuition fee with and then use the remainder to help towards living costs [coughs]. And then I would work sort of part time sort of throughout the degree and work – do overtime during the sort of summer holidays and breaks and stuff. And at the time I was – when I started my degree, I was working in Debenhams' head office, like in a call centre, so, you know, to sort of allow me to pay the bills. And before then – even through college I was working at sort of Morrisons, on the checkouts. So I always had, you know, was working and had some sort of money coming in. And I was able to finish the first two years of my degree and sort of be in no debt. And, you know, I was sort of – wow, this is, you know. But my brother, who's sort of gone a different route, chose to do a degree in media studies. Went to the University of West England. Chose to take out all the loans available to him, so the most expensive accommodation – we're very different people. And anyhow, and he sort of come out and – he finished the degree and I think he's, like, in eighteen grand's worth of debt. And I decided to do my top up year, which I had to do at Plymouth. I wanted to still stay in my flat, erm, and I just – I used to catch the train down to Plymouth, go to my lectures and crash on a sofa at a friend's sort of student accommodation, and then sort of catch the train back, to help keep costs down. But the tuition fee was more expensive, it was £3,250. So again, I used the maintenance grant but I had to add extra to cover it. I did have some financial assistance, like, as an incentive they were paying. Like, sort of, I think the local authority – I can't remember how much it was, like £10 a week or something, for the academic sort of – for each week you were in, as an incentive to go. So that was sort of – obviously that helped, you know, sort of financially. And I was able to, you know, and I worked, like, loads. Like I did so much – I was contracted to do twenty hours a week and then if there was overtime available and I could do it, I would. So sometimes I was working nearly sort of fulltime to get sort of money in [coughs]. And as soon as I'd got any sort of, you know, summer breaks or whatever, I would do as many hours as I could. I remember sort of working sort of Boxing Day, you know, because it was, like, triple pay and I sort of needed the money, and just trying to sort of, you know, sort of keep to my plan. And I managed to finish my degree and be in no debt, which is something I'm quite proud of because not many people can say so. But I did so through a lot of hard

work and planning. I mean, I finished with a 2:1, but perhaps if I wasn't sort of working so much, I might have been able to sort of have got a stronger – I don't know. I mean, I'm not massively academic, but, you know, if I had more time to focus on my uni work, that might have helped. So ... I've forgotten the question again now. So yeah, so I sort of did that. I don't know where I'm going with this.

*I can take you back, if you like.*

Yeah, take me back.

[44:18]

*I'll take you back. So you were staying with your foster carer but you left when you were seventeen and a half.*

Yeah, yeah.

*And then all this started. So what was that like, the transition?*

Well, it was annoying because I was sort of still in the second year of my college course when I had to move and, you know, it was just – like, it wasn't particularly good timing, but I didn't really have a massive say in it. And –

*Why did you have to move?*

Because basically sort of there was – stopped funding at eighteen. They said that these flats were sort of becoming available – and I was under the impression that I'm moving to this flat and stay there. I wasn't – if I knew that I'd be moving out in three months, there was no way I would have gone there, because it's just ridiculous. And I think their idea that it was sort of – by moving in there, we can sort of see that, you know, you can be independent and have life skills and whatever, but my argument would have been, well, hang on a minute, surely, you know, my foster carer can sort of work with me to do these life skills and, you know, he can relay back to you, you

know, what areas I need to work on, or whatever. Like, and it just seemed – and it was all – it's all financial. Looking back, that's all it is. It's because they had the leaving care accommodation. It wasn't – there was nobody in there. It wasn't being filled. They were paying rent on them. And by putting two people in there, they could then sort of be using that and put someone else in a foster placement there. So no thought of the people involved, simply financial. And a lot of the time it's always the case and people are seen as sort of – aren't seen as people. They're just seen as sort of figures – little figures are above their head. If that figure's getting too high then they want to cross it off the list. You know, and so that sort of was annoying. And I remember sort of eventually moving into my council flat and we had a sort of – at the time Somerset Local Authority – and again, it varies to different local authorities around the country, which is ridiculous, but some of them pay more, some are paying less. But Somerset provided me with a £1,000 leaving care grant, but that literally went like that [clicks fingers], because the council flat I moved into had nothing. So straight away, £350 went on sort of just normal carpet and flooring. It wasn't expensive, just cheap as chips, you know, flooring, so I wasn't walking on, you know, rubbish, nails and whatever. And then £450 went on sort of a second hand cooker, fridge freezer, washing machine, and the rest went on my TV licence, fittings and blinds. So that – and that was it, gone. And I sort of – I was thankful that, you know, I managed to sort of – I was working and I managed to save money, but I thought, if I was a young person – looking back, if I was a young person who wasn't able to work or couldn't find work and didn't – wasn't able to save, then I would have struggled massively. I managed to blag a sofa from sort of the leaving care team, because I saw that in an empty leaving care flat they had, there was a sofa sat there doing nothing. I said, 'Can I have that sofa? It's not being used.' Thank god I was able to have it. My old foster carer gave me the sort of TV and a dining set and chairs and a few other sort of bits and bobs. And then I – but then sort of all the, you know, I remember the first six weeks, I was sort of sleeping on the sofa 'cause I didn't have a bed. And then, you know, all the sort of little things that you sort of have to go and buy. And I obviously didn't have a car 'cause I couldn't afford to have a car. And obviously, you know, with that, you obviously pay for lessons and buy a car and pay for insurance and all the rest of it. There was no way I could afford that. So I, you know, remember sort of – I walked to Argos, bought a microwave and then walked

back and, you know, to sort of try and sort of rely on friends and stuff. I remember sort of – when I sort of went to get some sort of flooring for the bathroom, I sort of went into some carpet place, ordered it, and managed to get a friend to come and pick it up and sort of bring it back. And it was just, like, a sort of massive trouble. When you're sort of, you know, I would say normally, at sort of eighteen, nineteen, at that age, people tend to be sort of going out, enjoying themselves, sort of perhaps maybe wasting money on sort of drink or, you know, clothes and that sort of stuff, and I was spending a lot of my money on saucepans and cutlery and stuff. And, you know, it wasn't through choice, because if it was up to me I would still be in my foster placement, but I wasn't. So, you know, and when I sort of built all that sort of stuff up, you know, with the whole sort of uni thing – if I was going to move down, I had all that stuff and what will I do with it. So that's why I sort of decided to, you know, which aided my decision in sort of staying there. But it was just, again, rather annoying.

[49:11]

*What was your brother doing at this point?*

So my brother – at that time, he had moved – he had decided to move to Bristol, at the University of West England, and sort of do his degree in media studies. But again, we are totally different, totally different people. You know, like I said, he took out all the loans available to him and he [coughs] – he sort of did his sort of driving lessons and stuff and got a car. But I think, because he was in Bristol, he wanted to be able to sort of come back and stuff. And yeah, so – but he sort of, you know, did his – passed his degree fine, got a 2:1, and he also got a final project – he did a piece on, like, the Three Peaks and he won like a Royal Television Society award for his piece, so that was – I don't often give him credit but I'll give him credit for that. So yeah, so he did alright. And then sort of he finished uni and then he went travelling with his sort of – his partner for, like, six months and then came back and then stayed – he was living with her mum and dad. And in a way I think he's been sort of, you know, sort of quite fortunate, because maybe – if it wasn't for his partner, maybe he wouldn't have gone travelling, maybe he wouldn't – because I think he had some sort of security

there. You know, 'cause again, I think a lot of sort of students or people might sort of have a gap year, go travel, you know. For, I think, a child in care, it's a lot more difficult for you to do because, you know, it's not expensive – well, I mean, it is expensive, you know, and perhaps sort of people who are able on their gap year to be able to live at home, work, save up a large amount of money and then go travelling, but children in care can't really do that. Well, they can but perhaps maybe it's more difficult to do so. And, you know, it's just – I guess, you know, I'd just like to see any opportunity that, you know, a child who isn't in care has, can be had by a child who is in care, you know. And it seems that there's too many sort of restrictions or things preventing them from doing so. So I mean, I know there's been, you know, improvements, but I don't think it goes far enough. I know, for example, now that you can get – sort of children in care can stay in student accommodation for the full year rather than just sort of the academic term. But [coughs], saying that, I can remember my brother, in his – I don't know if it was the first year, when he'd finished his sort of first year in Bristol, he then – he was then – he moved back and had accommodation in Wellington for a few months before he moved back, you know, and sort of that was – and then he didn't do it the following year 'cause it was just so much, you know, moving about and hassle and stuff. But yeah, so obviously there's changes been made, but it's not good enough.

[52:25]

*Well, you've talked about children in care having sort of equal opportunities against sort of their counterparts.*

Yeah.

*One of the big issues today, where people say that sort of children in care don't have equality, is in education, because the education outcomes are so different. And I was wondering, with your mum passing away at the start of secondary school, what kept you on track educationally through that time?*

I guess in a way I sort of wanted to sort of do my own mum proud, if you like. And obviously I mentioned the sort of competitive nature of myself and my brother. I guess that I sort of knew that maybe if I didn't, you know, get sort of good GCSEs, I wouldn't be able to go to college or university, whatever, and get a good job and have, you know, a nice life.

*How did you know that?*

Erm, I don't know. It's difficult, really, 'cause like I said sort of before, it wasn't until sort of recently that I think back and I think, you know, my mum obviously wasn't working. I must have been in receipt of sort of, you know, sort of certain welfare benefits. And often in the media it's portrayed that, if there's a parent out of work then the child's more likely to be out of work, blah, blah, blah. But I don't know, that wasn't obviously the case for myself and my brother. I guess I just sort of knew that, you know, if you don't – I guess that, you know, if you don't – if I'm not working, I'm not earning. And I guess that's why maybe perhaps, when there was overtime, I would take it, because if I wasn't working, I wasn't earning. There was a period, when I finished my degree – obviously I was working part time in Debenhams' head office and that was my twenty hour contract and I was doing as much overtime as possible. And I picked up the ten hour sessional contract [coughs] with the sort of care – doing support work. And then I had another referral, so then it went up to twenty hours. So I had twenty hours there, twenty hours at the other place and then I was doing overtime as well. And I remember there was a period of – it was six – yeah, seven weeks, I worked seven days in a row and six out of the seven weeks were fifty hours or more. But I had – by doing so, that allowed me to sort of save up some money to be able to sort of do my driving lessons, buy a car and then pay for the insurance, you know, which wasn't cheap. You know, it wasn't that I was after some flash boy racer car. I picked up an old 1993 reg Nissan Micra, one litre, 140,000 miles on the clock, from some old bloke down the road. I think it cost me 400 quid and it cost me, what, over a grand to insurance, because I'm a young male and I'm, you know, I'm a new driver. You know, and then all my sort of driving lessons and tests and that, that would easily equate to 250 quid. So, you know, looking at sort of two grand, like, and it's a lot of money, you know. And I'm not saying that all

children, you know, have, you know, financial assistance from their parents, because obviously that's not the case, because everyone's situation's different. But, you know in terms of sort of, you know, helping to sort of learn to drive, I think it might be sort of normal for perhaps maybe a parent maybe just to take their son or daughter out in a car and just sort of teach them basics and maybe might contribute and pay for a few lessons, you know, or – but, you know, a young person in care doesn't really have much of that. I guess – I think, you know, perhaps it might vary depending on what local authority you live in, but in my local authority there's no support sort of there, so ...

[56:18]

*It feels like you always felt the absence of your mum.*

Yeah, I guess so. Erm ...

*What was your support network then, if not the local authority?*

I don't know. I just ... So I had, you know, a group of friends and stuff, but I wouldn't – I wouldn't talk about it, you know. And I don't – it's not something I sort of tend to bring up in conversation. I can remember, might have been last year actually, like – I think my nan found some, like, videotapes or something of sort of me and my brother when we were, like, really little, like, with our sort of mum and our dad or whatever. And I can remember sort of like – I went round to my sort of granddad's house and we put it on. I was, like, watching it and I just started crying, like, and I had to leave the room, 'cause I think – I don't know, 'cause I'd like sort of forgotten about it and, like, to see it, visualise it, I was just like, oh my god. Like, and it was just, like, woah. And in the end I just sort of – I got him to turn it off. I just couldn't watch it. It was just like, woah, this is too much.

*Did that surprise you?*

Erm, I don't know. I don't think it – I think it surprised me, like, how much I was just, like – like a fountain. But, like – I don't know, sort of ... Just to see it, you know, sort of to visualise it and see it and I guess, sort of – although I wasn't aware at the time as a child, but, you know, it looked like a sort of happy type sort of thing, to sort of see that, it's like, oh, you know. And I think maybe, you know – I think times have changed, but – and I think maybe, because of my sort of family's military history a bit, it was sort of like, you know, boys don't cry, you know, be manly, you know, that sort of thing. So that was difficult.

*Do you do that often? Do you remember your mum?*

No, I don't like to because, again, it's sort of, for me, looking in the past. I like to – 'cause if I do do that then I'll just get, you know, upset and it's –

*What do you do for Christmas?*

Christmas, I tend to go up to Newcastle and spend it with my sort of auntie up there and my cousin and my sort of grandma and granddad up there. That's what I normally do. And, you know, that's fine. It works alright.

*And birthdays?*

Birthdays, I just tend to spend with sort of friends sort of locally, so ...

*And what about – do you ever – like, do you ever do anything on the anniversary of your mum's death?*

No. Erm, I just – I don't know, I guess I sort of know – obviously before, I totally sort of forgot the date, you know, on purpose. Then sort of as I got older I sort of, you know, sort of remembered it a bit more. And I guess sort of, when it comes to the – I guess, you know, I don't often think about it or talk about it. When it comes to the day, that's when maybe I sort of – I do think about it and, you know, and whatever. So yeah, probably on a sort of yearly basis. I don't like to reflect on that too much.

[59:50]

*Okay. Let me take you back to education then, if you don't like to reflect on it too much.*

*FS: Actually, it's actually two hours now.*

Oh, is it? Okay.

*If you want to break, it probably would be –*

Okay, cool, yeah.

*Okay, yeah.*

[End of Track 2]

[Track 3]

*MS: Camera rolling.*

*Okay Chris, I've been thinking about what you were saying a few minutes ago and you sound really resourceful in sort of getting lots of jobs and working out what you need and when to do everything. I was wondering, over that process, what were your coping strategies for someone who was so resourceful?*

Erm ... I don't know, really. Can you reword the question, is that alright?

*Yeah. So I guess by coping strategies, I'm after – things seem to go to plan. So you make lots of plans, like you've been saying, and when things don't go to plan or you need to work out another way to get something, or the day to day problems of life come up, how do you cope with them? How do you deal with them?*

I try to get on with it. I don't know. I just think I just sort of – if I'm faced with a new challenge, you know, I'll just sort of deal with it and get on with it. And, you know, Google is one of my best friends. You know, and if I need, you know, I'll do a bit of research if I need to, to try and find information that I might need or help or whatever. I mean, for example, when – I can remember, when I sort of – returning to education to do my Masters, I sort of looked at what support could be available to me, because I knew that there was a sort of part of the law which said that any young person who used to be in care, who is returning to education, should be assessed to see if they're entitled to any support. And I managed to locate Somerset County Council's financial leaving care policy, so I had a sort of look through that in terms of sort of what support might be available for my education. And then it got me thinking of sort of my degree before and the fact that I hadn't – I had the bus pass for my first two years at the college but I didn't have any cost towards my sort of travel cards commuting to Plymouth. So then I sort of – I made contact with the local authority and said that, you know, according to this policy, you should have been providing me with some assistance and I was forking out of my own back pocket. And they sort of

looked into it and recognised that they should have, you know, been supporting me. And after sort of speaking to my foster carer and getting him to, you know, shout in a few people's ears, they sort of recognised and then sort of – and they asked me to sort of come up with a figure and I sort of worked out just, you know, a return ticket to Plymouth on a weekly basis for the years I was at – for the weeks I was at uni, and then came up with a fee and said, this is how much I believe it to be, and they said, okay. And I couldn't believe it. And that was a big help, but something that I shouldn't have had to fight for. And then, I mean, when I – talking about starting a Masters, they were aware of me starting the Masters a long – a long time ago. I made them fully aware, so they had a good year. And it sort of came up to the sort of September time and I was like, you know, 'I'm starting my Masters. Are we having this assessment? You know, what's happening?' It wasn't until – was it January that I finally had the assessment and then a few email exchange – and I sent off all the information that I was asked of in February and only a couple of weeks back I had sort of someone from the in care team come round and see me and discuss it with me. So I've finished my first year and most of my second year and I've had no – and I can remember talking to my sort of leaving care worker on the phone, 'Oh yeah, you've already had support for your undergrad degree.' I was like, 'Well yeah, I recognise that, but I've got your financial care leaving policy in front of me and it says the words postgraduate, so regardless of an undergraduate study, you know, surely, you know, if it's written in black and white, you can't ignore that.' So I think that obviously they again recognise that. It's just taken them a long time and I haven't had any financial assistance from them as of yet. You know, and I don't want to be seen as sort of – as money grabbing, but, you know, any support I can have is going to help me, because if it was up to me, if I was in a situation where, you know, I could move back home, I would, but I can't. You know, I've got just general living costs, you know, rent, you know, and food and all my other bills, you know. And, you know, if I look at other people on my course, you know, a lot of them are a lot older. They're sort of either supported by their partners or they're living at home, you know. So they're in a situation where they don't have, you know, all these sort of outgoings. And I don't live lavishly, you know. I live in sort of a council flat, you know, so sort of – I've got – rent is sort of, I guess, fairly sort of low, but all my bills add up. And I've got – I need a car because I need a car for placement and for work, you know. It

all mounts up. And when I was on placement, that was – the first one was sixty-five days, it probably cost me about 650 quid just in fuel for commuting there and back, which is a lot of money. And when I'm on placement that's Monday to Friday, nine to five, I was there for a three month period and I was doing a bit of work on sort of evenings and weekends, but I still had uni work to do 'cause I had to evidence what I'm doing on placement. So I wasn't getting any money going in and I had money going out and, you know, it was very, very difficult. And sort of, you know, I think sometimes sort of maybe they see it as an excuse because perhaps the number of care leavers that go on to higher education is low. Perhaps they're not fully aware of the situation and what support's available. And then maybe that can hinder someone who is going down that route. You know, it hasn't been as good as it should be, I would say, and it's very wrong that you have to get a young person to, you know, do research and look at their rights and what they're entitled to in order to get it. I think if I didn't do that, you know, what – I might not have got anything at all. And then perhaps if there's, you know, you've got another young person who might not be so confident, you know, they could be seriously missing out and perhaps miss out on an education, just because they're not getting what they should be entitled to, that can help them through, you know, their studies.

[07:10]

*And you had help from your foster carer in doing this initially, you mentioned.  
What's your relationship like with him now?*

Yeah, really good. So I sort of – I mean, he's also on the sort of – the panel of the fostering agency I sort of work for. Having said that they needed a foster carer, I said, 'Well, I know one,' and thought he'd be good, 'cause he sits on Devon Foster Panel. And now he's recently been put as chair of the panel. Yeah, I sort of, you know, speak to him on a regular basis, you know, sort of go round there for, you know, a bit of cooked food, you know. Like I say, he'll proof read my essays. Yeah, sort of good, you know, got a good relationship with him. And he's got the same sort of good relationship with my brother as well. So yeah.

*How would you describe that relationship?*

Erm, I don't know, just sort of like a – I don't know really. I guess sort of like an uncle sort of thing, I guess. Yeah.

*And does he support you sort of like on every sort of – on a day to day level?*

So it's not sort of day to day but, like, you know, if I sort of ring him up and say, 'Oh, I need a hand with this. I need help with this,' you know, he'll sort of – he'll go away and help me. Or if he can't help, he'll try and find someone who can. You know, and even if it's something as simple as, 'Oh, can I borrow your printer please?' [Laughs] You know, and he doesn't mind me sort of, you know, going round there and visiting and stuff. So – and, you know, I've still got a key to his house, so he's really, you know, trusting. But I think, you know, I've got a good level of trust there. And yeah.

*And that's all very practical. Does he – like, do you talk to him when you're stressed out about anything or ...?*

Erm, I guess I sort of, like – if I go round there for some grub, I might go off on a rant to him about something. But then I sort of tend to rant at friends and stuff and am told to calm it down 'cause I'm off ranting again.

[09:25]

*And what about with your social worker? Do you still – what was your relationship like with your social worker when you still had one?*

Didn't really see him. Didn't really have much contact with him. I mean, he's fine. He was – he was fine, you know. There wasn't many – there wasn't exactly sort of major issues or anything that needed to be dealt with. But one thing I always remember is that – I remember when we had our pathway plan, our social worker would come and the independent reviewer reviewing us would be there and then ask if they – the social worker could complete the pathway plan – oh no, no that's right.

And it wasn't till I was twenty-one that I finally saw, agreed and signed my pathway plan. So, you know, it sort of – there's plenty of tick box exercises, I find, that perhaps are in place to make it seem that, you know, the correct work has been done, but actually it's not. And obviously it's not been properly checked and, you know, not been supervised, because in my opinion, surely if that pathway plan wasn't done on the first attempt, on the first, you know, pathway plan, on the first review, then they should have said, 'Right, okay. Listen, I need to see this by this day.' And, you know, it just seems – obviously I appreciate that, you know, social workers have, you know, high caseloads and they're under a lot of pressure and stress and all the rest of it, but at the same time, you can't just ignore, you know, certain commitments to certain people.

*Do you still keep in touch with your social worker?*

No, no.

*Who's your main contact now in the local authority?*

Erm, probably my sort of leaving care worker or the sort of person above him, sort of the manager.

*And what's that relationship like?*

Yeah, okay. Just – yeah, it's fine. I think they, you know, recognise that things could have been better and they could have done better, and that, you know, I'm, you know, I've been honest with them. I'm trying to sort of better myself and, you know, increase my life prospects. And I guess they'll try as best they can to try and support me in some way, I guess, albeit if it's fairly delayed.

*So is it quite a formal relationship?*

Yeah, yeah.

*There's no one sort of – what I guess I'm trying to get at is who's there on a kind of more personal, emotional level?*

I don't know. I guess I just – I just deal with stuff.

*Are any of your friends, like, that way inclined?*

Sorry?

*Are any of your friends around in that capacity?*

Yeah. I mean, I guess obviously I can speak to friends about stuff, but I don't tend to open up. I find that a lot of times I tend to get people come and, like, talk to me about stuff. Like, I don't know, people seem to come and sort of talk to me about things that, you know, things that are going on, or they want advice about stuff. I know people seem to – I don't know why, but it just – yeah. But I'm cool with that. Don't bother me.

[12:58]

*And the other thing you mentioned last time was that you're really competitive with your brother, or there's been this kind of element of competition all the way through.*

Yeah.

*Is that still around?*

Yeah. So, you know, I'd be lying if I, you know, said that I don't want a better car than him, you know, because I do, I want a better car and a better house. I want a better – it's just the, you know, competitive nature, you know. And it can be, you know, stupid things, like, for example, if we were to fly to Newcastle to see our sort of family up there, we would sort of get off the plane and start walking towards sort of baggage reclaim and slowly the walk will get a bit faster and faster and then before

we know it, it's a race to claim our baggage. I've got a strong record, won the last five. So ... [Laughs]

*Does your brother talk to you? Is your brother one of those people that comes to talk to you?*

Erm, no, not really. I mean, he's got obviously a partner that I guess he, you know, talks to stuff about, you know. I don't really know.

*And why do you think people do talk to you? Do you know why?*

I don't know. I think I'm sort of, you know, I'm a fairly good listener. I think I, you know, try and give, you know, the best advice I can. You know, I sort of like to help people the best I can and I sort of like to, you know, sort of push people to better themselves. I don't know, for example, you know, I've got a friend that's been sort of working in Sainsbury's and he was sort of just on a sort of – he worked at Sainsbury's throughout college and throughout university and he was still working part time after he finished his degree. And he didn't sort of pass his degree but he got some sort of, you know, qualification from it. And, you know, he was only on a part time contract. I said to him, you know, I said, 'Are you happy sort of working on a part time contract, because, you know, you're always sort of complaining that you don't have money and stuff?' And I basically kept on – I was nagging him, basically, saying, 'Look, you need to speak to your manager and say, look, I've been working here for x amount of years, I'm trained in all these departments, you know. Surely you can, you know, for my loyalty, reward me with a fulltime contract.' And I said to him, you know, about applying for, you know, managerial positions and all the rest of it. And now he's working fulltime in a sort of supervisor role. I don't know, I just get so sort of, you know, like to see the best for people.

*How have you become so savvy?*

I don't know. It's just me [laughs].

*Fair enough, okay. So I'm going to go back to your brother. Has your relationship with him changed over time at all?*

Erm ... I guess obviously when we were sort of, you know, sort of teenage lads, you know, we would argue a lot and it got a lot better when, you know, when we had separate rooms and then we weren't living together anymore. So yeah, it's a lot better now, probably the best it has been since we were small children. But yeah, we're just, you know, different people. But yeah.

*Do you talk to him often or see him often?*

I see him from time to time, you know. Again, you know, I might go round and use his printer [laughs]. Yeah, I see him from, you know, time to time, when I need to.

*But he's in Bristol now or ...?*

No, he's living in Taunton. He finished his degree and he went travelling and came back and he's living back in Taunton. So he's only five minutes away if I need him.

*Printer.*

Yeah [laughs].

[16:52]

*And how's everything with your nan and your granddad?*

Yeah, alright. You know, again I sort of see them from – from time to time, you know. As we've sort of, I guess, matured, it's just – it's alright. It's cool.

*What's your nan like? We haven't talked about her.*

Erm ... I don't know. She's ... erm, I think she's very, very traditional, very set in her ways. Very – she's got a strong hatred towards my dad and – and yeah, I think just because of her sort of – some of her sort of, you know – because she was very set in her ways – but I don't know, I guess as I've got older I've sort of become more confident to challenge certain things she might say and say, 'Actually, you know, that's a load of rubbish.' But, you know, our relationship's fine. You know, I'll go and see her and, yeah, we're cool.

*And your granddad, what's he like?*

Again, he's sort of fine. Don't sort of see him sort of as often, but yeah, he's alright.

*Do you see your dad's family?*

So Dad's family, just normally sort of over the summer and then at Christmas.

*What's Christmas like usually? What was it like when you were younger, with your mum?*

It was – yeah, it was good, you know. I can remember, you know, waking up with, you know, a stocking on the bed, like, and obviously stupid – waking up at stupid o'clock and opening up the stocking and, you know, being excited. And I went downstairs and seeing the Christmas tree with all the presents underneath and being like, 'Oh wow.' Yeah, and it was, you know, it was, you know, a nice happy time, sort of thing. I can remember – I can't remember how old I was, but I can remember one year, I went into my mum's room and I found some toys in some bags that were hidden and they – they were the toys that I had for Christmas, so I sort of worked out that perhaps Santa might not be – might not be real, although he is. So yeah, it was, you know, it was good fun, a sort of happy sort of time. So yeah, it was good.

*Was there a routine? Was there something that you always did, like Christmas traditions?*

I don't know, sort of just normal, open presents, you know, have Christmas dinner and stuff and sort of watch Christmas films on TV. I might have a – it was good.

*Did you have family round or was it just the three of you?*

No, we'd have sort of family round, so our nan and granddad would come round and then our sort of auntie and uncle might sort of pop in and, you know, and then go off elsewhere, or whatever. So yeah, it was good.

*And then Christmas after your mum died was with your dad's family always?*

Not always. I mean, no. Obviously initially sort of we – I think, like, we'd spend it with our nan and sometimes we'd spend it up in Newcastle. I can remember one year it was just, like, really rubbish. I can't remember sort of – I don't know if it was Boxing Day or Christmas Day, but I can remember me and my brother just went out on our bikes and we were just sort of riding around on our bikes, 'cause we just didn't – we didn't want to be in the house, 'cause our nan was sort of – like, there was no Christmas decorations and it was like – I think our nan was like, 'Oh, I'm not celebrating Christmas this year,' blah, blah, blah. And it wasn't a particularly happy place to be in, so we sort of just got on our bikes and went off and cycled round.

*Why did your nan do that?*

Erm, I don't know. I think perhaps maybe she sort of hadn't, you know, was struggling to deal with the death of, you know, her daughter, and perhaps maybe didn't want to – didn't feel like celebrating Christmas. And because our sort of mum's birthday is sort of so close to Christmas, only two days from Christmas – so I guess that might be the reason why. I don't know exactly. So yeah.

*So you went off on your bikes.*

Sorry?

*You went off on your bikes.*

Yeah, we just went off on our bikes and just sort of got out the way.

*And how did she react to that? Was she okay with that?*

I think she was – yeah, I think she was fine with it. I can't really remember, to be honest. Again, a bit of a blur.

*Do you remember Christmas in care, with your foster carer?*

Erm, yes. I mean, each Christmas – when we were in care, each Christmas we would go up to Newcastle and spend it there. Like we'd have like a mini Christmas, if you like, in care. I always remember it because he had the worst nativity scene in the world [laughs]. He would sort of use sort of like sort of some polystyrene sort of stuff, like, to look like snow and there'd be like a sheep and, like, just random – like, random animals and random things that have no link to Christmas whatsoever, but like a polar bear, you know, obviously winter, cold, like, just really random and weird. But yeah, it was, you know, it was alright.

*Was it pretty much the same as every other Christmas?*

Yeah, it was pretty – pretty normal. It was alright.

*And birthdays in care? What were they like?*

Erm, yeah, yeah, the birthdays in care, they were okay. Sort of I'd normally just go and sort of spend it, you know, with friends and sort of do something. I can always – I can remember my nineteenth birthday, because that was really rubbish because at the time I was doing training to become a special constable for Avon and Somerset Police and so I was at college – no, I was at – doing it in the first year of my degree, that's right, and I was working weekends. And training was on weekends, so I used all my holiday to cover sort of the weekends or whatever so I could do the training, so

I didn't have any holiday. I remember originally, before I started the – before the training days came out, I was going to go to T4 on the Beach for my birthday with a group of mates just for a laugh and then I had to sort of cancel it. Being at work on my birthday and I had two massive complaints, like, people that were shouting down my ear, and it was real busy. And I remember I sort of finished work and I sort of got back to my flat and all my mates and everyone were still in, like, sort of T4 on the Beach and I was there by myself. It was just like, this is rubbish. So that's why I always try now to get my birthday booked off, so that I'm doing something, 'cause that wasn't great.

[24:00]

*What do special constables do?*

So a special constable is – it's the same role as a normal police officer, same uniform, although, depending on what force, some forces have SC on them, which stands for special constable. So normally the public won't know, but if another person from the police, they'll recognise that they're a special constable. Or in Avon and Somerset, a special constable caller number starts with five, mine was 5893. And yeah, same roles, uniforms, sort of powers as a normal police officer, you just – you just don't get paid. So you have to do a minimum requirement of, I think, sixteen hours a month and, you know, sort of – I chose to do it 'cause I thought it would, like, help increase my chances of sort of getting in the police and give me sort of hands on experience. I can remember, I was living in Taunton and I specifically asked to be based at a station in Wellington, because – because of where I live, I thought if I was policing on my own doorstep, that wouldn't be a good idea. So, you know, it worked out alright. So I did that for a year but then I had to sort of stop that because I was in my third year of my degree and I couldn't sort of do my degree, sort of do my dissertation and work and do the policing at the same time. I just couldn't commit to the sort of sixteen hours a month. So I had to give it up. But, you know, it was a good experience.

*What kind of stuff did you deal with?*

Well, I was placed with a neighbourhood policing team. I mean, Wellington's quite a small town, so, you know, it wasn't a lot of, you know, car chases and sirens and riots and stuff. I can remember, we went to this sort of village to do like a community speed watch thing with some elderly people from the village, and sort of – we were just basically supervising. They were there with the guns and stuff, sort of tracking the speed of the cars, and all of a sudden this ambulance sort of pulled up and parked on the road, and then a big bus came round the other way and the road was blocked. And then I was directing sort of traffic around, like, a big farm, with, like, tractors and stuff and it started raining. So that was, you know, I went to, you know, coffee mornings with sort of people from, like, villages and stuff. So that was all sort of nicey-nicey stuff. Just a few patrols on the beat with a PCSO or another officer. I can remember a few times sort of coming up to some sort of children who were sort of drinking underage, so sort of confiscated the alcohol, poured it away and take some details. I can remember attending a domestic incident, which was quite interesting. I had to go and sort of try and take – I was sat there with another officer, sort of taking a statement from the victim. What other stuff? Went to sort of custody a few times and obviously just did sort of basic searches and stuff. But yeah, it was interesting. It was a good – good experience. In a way I'd sort of liked to have seen more, but just the opportunity didn't present itself.

*Did it affect your perception of the police at all?*

Erm, it annoyed me, like, the amount of sort of like paperwork that's involved and, like, all the stupid – all the tickets you've got. It just seemed that there was a better way of doing it. So, for example, having one more general sort of ticket, whereby you could collect the information of the person, you know, and all their details and then tick a box to identify what sort of ticket it is – it seems to be a lack of common sense. I don't know if it's maybe perhaps – I was with a neighbourhood policing team, a lot different to a response team, but, like, I was, you know, very keen to sort of be walking round and going to sort of, you know, looking for stuff, and I think sort of they sort of seemed to spend a lot of time at the station sort of, you know, drinking tea and stuff. It was – I don't know, I sort of got an impression that – because, like I say,

it is a sort of sleepy town, not much tends to go on, or very rare something goes on, that, you know, it attracted an officer nearing retirement, who wanted perhaps a last few years, you know, perhaps ... So – so yeah, and – so I guess, you know, everyone's different and, you know, in – in the police you can use your sort of – what's the word I'm looking for? Erm, so sort of like your –

*Initiative?*

Yeah, initiative – well, your sort of judgement, it's your sort of judgement call, you know. I don't know, sort of – no, you know, I'd still be quite interested in joining the police, but I think, you know, depending on where you're working, who you're working with, that can have an affect on sort of what sort of you're doing. You know, when there's such a heavy sort of focus on targets and stats and stuff, I think sometimes it takes it away from the actual service that's being provided. You know, it's just getting people at the top concerned about numbers and – and boxes rather than people receiving the services. But I mean, it was a good experience and I enjoyed it.

[29:45]

*So considering that you've had that experience and your own experience of the care system, which you're kind of ambivalent about, or at least trying to disassociate yourself from, what was the thought process like in going and deciding to do social work and did you have any concerns about it?*

Erm, well, I don't know. I guess sort of, 'cause of the whole recruitment thing with the police, because of my experience of being in care, you know, I quite liked the idea of going into social work and perhaps trying to help sort of children in care, sort of care leavers and try and sort of improve their outcomes. You know, I felt, 'cause I'd sort of, you know, had an experience of it myself, you know, I – I don't know, I had an interest in it because, you know, perhaps I felt that the service I had could have been better so I want to maybe try and make the service better for other people. So, you know, and I'm quite – ideally I might qualify and work within a sort of leaving

care team or sort of work with children in care, or sort of, you know, start my sort of career in politics [laughs], move to Number 10 and try and make some change.

*Did you have any concerns about the impact that doing social work might have on you?*

No, not really, but, like, one thing I have found is that sort of since I've been on the course, like, I have analysed myself a lot and, like, I tend to analyse other people. And, you know, I might be like, ooh, attachment disorder or whatever, sort of, you know – and, like, yeah, it sort of gets me to sort of question and think a lot, you know, and sort of – 'cause I always find it interesting how people can be so different and how, you know, that can be down to a number of different factors that have gone in their life, you know. And how – for example, you know, you might have, you know, a person, you know, you might have a paedophile, for example, you know, who would be, you know, involving themselves in, you know, what the majority of people would see as inappropriate sort of, you know, behaviour, yet they, you know, might have sort of grown up in a situation where that behaviour is normal or has been normalised because they have witnessed it or been involved in it and they're simply a product of, you know, their sort of – their sort of childhood, you know, and they don't know any different and it's normal. And, you know, rather than sort of – do you know what I mean, it's sort of – it's difficult. But I just find it interesting how, you know, people can be so different as to what, you know, events in their life can have on them and how it can change them. You know, perhaps one person might be, you know, on a certain road and something will happen to them and they jump on a different road and go elsewhere. So ...

*So you thought about that when you meet other people and when you think about yourself?*

Yeah.

[32:54]]

*Okay. And looking forward, we've talked a bit about relationships, what kind of relationships do you sort of see building on or developing in the future, like, say, in ten years' time?*

What do you mean, like? What do you mean?

*Like, are there relationships you want to keep, you want to develop, that you hope to start?*

Erm, I'm quite happy with how things are at the moment. Everything's fine as it is [laughs].

*Everything's fine as it is, okay. And what about, like, not work? Say we're not thinking about work but say we're thinking just about you, where would you want to be in ten years' time?*

Ten years' time, like just to be comfortable and just to be able to sort of perhaps maybe enjoy life a bit more, you know, because I perhaps think that I maybe might have had to work slightly harder than other people who've sort of gone down the same route as me, perhaps. So it's sort of – I'd like to have – just be, you know, comfortable. Have a bit of time out, maybe.

*What does comfortable look like? So time out, holidays?*

Well yeah, just sort of, you know, not have to be sort of worrying about sort of finances all the time and paying the bills and stuff, because maybe perhaps I'm in a situation where, you know, I'm in sort of secure employment, with, you know, a wage that allows, you know, all my expenses to be paid, you know, without having to, you know, worry about it massively, or worry about a massive, you know, repair bill to my car or something. So yeah, it'd be nice to sort of not worry about stuff so much.

*So everything's fine as it is, except for that bit?*

Yeah. [both laugh]

[34:52]

*At the beginning you talked about this security, this financial security, and not doing something more creative because you were worried that creative options wouldn't have that level of security.*

Mm-hmm.

*So did you ever do any dance or acting on a kind of amateur level, if not pursuing it professionally?*

In – I remember in primary school I used to do gymnastics. At secondary school I did it in Year 7, then quite quickly realised that, if I continued doing so, I would probably get bullied quite a lot. So I sort of stopped that. I think sort of times have changed a lot now because of sort of profiles of sort of Louis Thomas sort of British sort of gymnast, sort of giving it a bit more sort of – oh, it's cool to do that. I sort of did – I always used to sort of like dance in my room and stuff and sort of – I used to like listening to Michael Jackson a lot. And I was obsessed with the – the Thriller video. And, you know, at sort of parties and stuff, I always sort of, you know, sort of dance and so – I don't know, I sort of always had an interest in it and have sort of just been sort of, you know, acting – I remember in Year 5 I was quite happy that I secured the lead role in our class's production of How the Elephant Grew His Trunk, so I was the elephant, so that was a proud moment. And I don't know, sort of, you know, I sort of – if the opportunity sort of came up, you know, I'd quite happily do it. But if the sort of – 'cause I've always been sort of so sort of focused on the plan, on getting somewhere and, you know, nothing's sort of – do you know what I mean, there's not been sort of time for it or – I can remember, I was sort of thinking about becoming a Blue Peter presenter and there was that competition you could enter. You had to do like a show reel and sort of do it. And I was interested in doing that but obviously, doing the first year of my degree, well, I need to finish the degree. But if I wasn't

doing that then that's something I would have been interested in doing, you know. So I just – yeah, I'm quite open minded. I'll see what happens and, you know, if an opportunity comes to, you know, play a character on Eastenders [laughs] ...

*You'll take it.*

Yeah, I'll take it.

*Have you done any acting?*

No [laughs], apart from the elephant. I remember, I was in school when I was one of the brothers in Jacob and the Technicolour Dreamcoat, but then I was sick for the performance [laughs].

[37:48]

*Another thing that you mentioned was accessing your care records, your file. You've not done it yet 'cause your file's still open. But for someone who doesn't like looking back, I was wondering –*

Yeah. I don't know, sort of – I guess it's just so I'll get a clear indication, like, of what actually happened, 'cause it is a bit of a blur, and just sort of get a greater level of understanding, maybe just sort of have a read, you know, and just sort of see, you know, what went on, what was recorded and sort of, you know, just maybe increasing my understanding.

*Has your brother asked for his file?*

No.

*Does he want to?*

He hasn't mentioned it to me.

*Okay. And a similar question then, what made you want to come here and be interviewed?*

I don't know, just sort of a chance to sort of – I always think just sort of sharing information, knowledge, experiences, to other people who can benefit is a good thing. You know, and I sort of saw it – saw it as an opportunity to do so. You know, I was quite interested in sort of – in the work that was – that was going to be done, yeah, and just thought I'd like to sort of share my sort of insight into the care system from my experience, because I recognise that everyone's experience is different. You know, people go into the system for different reasons, coming from different backgrounds and I thought that, you know, my background might be different from, you know, other people's, so thought that might be interesting to someone.

[39:26]

*Cool, it is. How has it been, this process of kind of – has it been as you expected it to be?*

Yeah, it's been alright. Obviously I wasn't expecting all the sort of lighting and the camera. If I had I would have done my makeup before I came, but there we are. So I hope I don't look too bad on camera [laughs]. But yeah, no, it's been fine. It's been fine.

*And what about the process of kind of reflecting back even further than just your time in care?*

Erm, it's been alright. Like I said, it's not something I normally do, but I guess when I'm sort of doing it with people that I don't know, it's a lot easier, you know, 'cause I – yeah. But it's been – it's been fine.

*Okay. And is there anything else that you wanted to say?*

Erm, I don't know. I can't –

*Politics maybe.*

I could talk about politics for far too long and I'd be here for hours and hours [laughs]. Erm, I don't think – I don't think so. But, you know, I would like to see more – more sort of change within the care system, more support for children in the care system and for – just things just to be better and just to use a more sort of common sense approach. You know, for example, you know, with my experience of having to sort of, you know, leave when I was seventeen, you know, I could still be there now, you know. And if I had still been there, that would have made things a lot easier for me, you know. You know, while I was – yes, I've sort of, you know, been at work and I've done my special – done my degree and stuff, it wasn't easy and it would have been a lot easier if I was – if I was there. So, like, I don't know, just – I'd like to think that, you know, hope that they can see the bigger picture and think long term rather than short term and think that, you know, currently with all the cuts and everything that have been made, what effect that will, you know, have on people. And, you know, I'd like to see sort of fostering promoted more and have people have a sort of greater understanding of, you know, what's involved and what it is exactly. And the fact that, you know, there's different types of fostering, you know, that might suit different people, so respite fostering or whatever, because I think there's a lot of people out there that, you know, have the potential to be good foster carers, even if it's for a temporary sort of short – short time. Yeah, so I'd like to see that. Erm, yeah, change, I think.

[43:25]

*And looking back on your care experience, how would you describe it overall?*

Overall, I think it was okay. I think it was good that we had one secure placement, 'cause again, I recognise that a lot of children aren't so lucky and are bumped around from placement to placement. So that was good, but obviously improvements could have been made regards to sort of support and, you know, finding out what we're

entitled to rather than having, you know, myself having to look up and find out for myself and then, you know, asking people, saying, 'Am I entitled to this? Can I be receiving this?' So yeah, it was just frustrating. And I guess, you know, again, you know, in terms of sort of support and stuff, when – I remember when I was on my sort of undergrad degree, in the second year the class were going on a trip to France, 'cause it was – the degree was public services with outdoor education, so there were some other elements in it. So they were going to France for a trip and I couldn't go. I said, you know, 'I can't afford it.' And there was sort of no sort of support, financial assistance, available to sort of, you know, pay for the trip or whatever, you know, so I missed out. But, you know, that happens. I remember sort of this – obviously, you know, again, I said before that I was looking into what support I could get while I'm sort of studying at the moment, and I noticed that Plymouth University are – have got the sort of – is it the Mark Buttle Foundation?

*Buttle UK Quality Mark.*

Yeah, that's it, yeah. They've got that quality mark, which demonstrates their commitment to supporting care leavers in education, but I don't really see why they've got that quality mark because during my entire time during my undergraduate degree, I didn't receive any support whatsoever, be it financial or anything else, nor was I even made aware of any support available. And when I spoke to the university and said that I'm back and I've studied before and I mentioned that, you know, 'I notice that you've got this quality mark and that you provide sort of care leavers with a care leavers bursary,' I said, 'I didn't receive it, nor was I aware of it. Is there a possibility that I could sort of receive it now I'm back at the university? It would, you know, help me with my studies,' etc. And I got an email back sort of saying, 'Unfortunately it can't be applied retrospectively.' So I asked why and sort of no answer. And it's just been – it just seems, you know, it just seems crazy that you've got this quality mark and yet you're not doing what you say you're doing. And I got my tutor to write a sort of supporting email and she sort of got a response back sort of saying, no, because he's a postgraduate student, he's not entitled to it, which actually is besides the point because I was entitled to it before but I didn't receive it and that wasn't my – I wasn't aware of it. You should be making sure that I'm aware of these

things. So it might have to be another fight, you know, contacting certain people and saying that, you know, I think it's very wrong that you have these quality marks and awards – and another example of when things are sort of put down on paper and they're not actually done. Too many – too many times people, you know, and be it politicians or, you know, top dogs at the top of whatever companies, say, 'We're going to be doing this, you know. It's in black and white.' It's all very well having it in black and white but if no one knows about it and no one's going to do it then it's useless. It wasn't till I left care that apparently there was – Somerset County Council has a sort of fostering pledge to all kids in foster – really? I didn't know that. It wasn't till I left that I was made aware of it. I had a conversation with someone else. You know, it just seems ridiculous. And also that there can be such differences between services provided from one local authority to another and that one local authority might pay, you know, a child leaving care a £2,000 leaving care grant to help get them, you know, sort of set up in their sort of flat so they can live independently. Another local authority might give as little as £500. And it just seems crazy what – you know, the differences in support available and that, you know, some people might be forced out of their placements early just to save money. And it's – yeah, it's wrong.

[47:05]

*Did you tick the box on your UCAS form saying that you were a care leaver when you applied to university?*

As far as I'm aware I did, sort of, when I applied before. I did this year as well. And I can remember, before I started this year on the course, I had an email from a sort of – a person in a role to support sort of care leavers and other sort of people at university, talking about an open – an open evening at the university. And I sort of emailed back saying sort of, thank you for the invitation, however I'm working so I'm unable to make it and I've been to the university before so I'm familiar with the campus, however is there any other sort of information or anything you can fund with?' No response. You know, and stuff like that, it's just like, oh brilliant, and it's just – it's just annoying. You know, and when there's just – other little things that,

you know, you're sort of – like I have to battle against. So for example, I sort of joke amongst some of my friends, but sort of recently sort of, in the area where I live, I noticed that a number of properties were having sort of improvements made to them, so sort of, you know, insulation, sort of, sort of to help sort of reduce sort of bills and stuff, a national scheme, and people were getting new windows, new front doors. And I'd sort of merely sent an enquiry. I sort of said, you know, 'I've noticed improvements being made to other properties in the area. What are the chances of us having any of the improvements?' And they came back and said, 'Oh, your property's not part of a planned upgrade so therefore anything will only be replaced if it's faulty.' And I sort of replied back saying that, 'Well, according to the tenants' handbook you were supposed to carry out external decorating two years ago, which you didn't do, so can you come out and do it, please, or at least have a look?' And so anyway, they came out to have a look at – and they look at my front door, and they said, 'Oh yes, one of the oldest, on the estate. We'll get you a new front door.' So I very foolishly thought I'd get a new door of a similar sort of standard and quality that other tenants were receiving. I got home from work to find what can only be described as a sort of wardrobe door. And it was – I couldn't believe it and I was so annoyed and frustrated by it. And it's gone on for some time. And I sort of complained – I only complain sort of directly sort of, you know, to the council, why I've got this, you know, ridiculous sort of door. And it was quite – I spend some time on the email. I think it was 1,300 words long. I was very annoyed. 'Cause it was after a conversation I had with someone on the phone, who was really unhelpful, and it was another – you know, and I had two people come out to see me, to try and sort of blag me over and – and I just got really sort of frustrated and annoyed, so I sent this email, because they were coming out with these policies that I couldn't find anywhere. And basically I just sort of went from when I moved into the property to where I am and literally went through all their sort of policies and procedures and ripped them apart and said, 'Well, you haven't done this. You haven't done this. You haven't done this.' And I said, 'It's not acceptable for you to pick and choose what policies you stick to, you know. It's ridiculous.' And it's sort of still ongoing at the moment, you know. And I've spoken to my local councillor, because – and one little thing like that, it's just – it's just so annoying 'cause all I want is just, you know, to be treated the same as everyone else, you know, and it's an embarrassment. You know,

again, sort of when you're, you know, in care, negative stigma you know, a negative sort of stigma surrounding that. Live on a council state, negative stigma surrounding that. And when I got this, like, door, like, it makes it look as if, you know, I'm living in a sort of drug den, you know, and there's stigma surrounding that as well. And I know it sounds small, it's a small thing, but something for me that – it's just so just annoying because it's just like; do what you're supposed to do. It's another example of just, you know, and when you've got the council driving round in new – like, thirteen – twelve, thirteen vehicles and, you know, they can't give me just a suitable, you know, front door – I'm not asking for a golden gate, you know, security system or anything, just a normal front door like anyone else. And, you know, it's taken some time, but I won't give up because, you know, and I'm – again, that's one thing, you know, with anything, whether it's this stupid door situation or anything else, like, you know, I'm very much sort of frightened – if something isn't right, you know, I'm very much annoyed and feel that, you know, something should be done about it, and if people aren't doing their job properly or whatever, you know, I don't want to be seen as sort of complaining about pathetic things, but, you know, if something's not right, it should be, you know, sorted out. So many things get on my nerves, which is maybe why, you know, some of my friends call me the old man. So yeah, sorry, I realise I've gone on a bit of a rant again, so apologies.

*It's alright. [both laugh]*

[52:11]

*FS: I need to let you know that you've just – in fact you've got eight minutes left.*

*Thank you. I was just wondering whether you think care has been a formative experience for you, because said on your form that it was a very brief time compared to other people. Do you think that brief time has had a significant bearing on your life?*

Erm, I think that, if it wasn't for that experience, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now. I wouldn't be sort of doing my degree. I wouldn't be involved in the fostering

agency. I wouldn't be helping out with training. And I think it sort of – it's helped me sort of appreciate and value what I do have rather than what I don't have. So yeah, for me, you know, it was – and I think obviously I benefited that I had like a secure, stable placement and had a relatively good experience. But yeah, it was, you know, I think I'm a different person for it.

*And were you always so dogged and articulate and aware of your rights before you came into the care system or is that something you developed later?*

Definitely not. It wasn't till sort of after. And I think it wasn't till maybe I increased in confidence – I think doing the sort of policing, that was a bit shock. You know, when you're driving round in a squad car and all of a sudden comms comes through on the radio, speaking directly to you and you need to respond, you know, and you're faced with situations, you know, you just have to be confident. And when it's simple, you know, even, I guess, when I was working sort of, you know, in the call centre, you have to be sort of, you know, confident on the phone to people and, you know, sort of – so I guess I sort of slowly sort of built my confidence up, you know, over the – over the years. But I definitely prefer talking than I do writing, so I've quite enjoyed this experience [laughs].

*Great. Okay, is there anything else?*

Erm, I don't think so.

*Well, there's nothing else from me. So I reckon we'll end there.*

Thank you.

*Thank you very much.*

Thank you.

[End of Track 3] [54:22]

[End of Transcript]