Over the past 20 years, the spotlight has fallen on residential care as an environment which increases the risk of young people entering the youth justice system.

As acknowledged by recent legislative and inspection changes (Children’s Homes Regulations 2015 and Quality Standards) it is vital to hear young people’s own explanations as to why they may offend within this setting. For the purposes of this study 12 current and former looked-after young people aged 15-22 from one local authority (LA) took part in interviews between 2008 and 2009. All had been convicted of an offence committed whilst living in either a LA or private children’s home.

Experiences of the family home and recognition by offending peers
The young people’s accounts of their experiences of abuse, neglect and socio-economic deprivation suggest that they found this disempowering. They felt that they had grown up too quickly, seeking accelerated transitions to adulthood and the perceived empowerment accompanying this, participating in activities such as alcohol consumption and staying away from the parental home for long periods. Violence at the hands of a male parental figure was a recurring experience about which they felt little could be done other than to find solace with a risk taking peer group, an association which might continue in care, or entrench behaviour which was hard to break.

Many stated that offending behaviour was often motivated by a desire to fit in with a peer group. When young people were removed from their families, peer group associations provided a means of empowerment in a situation where they were not otherwise in control, which could engender both positive and negative consequences.

Peer relations in the residential home
Some young people reported settling into residential care well. For others, the desire to fit in with peer/s was more important than conforming to what staff considered to be acceptable behaviour. Displaying solidarity with other residents was sometimes cited as a reason for getting into trouble, especially if they were seen to be treated unfairly by staff. Nevertheless, relationships with fellow residents could be precarious, and police could become involved as the result of conflicts between residents. Young people suggested they had to project an image which indicated that they were capable of standing up for themselves. A failure to do this could result in bullying or a loss of place in the ‘pecking order’ of the home. The respondents also described being introduced by fellow residents to ‘criminally involved’ young people from the local communities.

Staff-resident relationships and care home culture
The importance of staff–resident relationships and the culture of individual homes were clearly illustrated by the study. Most of the young people reported both positive and negative experiences. Some felt that certain staff were well-meaning, while others described frustration because they were getting mixed messages from the staff group. Some young people spoke of feeling that staff did not accord them appropriate respect and space, which led to unnecessary confrontations and an escalation of incidents. A low threshold for police involvement was discussed.

Residential home structures
Some described resenting set mealtimes or bed times, or having to ask for permission to do things that they would normally take for granted, such as eating if they were hungry at night. Having participated in a certain lifestyle before entering care, many experienced difficulty adjusting to the requirements of residential regimes. There were also difficulties created when young people experienced a number of placements, as homes had different rules, which they had to adjust to every time.

Practice points
> Good practice requires leadership in developing positive cultures in residential care (Anglin, 2002) with a shared vision and clarity of roles (Kendrick, 2012).
> Thorough assessments must take place before moving children to out-of-area placements where they may not be able to resist offending behaviour through an enhanced need for peer acceptance.
> Careful thought should be given to the mix of residents in a home and how the group dynamics might encourage or militate against disruptive behaviour.
> Staff must engage with young people in a way that respects them as individuals, building on their strengths and using discrete and personalised therapeutic approaches (Clough, 2000).

References