

Helping Care Leavers: Problems and Strategic Responses

Executive Summary

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1. Defining the problem

- Currently about 8,500 young people leave the care of social services between 16 and 18 years of age. The majority of these young people will be expected to live independently in the community.
- Care leavers share a lot in common with other young people but the research evidence points to key differences: having to leave care and live independently at a much younger age than other young people have to leave home; lower levels of educational attainment and post 16 further education participation rates; higher unemployment rates, unstable career patterns and higher levels of dependency on welfare benefits; earlier parenthood; and higher levels of mental health problems.
- Care leavers are also a diverse group in terms of their pre-care experiences, their care histories, their cultural and ethnic backgrounds and their needs and abilities including any disabilities they may have.
- The Children Act 1989 and its associated Guidance provides the legislative framework for developing leaving care services. The Quality Protects initiative outlines objectives and targets for local authorities to increase contact with care leavers and the numbers participating in education, training or employment.

2. Local authority aims

Local authorities should be aiming to:

- provide stable placements, continuity of carers and the maintenance, wherever possible, of positive family links whilst young people are 'looked after';
- 'look after' young people until they are prepared and ready to leave care;

- maintain relationships with carers and families after young people leave care;
- prepare young people, gradually, paying attention to practical self care needs – health, budgeting, domestic skills – and personal and social relationship dimensions;
- maximise education, training and employment outcomes;
- ensure young people leaving care have access to a range of accommodation and the support and skills to maintain themselves in their accommodation;
- ensure that there is contingency provision to support care leavers in the event of a crisis, including arrangements for respite care;
- provide or enable ongoing support – this may include specialist scheme support, support by carers, social workers, and by befrienders, mentors or volunteers;
- ensure young people leaving care receive their full income entitlements;
- involve young people in all assessment, planning, review and decision making arrangements for leaving care;
- inform young people leaving care of the available services (including guides);
- monitor and evaluate the above outcomes.

3. Issues affecting local authority responses

In local authorities which currently attempt to meet the aims outlined above, the following elements are usually present:

- A considerable level of awareness amongst members, senior managers and a range of practitioners of the key messages from research in this area.
- A corporate and inter-agency framework for delivering services agreed through formal committee and planning structures.

- A strategic response reflected in written leaving care policies and procedures.
- An appropriate model of service delivery.
- A highly motivated and skilled workforce, trained in the specialist areas of knowledge required for the work.

4. Baseline of current practice

From the early 1980s, local authorities have been responding to the problems experienced by care leavers through the piecemeal development of specialist leaving care services. The following models of authority-wide provision are representative of existing practice.

- Non specialist service– In this model responsibility for delivering a leaving care service rests primarily with field social workers, sometimes in collaboration with carers.
- Centrally organised specialist service– This comprises a centrally organised team of workers that usually attempts to provide an authority wide service, primarily to care leavers.
- Dispersed specialist service In this model individual specialist leaving care workers are attached to area based fieldwork teams.
- Centrally organised integrated service There is evidence of an emerging model which attempts to provide an integrated service for a wider range of vulnerable young people, including care leavers and other young people ‘in need’ such as homeless young people and disabled young people. Integration is intended to be facilitated through a multi-agency management and staffing model.

5. Essential characteristics of best practice in leaving care

Evidence of best practice was derived from published research, Government policies, guidance and inspections, and from a survey of local authorities requesting documented examples of best practice in leaving care – 42 responses were received. Given the diversity of local authority contexts, there can be no single blueprint for a best practice model. Leaving care services need to build upon the solid foundation of a stable and positive care experience during which young people can be adequately prepared for adult life.

Preparation for adult life

- Evaluations of good practice point to the importance of assessment to identify young people's needs and how they will be met, support and participation, involving discussion, negotiation and risk taking in the context of a stable placement and the gradual opportunity to learn skills.
- Evidence also suggests that preparation should be holistic in approach, attaching equal importance to practical emotional and inter-personal skills. Elements of preparation may include: self care skills – personal hygiene, diet and health, including sexual health; practical skills – budgeting, shopping, cooking, cleaning; inter-personal skills – managing a range of formal and informal relationships, including sexual relationships; education – planning and supporting positive progress; and identity – knowledge of and links with family and community, sexuality, cultural knowledge/ skills for young people from minority ethnic communities.

Planning review and monitoring: a policy and practice framework for leaving care

The provision of a comprehensive framework for the delivery of leaving care services should include the following.

- Clearly written, comprehensive and accessible leaving care policies, procedures and practice guidance – including accessible guides for young people.
- A model of service delivery appropriate to the numbers and diversity of young people leaving care, including ethnicity and any disability they may have, and to the geographical area in which they are situated.
- Arrangements for the systematic monitoring of individual and service outcomes – including education, employment, training, finance, accommodation, life and social skills. Effective monitoring of care leaver progress, including performance review and target setting, will require the development of an authority wide database.
- Arrangements for consulting young people about the evaluation and development of services.

Individual planning and review

The planning and review process prior to a young person leaving care is the foundation upon which good after care support can be built. Research suggests:

- it helps for leaving care planning to take place early;
- that all those with an interest in the support of the young person should be fully involved in the process, provided this is consistent with the young person's wishes;
- where specialist schemes exist, it is helpful for them to be involved at an early point.
- that the process should proceed at the young person's pace;
- that the approach should explore all dimensions of young people's lives;
- that young people need to be aware of the future sources of support that will be available to them, how to access them and of contingency plans in the event of a crisis;
- that it helps for leaving care planning to be written to facilitate review of progress and to identify discrete tasks for those involved.

Helping young people maintain existing relationships, community ties and develop new ones

Evidence suggests that:

- young people's best interests will be served by efforts to maintain or create links with their families and friends while they are looked after;
- a thorough knowledge of young people's existing sources of informal support and of their ability to make and sustain relationships should form an important part of leaving care planning;
- continuing links with carers and social workers may help to provide stability through transition, where young people choose this;
- specialist schemes can play an important role in helping young people to form new links and relationships.

Ensuring young people receive their full income entitlement

- Young people are unlikely to receive their full entitlement unless local authorities provide clear and accessible information to social workers, substitute carers and young people.
- Financial assistance to young people is also likely to be promoted by formal links and protocols with other relevant agencies, including provision of designated link officers.
- An assessment of young people's financial needs should form part of the leaving care and aftercare planning and review process.

Promoting a healthy and stable lifestyle

- The health needs of young people leaving care need to be built on the foundations provided while young people are looked after. Best practice is likely to be evidenced through thorough health assessment and the maintenance of detailed health records at this stage.
- Young people's health needs should be built into the preparation, leaving care and after care planning and review cycle. These needs should be viewed from the young person's perspective and link material circumstances (housing, employment, income) and social relationships to a young person's physical and mental health.

Contingency planning

- Leaving care planning should foresee the potential for future crisis.
- Contingency plans should be capable of responding to difficulties in any of the core areas of young people's lives – social relationships, accommodation, finance, employment.
- Young people's support needs should be re-assessed at regular intervals.
- An option to return to more supported accommodation should be available for young people in acute crisis, should they wish this.

Employment, education and training

- Improving the career chances of care leavers needs to be built upon educational progress while looked after. Evidence suggests that placement stability, positive encouragement, proactive placement, school and Education service links, and compensatory assistance are likely to be helpful.
- The assessment of current skills and career planning ought to form a central part of the leaving care planning and review process. Young people need to be signposted to their future entitlements to support and financial assistance should they wish to return to further or higher education some time after leaving and how to access them.
- Continuing support will be necessary to help young people maintain motivation and to respond to those wishing to return to learn or earn.
- Inter agency links are needed to provide access to opportunities and to plan service developments in this area – including Careers, training agencies, further/higher education colleges, employers, Benefits Agency and youth services.

Arrangements for staying in touch

Given the known mobility of young people after leaving care, staying in touch is never likely to be straightforward. However, the following pointers may be helpful;

- There is no substitute for a well planned transition and clear support arrangements with which the young person is happy.
- At the point of leaving care young people should be fully aware of their future entitlement to support and who will provide it, even if they reject support at that time.
- Young people will need a clear link person responsible for co-ordinating support and resources for them. Young people ought to have a say in who this person is, given the importance of a positive relationship.
- Specialist schemes, working in partnership with other sources of support, tend to have a presence, a style of work and a social

base that encourages young people's involvement and may be helpful to those returning for help at a later date.

- Given the mobility of staff as well as young people, the recording and monitoring of contacts may help links to be retained, where young people approve of this.
- Other strategies that may help to promote links might include: regular newsletters, especially where young people are involved in producing them; self return change of address cards; birthday/Xmas cards; or fairly regular consultative feedback initiatives.

Safe, affordable and supported accommodation

- Young people leaving care are a diverse group whose accommodation needs will vary according to their care experience, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, contact with their families, degree of preparedness for leaving and any disability they may have. It follows that their accommodation needs will be equally diverse.
- The provision of an appropriate range of accommodation options will present different challenges to local authorities depending on their size and the nature of the geographical area to be covered.
- The development of an appropriate range of accommodation will require formal agreements with statutory and voluntary housing providers to plan services, ensure access to a range of tenancies and partnerships or joint ventures to establish a range of supported accommodation options.

Evidence suggest that when planning accommodation to meet the needs of individual young people leaving care the following areas will assist positive outcomes:

- involving young people in planning and decision making.;
- assessing needs and preparing young people;
- offering a choice in the type and location of accommodation;

- not moving young people in an unplanned way, before they are ready;
- having a contingency plan in case the proposed accommodation breaks down.
- setting up a package of support to go with the accommodation;
- having a clear financial plan for the accommodation;

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