

Life After Care

Report

For

Children and Young People Now Magazine and the Care Leavers' Foundation



Research

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Research

1 Executive Summary

Although the majority of young people experience difficulties and challenges throughout their adolescence, this study has found that due to systematic and individual failures of the state system many care leavers are still prevented from making successful transitions from childhood into adulthood. From lack of choice, information and support, to inappropriate housing and substance abuse, the care leavers that participated in this research have painted an explicit picture of frustration, disillusionment and abandonment in relation to their new independent reality.

Yet, despite producing a plethora of candid and often disturbing findings, this study has in fact not told us anything new. Rather it has both re-affirmed messages that have reverberated within the political and social arena for many years and has verified concerns that are to be addressed in the forthcoming Children and Young Persons Bill. On the eve of the publication of this landmark legislation we not only encourage those who are involved in the current care system to reflect on the lessons that have been learnt, but also find ourselves aspiring to a future in which care leavers' voices continue to be heard and, perhaps more importantly, understood.

Objectives & Methodology

- The principal aim of this study was to explore the transition from care experienced by young people. Objectives within this aim were to identify any differences in the experiences of recent care leavers when compared to their older peers and to determine key factors in the transition which impact on life after care - with particular attention paid to housing
- In order to achieve this aim, six focus groups were conducted with care leavers in areas throughout England. A total of 41 care leavers were consulted.

Preparation for Leaving Care

- Preparation for leaving care varied within all the groups, demonstrating a lack of consistency generally for care leavers
- There were mixed views regarding the Pathway Plan's usefulness, style and effectiveness. Many care leavers felt that it was too formal, built unrealistic expectations and excluded them from decision-making. For others, the Pathway Plan was a positive planning tool that enabled them to see what they had achieved in the past and to determine what priorities they had for the future
- Although most young people found the life skills courses they had received prior to leaving care useful, some care leavers articulated that more practical experience of budgeting before leaving the care system was required.

Housing

- The number of moves and the quality of housing experienced by young people was heavily dependent on their relationships with and support received by key support workers
- Care leavers residing in semi-independent housing praised this particular type of project for its ability to combine an accessible supportive environment with freedom and autonomy

- Location of housing was an issue of great concern, with young people housed in deprived areas being characterised as more susceptible to negative experiences, including substance abuse and crime.

Support

- The overriding experience within the cohort group was that key workers did not care about - and were not committed to - the young people they were supporting
- The transient nature of key workers led to a breakdown in communication and the inability of care leavers to trust/build relationships with their workers.

Employment & Education

- Care leavers' aspirations to be independent and gain employment were often discouraged by their support workers who advised them to apply for state benefits
- For several care leavers, securing stable accommodation and adjusting to living alone were deemed to be higher priorities than seeking further education
- Lack of appropriate clothing, stationery and ICT equipment were identified by a number of young people as key barriers to entering the educational domain.

Stability

- Many young people recognised drugs and alcohol to be not only the sole 'constant' in their life after care, but also a means of escaping problems and securing an identity
- For some care leavers, the moment they left the care system was the time they were able to re-build relationships with their families and concrete friendships.

Recommendations

- No care leavers should be placed in hostels, Bed and Breakfast accommodation, lodgings or localities where their health and welfare is seriously jeopardised
- The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) should take a strong lead and back a programme of voluntary adoption and self-assessment of leaving care services against the National Minimum Standards (NMS) for leaving care
- We recommend that the Government regulates for the basic 'setting up home' grant to be made available to all care leavers on an equal basis
- Every local authority should be required to produce a strategy document or action plan which not only addresses key areas such as mentoring and resource packs, but which also outlines what they propose to do to ensure that care leavers services are communicating and working together
- The development of a specific set of qualifications is essential for leaving care workers and should cover all practical areas of their role including understanding legal, housing, employment and welfare issues as well as the emotional and psychological journeys undertaken by care leavers
- Young people leaving care should have access to independent advocacy services that can assist with problems arising from services received from their local authority, education service, local health trusts and independent housing associations.



2 Preface

Journey to adulthood

Most young people, whether they are living with their families, in foster care or in a children's home, experience challenges during their journey to adulthood. It is a journey from a childhood status characterised by dependency on family, school, friends and neighbourhood, to an adult status based, in part, on choices such as becoming a householder, partner, parent, student and employee.

Young people leaving care face the challenge of making this transition from the role of young person in care to that of adult out of care. They share a lot with other young people during this journey. However, whilst this journey is difficult for most young people, young people in care need additional support and help – because of their damaging pre-care experiences, or movement and disruption whilst they have been in care, or problems or difficulties they may have at home or school. In addition, they may need help with any disability or emotional problems.

Young people leaving care are still overrepresented in all indicators of deprivation. They are more likely to experience homelessness, to not be in education, employment or training, to suffer from mental illness, to be disabled or to be a young parent.

Responsibility for caring for and supporting care leavers rests with local authorities; most have dedicated leaving care teams or services of their own, or outsource such services. The duties to support them, originally in the Children Act 1989, were strengthened by the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. There are duties to maintain to 18, to support till 21 and in some cases beyond, to plan for the future and provide the services of a personal advisor or social worker. The recent Care Matters White Paper and Children and Young Persons Bill have taken these further with measures and proposals that, amongst other things, will seek to prevent some young people leaving their care placements before 18, enabling access to a personal advisor to 25 for some and increasing financial support for young people from care who go to university.

In recent years the higher profile given to young people from care and the increasing legislative duties, have brought modest improvements in the outcomes they experience. However, as this study shows, there are still systemic and individual failures of the system that prevent young people making successful transitions to adulthood. Too often young people have little choice over whether and when they leave care and are left to fend for themselves at an age when most young people are still more interested in school and enjoying themselves. Services are still inflexible and uncoordinated. Worst of all there is, for many, a lack of aspiration and an acceptance of second best.

There is still much to be done.

We are publishing this study in the month that the Children and Young Persons Bill becomes law. We invite readers to consider both how far we have come and how far we still have to go. The voices of our young participants speak for themselves.



3 Introduction

'Life After Care' is a small-scale study undertaken by QA Research on behalf of Children and Young People Now Magazine and the Care Leavers' Foundation for National Care Leavers' Week.

The resulting report examines the experiences of young people leaving care and their transition into independent living. The research was undertaken in September 2008 using a series of discussion groups throughout England.

Children & Young People Now

Children & Young People Now brings together professionals working with the young, from birth to 19, across the public, private and voluntary sectors. We strive to be a strong, independent voice for all those working with the young and we decode local and national policy and highlight best practice. However, we also aim to ensure the views of children and young people are heard. What is key is that our readers are united by the purpose of fulfilling the potential of tomorrow's generation, including those in and leaving care. As a result, we are very happy to support the work of the Care Leavers' Foundation and National Care Leavers' Week.

The Care Leavers' Foundation

The Care Leavers' Foundation (previously known as the Bryn Melyn Group Foundation) is a grantmaking charity providing support for care leavers up to the age of 26 by making modest but essential grants to help where an absent parent might provide similar support. Grants support personal development and aspiration as well as addressing poverty and hardship. The Care Leavers' Foundation is also involved in campaigning for better services for children leaving care and coordinates National Care Leavers' Week.

QA Research

QA Research is a Social Research agency with experts in the field of children and young people. QA aims to make real change as a result of the research it undertakes and has done so on many occasions in the past. For QA, involvement in projects such as Life After Care is essential in proving to decision makers that research can result in real change for the most vulnerable members of our society who may otherwise not have the opportunity to be heard.

4 Aims and objectives

The overarching aim of this study was to explore the transition from care experienced by young people. We wanted to find out if there was any difference in the experiences of young people who have very recently moved through their transition compared with those who were four or five years their senior. We wanted to determine key factors in the transition which impact on life after care and sought in particular to look at the knock-on effects of good or bad experiences of housing on other areas of transition.

We were also aware in conducting the study that we publish our findings on the eve of the passing of the Children and Young Persons Bill. This will have a far reaching impact on services delivered to care leavers; this reports flags up many issues that Government *has* now shown an awareness and understanding of and tried to address within the new legislation. In reporting our findings we have also tried to indicate where there are solutions in the pipeline, where there will still be significant gaps and which areas might be addressed through other current areas of Government interest outside of the Children and Young Persons Bill.

There are also pointers to good practice case studies where solutions are being developed in some areas, but are far from widespread or universal.

5 Methodology

The following methodology was used in the study.

Discussion groups with care leavers

In order to fully understand the issues faced by care leavers, their perceptions of their situation and their views on where there were opportunities to improve services, six focus groups with care leavers were undertaken. The groups took place throughout England in the following areas:

- London Boroughs
- Midlands
- North East
- North West

These groups were recruited through the Care Leavers' Foundation. All groups were undertaken in venues familiar to the young people, such as the venue of their support groups (with the exception of one group which took place at 11 Million in London).

Overall 41 care leavers took part in discussion groups. Of these 28 participants were female and 13 were male. The young people consulted were aged between 16 and 23.

A discussion guide was developed in consultation with five older care leavers who were involved in quality assuring the process throughout. The guide was intentionally left as open as possible to enable the young people to direct the conversations into areas of their

own choice ensuring that the majority of responses were unprompted and there were opportunities for participants to express all of their main concerns. Activities were used in some groups such as a 'Timeline of Events' since leaving care; this used symbols to represent issues which may have been faced by young care leavers such as drug misuse, mental health problems, money and housing.

Each young person was given a £25 high street voucher as a thank you for their involvement in the consultation.



6 Key findings

The following sections discuss the key findings from all the groups.

6.1 Participant profile

A total of 41 care leavers were consulted. Of these, 28 were female and 13 were male. The youngest participant consulted was 16 and was in the process of leaving care while the oldest participants were 23 years old and had completed the transition from care.

Within the groups there was great diversity with the following minority groups contributing:

- BME participants
- Disabled participants
- Participants with mental health problems
- Young parents
- Asylum seekers

Within the groups some young people were living in stable accommodation while others were in the process of seeking permanent housing and were either currently staying in Bed and Breakfast accommodation, were homeless - living on friends' sofas, or sleeping rough.

Most, though not all, of the contributors were engaged in regularly attending some kind of participation group via their local authority care leaving team.

Groups took place during daytime and early evening sessions to enable the participation of those attending college or in full time work. However this spread could not be replicated in every area, therefore some of the groups may have had an under-representation of participants in full time education or employment.

Notwithstanding the above, the sample size and the spread of participants across a range of ages, gender, heritage, citizenship status, health and other specific needs gives a sufficiently valid sample on which to base the conclusions and recommendations of this report.

6.2 Preparation for leaving care

Preparation for leaving care varied within all the groups, demonstrating a lack of consistency generally for care leavers. When asked, many felt there was no preparation for them leaving care; the following areas, however, were commonly noted by young people:

Pathway Plans

Pathway Plan meetings are supposed to be held every six months and for most of the sample this did happen. However, mixed views of the usefulness, style and effectiveness of the meetings were expressed. The groups explained that these meetings included a number of professionals, sometimes up to eight different people, and discussed objectives for care leavers for the next six months.

There were mixed opinions on the Pathway Plan. Many felt that it was too formal and included too many professionals:

"I don't think anyone should be [at your Pathway Plan meeting] really other than you and the person that is interviewing you, if they want another output from someone else's point of view they can ask your permission." (Female, 19)

Some young people felt that the items discussed during the Pathway Plan meeting could be taken too literally. For example one young female who had explained that she was starting to socialise with friends stated:

"Say you've said something, [the Pathway Plan committee] could interpret it completely different to what you meant it to be... you could say 'I've had a really good social life, I've been out with my mates every weekend drinking', then [Pathway Plan members] turn it round and say 'binge drinking' and they automatically think this person could be using drugs if she's out all this time, what can we do, get her involved with a drugs worker, get her involved with an alcohol worker. But you're thinking 'I don't need it.'" (Female, 19)

Care Leavers believed that the Pathway Plan was meant to encourage and enable them to make their own choices and decisions about the future. However, it was felt that this did not always occur:

"Some of it [the Pathway Plan] is really good and you've got to be there to make your own decisions. Other times it's like you're sat there and they're making them for you and it's like you're not in the room... like making decisions on who I had to go and see, like counsellors and all that stuff when I didn't need that myself I didn't feel like I needed it but they'd already made that decision." (Female 18)

The impact of not being able to make their own decisions is also highlighted later in this report. It was felt that during the Pathway Plan meetings expectations can be raised about what will be available for young people when they leave care and then the reality is that no choices are available, as this young person states:

"On this Pathway Plan they were saying 'when you leave care you'll either go into supported lodgings.. you'll do this or you'll do that' and I thought wow I can't wait. You get there and it's them options, it's like where've they gone?" (Female, 19)

However, some care leavers did feel that the Pathway Plan was a good method of helping them see what they had achieved in the past six months and what priorities they had for the next six months. Female respondents were on the whole more positive about the merits of formal planning than their male counterparts.

It was also noted that although it could be useful to reflect and plan at the beginning of the process of transition, as time went on it became less useful.

It was felt by some participants that undertaking the Pathway Planning task every six months did not reflect what would happen to other 'normal' young people leaving home. Instead young people understood that parents would be available and willing to help their children on an ongoing basis and not feel the need to review their progress so rigidly and formally. Young care leavers strived to be 'normal' and often had very clear ideas about how things would happen in a 'normal' family.

Life skills

Many participants discussed the life skills courses they had received prior to leaving care. This tended to be the first thing young people commented on when asked about the preparation they had received for leaving care and this may be a reflection of the relative importance that adults placed on practical life skills before social and emotional needs were considered. Life skills included the following:

- Cooking
- Cleaning
- Budgeting
- Registration with doctor/ dentist

Although some young people found these useful, the majority felt they had already been exposed to these skills in real life when living either in foster care or their children's home. Budgeting, however, was seen to be one of the most important aspects of leaving care and most expressed they had struggled with this. It was felt that although there may have been lessons or courses in budgeting, the reality of paying bills and managing money was very different to the theory they had learnt and more practical experience of buying food, paying bills, rent and so on was needed.

Housing

Many young people, with the support of their key worker, had put their names on housing lists before leaving care. However, it was felt that there was a big difference between what they thought leaving care would be like and reality; whilst preparing to leave care it was perceived that there would be several housing options open to them, but on leaving care it was felt that these choices were removed and they were placed in any housing available, mainly hostels and Bed and Breakfasts.

Emotional preparation

In addition to the more structured examples of preparation above, some young people felt there was a distinct lack of informal emotional support; this is detailed later in the report.

6.3 Number of Moves

The number of moves experienced varied between young people. This was most likely to depend on relationships with and support received by key support workers.

The highest number of moves was cited by a young male:

"No kidding ... I can't even begin to tell you, I have lived in about thirty different places at least, that's no exaggeration ... it's ruined my life." (Male, 21)

The number of moves experienced by participants impacted on their quality of life and attitude to moving on. For example:

"I've been tossed left, right and centre, I've never really been anywhere for longer than six months ... it's ruined my life ... no matter where I live I still feel unsettled ... it's messed my head up." (Female, 21)

"If you've ... been moving around for that long, you just sort of get into the habit of doing it." (Male, 23)

It was also felt that when leaving care at 16 years old, additional barriers are faced in seeking stable housing as appropriate support is not available from other sources until they reach their eighteenth birthday:

"The amount of addresses that I've lived at since being 16 to now is unbelievable... I've not had a permanent address, the longest I've probably lived somewhere is about 4 months... you're staying on people's couches. The housing aren't helping you 'cos they're saying 'well you're in care till you're 18'." (Female, 19)

It is a matter of concern that some care leavers find themselves falling through this gap as the responsibility for ensuring young people have suitable accommodation until they are 18 rests firmly with their local authority. The lasting impact of frequent movement on care leavers was evident and included excessive or chronic use of drugs and alcohol, which then impacted on the likelihood of finding stable accommodation:

"It was hard for me to find somewhere to live... because I've been homeless, I got myself hooked on drugs and a lot of semi-independent accommodation was like 'you're hooked on drugs so we don't want you', so I got turned away cos of that and funding was a big issue, I couldn't secure any funding off like.. social services, care leavers, things like that." (Female, 18)



Those who were moved frequently felt this impacted on their experience of further education. For example, if a young person did not feel stable in their housing and anticipated they would have to move frequently, they were less likely to engage in a college course because this would mean they may have to move and not complete it. Some young people explained they had not completed courses at college due to the number of moves they had to make. This was especially true for those who felt they had no choice in whether they moved.

It was also felt, particularly by those who left care and secured housing at the age of 16, that 16 was too young to leave care and the likelihood of keeping this housing was reduced due to the pressures of living alone and having the responsibilities of an adult householder being simply too great for a 16 year old:

"At 16 I don't know why but they were gonna put me in my own council flat. Now what person at 16 who leaves a children's home where they've been looked after is ready to go into a flat on their own and pay gas and electric?" (Female, 18)

"It's a big transition, from being in foster care or residential unit to being in your own semi-independent flat. I don't think a lot of people are ready at 16." (Female, 21)

Those who had stayed in stable accommodation since leaving care said this had impacted on them positively. For example, one young female had been able to attend college regularly and was starting university. She had been living close to her 'family' (she regarded her friends to be her family) and had stayed in the same place for over three years.

6.4 Quality of Housing

In 2005 the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), in their Transitions¹ report, stated:

"There are also issues around the accommodation that is seen as suitable for young adults. One particular issue is the need for accommodation for younger adults (and especially 16 and 17-year-olds) that comes with some support and help, both in sustaining their tenancy and in other areas of life. It is particularly unhelpful for 16 and 17 year-olds to be housed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation (which we now consider unsuitable for families with children up to this age). This is a particular issue for the most vulnerable young people. This type of accommodation should not be considered suitable for care leavers for anything but very occasional, short-term, emergency use."

In this study the importance of quality of housing depended on the experience young people had with key support workers and their experience of care prior to leaving the system. Young people who had the relevant support they needed tended to be more concerned about their quality of housing, whereas those who had not received the support they needed were content with any kind of housing and felt priority should lie in gaining 'a roof over their head' and emotional support.



Poor experiences of housing included:

- Being housed in the same room as a single parent and their child
- Not having heating and hot water for their first night in their new social housing
- Mould and damp
- Emptiness (lack of both physical belongings and emotional attachments)
- Rotten windows
- Wasp nests
- Poor decoration and general upkeep by previous tenants

Comments on these included:

"The windows were rotten and there was a wasps nest which took ages to be sorted out and cost £50." (Female 21)

"When you move into a council flat like, people have lived there before like, it's all tatty and all crap, no heating on whatsoever, big holes in your walls and doors, wallpaper not done." (Male)

However there were positive experiences of quality of housing. This was true for young people with disabilities who noted that their properties had been re-decorated and been made ready to live in prior to their arrival.

For some groups the quality of the housing they lived in was not a priority and they needed to be prompted to explain the physicality of their accommodation. These young people were also more likely to state that they needed more emotional support when leaving care.

6.5 Experiences

The following section details the experiences young people described after leaving care. The experiences are prioritised in accordance with the young people's discussions.

Support

Young people commonly discussed the impact of appropriate support. There was inconsistency in the terms used throughout the groups for social workers, after care workers and Personal Advisors (PAs). Young people did not always know the difference and therefore throughout this report, as the lessons are transferable, the term key worker is used, unless otherwise stated.

The overriding experience within the cohort group was that key workers did not care about the young people they were supporting. Over and above any lack of attention to the practical support they felt they needed, this left them feeling very alone with the things they had to deal with. Comments such as the following were common:

"When you ask someone to do something for you and they say 'sorry mate I can't do that because I'm finishing at ten' and they really need to leave at ten and whenever I hear that I'm like, I just feel a bit disrespected." (Male, 18)

"I think most social workers do it for the money and not for the job." (Male, 21)

"You can't trust any [social workers]." (Female, 19)

Young people were often happy to be leaving care, losing a social worker and gaining an after care worker, as the latter were generally seen to be more helpful than social workers. However the following comments were made about after care workers:

"The other day I phoned to speak to my after care worker and they were like 'he's left'. He had been gone three weeks and nobody told me." (Female, 22)

"[My aftercare worker] wasn't there for me, she was always on holiday, or she would be taking days off sick." (Female, 21)

This transient nature of key workers was noted within the majority of discussion groups. Care leavers felt their workers were not committed to them and this was demonstrated by the length of time they stay in post. In other words, many experienced the transience of adults around them on quite a personal level. The consequence of this movement on the young people was that they were not able to build relationships and trust their workers and therefore were not getting the practical guidance or emotional support they needed.

The quotes above also demonstrate the lack of communication about their key workers to care leavers. Care leavers often felt let down and as if they were not important enough to be told about a member of staff leaving. It is easy to understand how, in a busy team, dealing with their own difficulties associated with staff movements, re-recruitment, covering gaps, induction, case reallocation and so on, those in a position to do something about this might not see sharing information with service users as a priority. However it is not difficult to understand how such behaviour among adults with parenting responsibility impacts on young adults who have been in care and had a lifetime of disrupted caregiver relationships, often being the last to know about changes that affect them, including changes in family structures.

Professionals delivering leaving care services should be acutely aware of the impact that their actions and communication, or the lack of it, can have at this crucial time when care leavers in transition can be vulnerable and bewildered.

There were also positive experiences of the support available and where a care leaver did experience that positive relationship and 'can-do' attitude towards helping them to problem solve it could make a significant difference. The examples given normally related to specific individuals and the commitment and stability they gave to young people's lives, and also how acutely aware children from care generally are about the limitations that the teams have to work with:

"[It's good] if their heart's there and the heart's in the job and they're there for you, but they're not able to do the best they can because they haven't got the



funding or they haven't got whatever they need to do the support to the best of their ability." (Female, 19)

The relationships young people are able to form with key workers are crucial to their success whilst still in care and post care. Not only would this allow young people to work closely with their key workers enabling better outcomes but also when attention is paid to their emotional well-being this can have a big impact on raising their motivation and aspirations. It was stated:

"If the staff were there for you and could adapt to your level and speak to you how you needed to be spoken to, then you got on with them more and you would do more for them... and you'd work well together and [then you won't] get depressed when you're with this person and you're happy." (Female, 19)

Many participants noted that they understood and had empathy for their workers, explaining they had large case loads and little funding. They understood the stresses their workers must be under; however they did not feel that this was a reason they should experience poor service. They felt this was a problem that senior managers needed to address to enable key workers to do their job properly. Suggestions offered by the group about ways to improve this can be found in section 6.5.

One group of young people specifically cited their aftercare centre as being an important source of not only practical but also emotional support. Their centre provided them with a laundry facility, a kitchen, open access computers for college work and telephones they could use. In addition to this, their PA's are on site for any support they need.

"If you've got a problem you come [to the project], it's most likely that they can help you with it, no matter what." (Female, 21)

This centre also provided opportunities for socialising; every fortnight for example, the young people accessing a particular service go out together, the following fortnight they have a speaker (such as the Primary Care Trust or a drug advisor) who talks to them. They learn cooking skills together and watch movies. This centre could be seen as an example of best practice for after care support. The atmosphere of this centre is truly that of an all-embracing extended family. Care leavers arriving there are genuinely cared for and cherished which is a huge source of confidence for them.



In Westminster the WALC groups have been running for 9 years and are split into 16 and 17 year olds and 17+. On the surface these weekly groups are a cookery skills group, making cheap healthy and nutritious food on a budget, however the groups help engage the young people in the work carried out at WALC, like Connexions, work experience, higher education, as well as being visited by numerous organisations that want to consult with young people. Those attending groups help develop and present our annual conference. Subjects have included emotional well being and raising standards towards excellence in foster care; next year we will be presenting about identity and personality. The leaving care skills group includes health work, budgeting, benefits and entitlements, tenancy law, practicals skills on flat pack furniture, painting and decorating, drugs work and education and employment. In addition to these groups we have a camera club, an annual art project with Tate Britain, residential trips, homework groups, housing drop in advice. The groups provide a sense of family, provide excellent peer support and are an integral part of the work at WALC.

The importance of key workers seeing young people as individuals was also noted during discussions about support. Those young people who had positive experiences recalled that their workers were able to spend one to one time with them in preparation for leaving care and then had followed this up:

"My social worker was really good... she took the time out to help me get ready for my flat... It prepared me enough to set me up on my own." (Female, 23)

"[PA's] are understanding, social workers ain't...if you need your PA they are always there for you." (Male, 21)

When discussing the emotional support and being seen as an individual one young person gave an example of a key worker who they felt demonstrated he was not in the job for the money and genuinely cared about the young people he was supporting:

"Christmas day, in my kids home – this is something that I'll never ever forget, this member of staff has his own children and this was my best Christmas ever, we were all together and he was with us on Christmas morning and we said 'well why aren't you at home with your children?' and he said 'because I'd prefer to see you lot smiling for something you didn't think you were going to get', and it was just the way he said it, his heart was there and you knew, it was nice." (Female, 19)

Money

Following emotional support and the impact of key support workers, young people next cited the impact of money. They felt this was linked to the quality of their own experiences when they left care and also had a perception that not only were they themselves struggling with financial hardship but some expressed the belief that their key workers were over-worked and under-paid and as a result felt they did not receive the support they needed.

This is a very perceptive observation in terms of where care leaving teams fit systemically within their departments. If care services in general still perceive themselves as a 'Cinderella service' within the overall remit of children's service provision, care leaving



services are even more out on a limb. They do not have the profile, the budgets or the importance of preventative and protective services, and those working in leaving care teams are often acutely aware of this lack of priority. Their remit is to make the best of limited resources – and those resources are often limited, not just relating to real budgets but in terms of status, priority, training, filling vacant posts and so on. There are also limited career options within leaving care teams so although there will be a core of passionate and dedicated professionals who will stay within these teams long term, many excellent and ambitious workers will inevitably move on to seek career progression, contributing to the transience of workers spoken about by many in the groups.

For the care leavers themselves, the financial help they received can be broken down into the following:

- Benefits and income
- Leaving Care or 'Setting up Home' Grants
- Savings

Benefits

Young people did not always feel that they had a choice about applying for state benefits. In a number of cases going onto benefits was the advice young people had received from their key workers:

"I got a bit like angry with my social worker 'cos, like, why do they say to you go on benefits? That's not the only option, is it? ... when you're young, when you're 18, if you've just ... left care if someone tells you to do something, like a personal advisor who is a professional at doing their job and they tell you to go on benefits you're going to think that's right, but actually its wrong ... because once you go on benefits you're going to depend on benefits for the rest of your life." (Female, 20)

"The majority of care leavers are on benefits because your personal advisor or your aftercare worker or your social worker tells you to go on benefits." (Female, 20)

"As soon as I hit the 18 mark [my personal advisor] walked me to the job centre. Why didn't she take me elsewhere and like, get loads of leaflets and stuff like that for other courses or another job?" (Female, 21)

The comments above demonstrate, again, the lack of choice young people felt they had when leaving care. Their aspirations to gain employment and support themselves were often discouraged by key support workers who had told them that it would be better to claim benefits.

For some this reliance on the state was exactly what they did not want following on from a childhood which was dependant on others. Young people wanted to be independent and support themselves rather than carry on needing to rely on state support. Not only was this a financial decision, some also felt that emotionally they needed to break free from a system which they resented:



"I wanted to be given the directions to what my options were... I didn't want social services hanging over me." (Male, 20)

Once in the benefits system the young people faced barriers in getting the money they were entitled to. The benefits system was seen to be complex and arduous. This complexity was compounded by the lack of support available to help young people complete the forms needed to gain any kind of income. The time taken for benefits to 'come through' was also noted as a barrier to making a successful transition out of care:

"Benefits are crap because they take too long, it's like you apply and then they take 4 weeks to come so you're waiting for like 4 weeks with no money." (Female, 23)

In the West Midlands, Dudley, Smethwick and Wolverhampton Jobcentre Plus offices are working towards providing a 'one stop shop' service for young people preparing to leave care, enabling them to make an appointment to meet an advisor, talk about their benefit entitlements and complete application forms four weeks ahead of their 18th birthday. This prevents the period of 'limbo' that many care leavers find themselves in when financial support delivered via their leaving care teams has stopped and claims are still being processed, a gap that often also affects access to housing and rent support.

In addition there was some confusion in some groups about the amount of money that could be claimed as a care leaver. For example, some young people were receiving £47 per week while others (within the same group) claimed they were receiving higher amounts as a result of being a care leaver. The groups were very diverse in nature and some care leavers may have had additional entitlements due to other personal circumstances, however there was certainly a lack of clarity as well as disparity between amounts received by care leavers in apparently similar circumstances.

On the amount of money received one young person stated:

"You're on next to nothing... I'm on £47 a week paying every single bill, then after all my bills I have £2.57 to feed myself, it's rubbish." (Female, 19)

It was felt that this reality was not explained in enough detail before leaving care. As a result, when faced with this amount of money, the impact was primarily felt on the mental health of the young people.

The barriers of being homeless and attending Job Seekers' meetings were also explained by one young person:

"I had loads and loads of arguments with my job seekers advisor ... when I had nowhere to live ... you have to be at the job centre by a certain time otherwise you don't get paid and I tried to explain to her that I had to walk from quite far [her reply was] 'why didn't you get the bus?' [I replied] 'because I'm homeless and I'm on benefits!' ... the thing that got me mad was that she was a care leaver herself, you think she'd understand." (Female, 20)



A small number of young people commented on the positive element of being on benefits. A minority felt that by receiving benefits they were independent and able to look after themselves, this was particularly true of those who had had negative experiences of being in care. Others who felt they were better off were young parents. For example one parent explained that financially she was better off since having her child as she now received £120 per week through a variety of benefits and as she was a single parent she did not have to pay rent or council tax.

Leaving Care Grant

Young people living independently for the first time need help with the start-up costs associated with furnishing their flat and starting work or higher education. Many local authorities give young people leaving care grants to meet these costs.

The groups all talked about the setting up home grant they had received on leaving care, this was often referred to as the Care Leavers Grant. The amount received was not consistent within any of the groups and ranged from £500 to £1500. Young people used the money, in the main, to buy furniture and essential equipment for living alone. For some the money was not enough to buy the items they desired, but was enough to buy the items they needed. For others it was simply not enough.

Although care leavers appreciated this money some felt it was wasted especially if a care leaver was only housed temporarily. It was explained by some that they had bought sofas and furniture with their leaving care grant only to be told that they would have to be re-housed. They could not afford to move their furniture and therefore lost it.

The Care Leavers' Foundation receives many grant applications from care leavers needing items for their home. The Foundation expects, and welcomes, applications from older care leavers, who may have moved several times over a number of years and no longer have access to any other means of setting up home funds. However it has become concerned in recent years that one or two local authorities are paying very low initial leaving care grants – in some cases as low as £350 - £500, and instructing leaving care workers to ring round charities to try and make up the difference. It is the responsibility of the local authority to make sure care leavers have essentials in their first home. It is not unreasonable to expect that these essentials might include a bed, some kind of covering for concrete floors and at least one piece of furniture in each room.

Savings

A minority of young people explained that while they had been in foster care their carers had put money away for them in a savings account. They had received this money when they left care. However there was a general feeling that they were not equipped to spend this money in a rational and mature way and therefore they had wasted the money on the lifestyle they had chosen when leaving care. This was often seen as rebelling from the care system and included recreational drug use.



Employment and Education

Throughout the groups there was a positive attitude towards employment. The majority of young people wanted to work and not be on benefits. However, once in the benefits system care leavers found it difficult to get out of it, either down to personal motivation, lack of qualifications and experience or being 'trapped' on benefits. This compounds the argument for participants not to be automatically placed on benefits as the only choice if they are leaving care at 18.

It is also one of the areas where care leavers, particularly those who are entirely estranged from family contact, are particularly disadvantaged compared to their peers in the overall population. A young person living in the family home, even where that home may be very basic and the household income modest, can take up low paid employment and begin to gain vital work experience, skills, confidence and a route towards improved future employment without the spectre of poverty and eviction hanging over them. For too many care leavers who really do want to work, the fear of being trapped by a benefit system which will take away their entitlement to support with their rent and council tax charges before they are earning enough to cover these costs themselves remains a real disincentive to taking those first steps. The disincentive is not 'oh, I'm better off on benefits so I don't need to do anything', it is often a real fear around spiralling into debt, being unable to pay essential bills and potentially losing their tenancies as a result. Not being in employment, education or training also keeps care leavers excluded from opportunities to develop new friendships and social networks and feel like they are participating as full members of their communities.

A number of young people not only wanted to find suitable employment they also wanted to further themselves by attending college and gaining employment which would reap greater benefits in the future.

Many participants were at college with a few preparing to attend (or already attending) university. These young people were more likely to be those who had praise for their key workers and had an overall better experience of being in care, with fewer placements during that time.

Many had started a college course but had been unable to continue attending this. The main reason normally being that they had been forced to move or had been re-housed and therefore college attendance was made more difficult and expensive.

"The first time I went to college I got my catering certificate and then I got moved. I nearly completed my drama course, I got moved. So it's like that's disrupted my learning but I still managed to get a couple of things." (Female, 18)

It was also true that those who had experienced instability during care would be more likely to live a chaotic lifestyle after care and could therefore not hold down a place at college:

"I started college, I tried a few courses, but I could never complete them because I had an unstable home." (Female, 20)

One participant, who left care at 16 years old, explained they had been moved quite a distance from their school and could therefore not complete all their GCSEs. They felt that this had a lasting impact since leaving care:

"I've got no GCSEs at all because I got moved up to Oldham and it was so far from my school, they did offer to pay for taxis and stuff but it was just, I'm there on my own, I don't care about school anymore, I want to make myself money so I can live and support myself." (Female, 19)

Prioritising somewhere to live was echoed throughout the groups. Once young people have left care their priority is no longer on their education and instead they focus on finding stable accommodation and coming to terms with either living alone or the practicalities of living outside of the care system:

"Finding yourself somewhere to live, that's your priority... obviously you do care about getting your education but that's not your main priority... by the time you try to get yourself back into [education] it's difficult." (Female, 19)

In addition there was a concern by some young people that if they were to start a college course they would 'stand out' as they would not have appropriate clothing and stationery. Not being able to afford their lunch at college was also highlighted as a barrier. In addition there was also an overriding view that most college courses required young people to have ICT equipment and for some the expense of buying a laptop was a barrier.

Those who had attended college and succeed stated that it had had a positive impact not only on their employment aspirations but also on their well-being and motivation:

"When I went to college last year it made me feel well better about myself 'cos I was actually doing something for myself." (Female, 20)

Housing

There was no 'typical' pattern of experience relating to housing since leaving care for young people; the paths they had travelled were many and varied. Many had both positive and negative experiences of different types of housing, including:

- Bed & Breakfasts
- Hotels
- Hostels
- Semi-independent housing
- Remaining with foster carers
- Live-in college accommodation
- University
- Council housing
- Housing Association housing
- Private rentals
- Within the Criminal Justice System (HMP or probation hostels)

- Homelessness
- Rough sleeping

Perceptions of these different accommodations differed throughout the groups. For example some young people sought sanctuary in being placed in a hostel because they had peers around them who understood what they were going through.

"I think hostels are better than living on your own ... 'cos you've got more people around you, so, if you do mess up then people are always there, and people in the hostel have been through the same situations as you, so they're always going to be there to try and help you." (Male, 21)

Others found hostels to be 'scary' and unsafe including examples of break-ins and prolific drug use. It was noted within one group that placement within a hostel felt like social services relinquishing their responsibility for the care leaver:

"I didn't need... support [from the people in the hostel], because I knew what I could get from social services but they were saying speak to the people in the hostel... It's a way for them [social services] to lay back." (Female, 22)

Semi-independent housing was praised by the majority of young people who felt privileged to have found accommodation within this type of project. It was felt that schemes allowed independence in an environment that still provided access to a supported environment which was often craved by young people leaving the care system.

Many young people explained a feeling of emptiness when arriving at their first independent accommodation and a lack of personal belongings which differed from both foster homes and children's homes. For example one young male stated:

"When I lived with my foster family ... I was used to having nice things around me like my Play Station and all my gadgets ... where I live at the moment I've got a telly ... it's not even worth watching ... and that's the best thing I've got in my room ... it makes me regretful ... how the hell have I ended up here? Fair enough, I didn't get on with my foster family, but like, it was nice, it was a total different area, it was in the countryside ... now I'm stuck here." (Male, 21)

This feeling of emptiness was echoed by a lack of visitors or familiar faces when first living alone. There were feelings of loneliness which were detrimental to the mental health of the care leavers. This isolation had led to young people turning to drugs and alcohol as a crutch. This was then compounded with unemployment and crime and for some it did not take long for them to be thoroughly trapped within a cycle of exclusion from mainstream society that was increasingly difficult to break out of. Young people often compared themselves to 'normal' families and expressed the view that if a child left home from that situation, contact with their family would not just stop. They felt that they would receive phone calls and visits and continue to be emotionally a 'part of' their family even though they had moved out. For care leavers the experience was very different.

Once a young person leaves care they are no longer contacted by those who have provided both emotional and practical support to them throughout their childhood. This



leaves young people feeling lost and alone. This was especially true for those housed in independent accommodation at the age of 16, who would then seek solace in their peers, which often resulted in the increased use of alcohol and drugs to socialise. Consequently these young people sometimes faced time in the criminal justice system or were rehoused. This cycle was difficult for the young people to break without the support they needed, which had already stopped.

When young people did seek to gain support from those who had cared for them during care the experience for many was generally negative:

"I went back to visit my kids home, it was about 3 weeks after I left and I wasn't allowed in, I was on the doorstep...they were like I was just someone who'd gone and knocked on the door, I wasn't nothing to them anymore because I'd left and I'd moved out... they shouldn't just forget about you once you've moved out... even if it's just a phone call or a letter from them". (Female, 19)

One young person however related their positive experience of returning to their foster carer in times of need:

"I had a foster carer from the age of four, up until I was ten, I haven't lived with her for seven years, but I still keep in touch with her ... if you can't fall back on your own family it's nice to have a family to fall back on, and if you've had a good foster carer ... at least you've got someone to say 'oh you know I'm a bit stuck this week, can I borrow a pound?'" (Female)

Generally Bed & Breakfast accommodation was seen as a negative setting and not suitable housing for a care leaver. In some instances young people had made themselves homeless rather than staying in Bed & Breakfast:

"Rather than go to a B&B I'd just end up crashing out on a park bench ... I grew used to it ... even in the middle of winter I was still crashed out on the street." (Male, 23)

Young people were aware of the issues that could lead to them being moved on and rehoused frequently. In some cases this was sometimes down to their behaviour, for example:

"As soon as I left care then obviously it was Target [leaving care project] that helped me and they were the ones that put me in all the B&Bs 'cos I got kicked out of B&Bs left, right and centre and it was them that replaced me where I needed to be, without them I would have been homeless." (Female, 21)

For those who had many placements during care the pattern often continued:

"I've just moved around all over the country and that's all I've been doing since then [leaving care], 'cos I can't like settle, I want to, but I just mess it up for myself all the time." (Male, 21)

"In developing the new arrangements I asked everyone involved to look at things from the point of view of the young people and to ask,"Would this be good enough for my own children?" I am determined that young people living in and leaving care will in the future get the same support, as far as possible, as other young people who are living at home and leaving home. This means a home to live or return to, a shoulder to cry on, encouragement with work or school or college, someone to take you out for a meal or out for a drink, someone to help you with a bit of cash when you need it, somewhere to get the washing done."

Frank Dobson

From the foreword to *Me, Survive out there?*²

Although, as stated above, the quality of housing was paramount for some young people, the greatest concern for most was the location and people around the housing they received. This was particularly true for those living in hostels, Bed and Breakfast accommodation and council housing.

There was an overarching feeling that young people who were housed in deprived areas which experienced social exclusion, including high crime rates and drug misuse, were susceptible to negative experiences and either feared, or actually suffered these when living there alone:

"It rubs off on people." (Male, 20)

Others feared the people and crime in the areas in which they had been housed, this was especially true for young parents. One young female who had left her accommodation and was starting university stated:

"[You worry] about a gang of youths trying to stop you going into your own flat because apparently it's their flat." (Female, 21)

Many care leavers however feel they have no choice about the accommodation which is offered to them, fearing that if they don't take housing they will become homeless and lose any right to be housed as they will be classified as 'intentionally homeless'. The feeling of being 'lucky' to find somewhere was echoed throughout the groups:

"Most places you need a reference, or most places don't accept housing benefits, so you're really lucky to get some places." (Female, 21)

The cases found in this study are not alone. In 2007 Rainer³ stated:

"In almost every example surveyed for this report the young people did not feel they had any choice about accepting the accommodation offered to them. In the majority of cases the main reason, either implicit or stated by housing staff, was that the applicant would be deemed to be intentionally homeless if they refused the accommodation. This related particularly to interim decisions where young people were placed in unsuitable temporary accommodation."



Research

This perception of a lack of housing was communicated to young people through their support workers who encouraged them to take the first available housing on offer, again compounding the feeling of having no choice in their own future.

There was also disillusionment with the Council regarding housing. Young people who were homeless did not feel that staff took them seriously. In particular having to prove they were homeless was a challenge for some young people as a waiting period of up to four weeks was required after first presenting as homeless before their situation would be looked at.

"When I went in and told [the Council] I was pregnant and everything they told me I had to come back in four weeks to prove that I was still homeless because they were getting so many people coming in and lying that they were homeless. So I had to carry on staying on other people's couches for four weeks and because I went back on the deadline and said I'm still homeless they believed me. I shouldn't have to do stuff like that." (Female, 19)

"People think that if you [don't look like] a tramp, then you're not homeless." (Female, 17)

Drug and Alcohol Use

The use of drugs and alcohol was noted, unprompted, within the majority of groups. Some care leavers said they had turned to drugs prior to leaving care. Upon leaving care this was then one of the only 'constants' in their lives. Some young people explained that this was a way not only to escape problems and forget the issues they were dealing with, but it was also a way to find an identity for themselves.

"[Alcohol and drugs] was a way of escaping from the problems that were going on after leaving care." (Female, 18)

"From being 16, that's when they just start giving up basically... the amount of people I've met at 16 who've just been thrown out of care and they've gone straight onto drugs. The way to make money is drug dealing... and when you come to try and get your own place it's like... 'you can't come here because we can't support the stuff like that.'" (Female, 19)

The negative experiences as a result of drug and alcohol abuse were not only because of their addiction but also because of the impact this had on their physical health. This places an additional strain on their ability to gain employment and sustain housing. For example one young male stated:

"I've been on the operating table a few times in the past few years ... I got stabbed in my arm ... and I perforated my intestine 'cos of drink, I got told some cacky news off someone and I just went overboard, I drank about thirty litres within the space of about three hours." (Male, 23)

Other young people noted stomach ulcers as a result of their drinking.

Relationships

Relationships are vital in ensuring that young people have a successful transition out of care. Participants considered relationships with both family and friends to be important. For some care leavers the moment they left care was the moment they were able to start rebuilding relationships with their families. One participant regarded this as the final piece of their jigsaw which needed to be in place to enable them to start a new life post-care.

The cost of visiting family, however, had presented a barrier for some care leavers who had settled in areas away from their family. In most cases, aftercare services did pay for young people to re-establish relationships with families:

"[After-care workers] do encourage you to go and like talk to your family, and they'll pay for it by all means to make sure you're on talking terms." (Male, 23)

In addition to the importance of family, some care leavers also saw their friends as crucially important in enabling them to find stability once they had left care. One young female described living in the same place for many years, close to her friends. This had impacted positively on her ability to attend college and she had completed her college course and was due to start university soon.

Parenting

Several of the young people involved in this consultation were already parents or were expecting a child. Overall, this sample felt that having children was a positive choice. One young person, unprompted, felt that she was financially better off because of having her children. Others commented on how their children had forced them to 'grow-up' and be accountable for their own actions:

"It made me grow up... 'cos I used to have drug and alcohol issues ... it sorted my head out major... I wouldn't want to go back to how I was." (Female, 21)

Others felt that because of their negative experiences they would be good parents and always try and provide the best for their children. Thus the often expressed beliefs that young women, particularly those from care, have children 'to get a council house' and that it is not necessarily an undesirable outcome for them to become young mothers, were not supported by the opinions and experiences within our groups.

6.6 Improvements

Care leavers were asked what improvements they thought should occur to help make the transition of leaving care more successful. The following is a summary of their ideas.

Key workers

Care leavers felt that on most occasions key workers are central to a successful transition. The following suggestions were made to improve their performance and outcomes:

More one to one support with one key worker

Care leavers wanted to be able to spend more face to face time with their key worker. It was felt that this could be a time to simply 'catch-up' with no pressure. By having this time young people felt that they would be able to trust their workers more and therefore would be able to ask them for the support they needed, rather than accepting what was forced onto them.

Although young people did want a team around them to help them solve their problems they did not feel that they needed to know all these people. Instead it was felt that one key worker could liaise with all relevant professionals and the young person would then only need to build relationships with one key worker.

"All the agencies ... should all work together ... 'cos some people don't want to deal with them separately." (Male, 23)

A change to the current Duty Social Worker system

Many young people felt that a better service provided after hours was needed. Most had had experience of Duty Social workers and this had generally been negative. These workers were not able to open the files and therefore any problems the young people were having would have to be explained from the beginning which sometimes could be painful for the young people.

Matching gender of worker to gender of young person

Within our sample groups, both male and female care leavers said that if able to pick their own worker they would pick one of the same gender to them. It was felt this could help with trust issues and encourage young people to talk about things they might not be comfortable with. For example one young female stated:

"I think you should be able to chose what sex your social workers are 'cos I think that's important ... some care leavers have been abused and they don't want to work with the opposite sex or the same sex as them and some people just don't feel comfortable, like for girls, I wouldn't want to talk about ... sexual health with [a male social worker]." (Female, 20)

Rewarding positive outcomes

Some groups discussed incentivising workers to help the care leavers on their case load. One group came up with a suggestion that a worker who 'does well' should get a bonus:

"If they do get you into employment and you're at it so long, give that support worker a bonus ... so that they are realising what they're doing right." (Male, 21)

Equal pay

It was also felt that many workers move post so frequently because they feel they can get better pay elsewhere. Young people therefore felt that there should be equal pay to encourage workers to stay in post longer ensuring continuity for young people.



It is interesting that young people had clearly picked up from their workers that they felt underpaid and undervalued and sometimes felt unmotivated, ineffective or powerless, as well as teams experiencing significant flux and movement making it difficult to achieve stability and continuity in their practice. That this is so clearly mirrored in those receiving their services was not a connection specifically made within the groups and they tended to identify simplistic solutions associated with better pay – rather than better morale and conditions – as the possible solution.

Being seen as an individual

Young people wanted to be seen as individuals not as a collective group of 'care leavers'. It was felt that dealing with only one worker would enable this to happen more frequently than it currently does.

"Having your own support worker to listen to what you individually want." (Male, 21)

Additional emotional support

An increase in emotional support was mentioned throughout all groups as something that would be welcomed. Young people constantly compared themselves to 'normal' young people and felt that if they were in a stable family environment there would be people there for them to talk to whenever they needed. Participants felt that when they leave care the network around them disappears and they are often left feeling alone. Having a worker who was on call to simply have a chat with and support them through difficult times would help the young people achieve their goals.

"Support in general just like... basically preparing you for the big wide world and I think it'd help having that extra support covering those emotional needs and everything and I think that's the main thing, just knowing someone's there for you." (Female, 19)

Realistic workers

The majority of young people explained they were told there would be options for them when they left care; that they could live independently, go to college and rebuild their lives. However the reality for most young people was very different - it was felt that workers should prepare them for this reality prior to leaving care. If they are not prepared this reality comes as a shock and increases the possibility of young people turning to a lifestyle including drug and alcohol misuse.

"Instead of giving false hope to everyone they basically need to act on what they say and stick to what they say." (Female, 19)

One young person thought that allowing young people to sleep rough for a night prior to leaving care would give them a 'wake up call' to the realities of leaving care:



"There needs to be more simulation - young people need to be given more of a simulation of what it is like [when you leave care]. It can be quite scary.....whilst in care there is a sense of security." (Male, 20)

More flexibility

Increased flexibility was suggested. This referred mainly to workers needing to leave at a certain time of day without having resolved a problem for a young person. Groups also felt that workers often allowed problems to escalate before intervening and helping, meaning that many of the care leavers' problems could have been solved days or weeks in advance of them leading to crisis.

Some of those in the discussion groups also admitted not telling their workers soon enough when things were going wrong. In many cases there was a feeling that they could not approach their worker because they would have bigger problems to deal with and there would be others in more critical need than themselves:

"We shouldn't be thinking - should I ask my after care worker this because they have other kids? That's a problem with the system." (Female, 22)

We should note that it is not uncommon for care leavers to feel that they are not that important and should not make too much fuss. Acceptance of their 'lot' and seeing themselves as passive recipients of things that happen to them rather than active agents in their own lives is common. Work which is directed at raising self-worth and making positive choices would help care leavers to feel more in control of their lives. However we have already heard how self esteem is damaged by transient relationships with key workers, there is often a perception of no real choice and aspiration is not always present in the adults who have significant influence over these young care leavers.

Information

Care leavers were generally confused over what they were entitled to and where they could go to seek additional help. Suggestions for increasing the flow of information were two-fold. Contributors wanted to see evening sessions put on at their local drop-in centres or after care team bases, giving easy to understand information about rights, where to access services and policy updates. Also commonly suggested within the groups was that every young person leaving care should be given a handbook with all the relevant information they needed in it. For example it could include a section on benefit entitlements for each circumstance, contact numbers of organisations which could help them, information about housing and employment and education opportunities and their associated benefits.

Regulations and Guidance to the 2000 Act⁵ require all local authorities to provide information in appropriate formats to children leaving care. There is now a plethora of resources available from basic leaflets to full training and preparation packs such as those produced by the What Makes the Difference Project. Questions therefore need to be asked about the dissemination and availability of such resources so that all care leavers and leaving care workers have access to these, both when they first leave care and at different points along the way.



The What Makes the Difference (WMTD) project ran from January 2006 – March 2008 Available resources include the 'Get Ready for Adult Life' pack. There is a young person's manual and a trainer's pack and WMTD recommend that work on the pack is started as soon as possible. A wide range of topics are covered including Money, Health, Education and Employment, Family and Relationships, Accommodation, Life Skills and much more. This pack does need to be supplemented by local information; however it is the most up to date and comprehensive resource currently available. Packs can be downloaded from www.leavingcare.org/professionals/products/get_ready_for_adult_life_pack

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Age restrictions

It was felt that support should not end at 21. Instead care leavers stated that 25 years old would be a more appropriate time to stop support. Again, this was compared to 'normal' children and the support they receive from their parents, most feeling that this did not end at 21 years old.

"Some people need help past 21, but they're just finished with." (Male, 23)

The suggestion was put forward in several of the groups that if a young person left care at 16 years old and found it too overwhelming and they were struggling that they should be allowed to make the decision to re-enter the care system until they are 21 years old.

Housing

Appropriate housing

It was felt that young people should be housed in appropriate accommodation that they have chosen. As explained above there were many instances where young people felt that they were not in a safe place and felt threatened. For example:

"It's not appropriate to put a mother and a child in a crack den." (Female, 22)

In *'Me, Survive Out There?'*⁴ the Green Paper that preceded the 2000 legislation it was clear that one of the aims of the new arrangements would be to ensure *"that young people live in accommodation suited to their needs, thereby reducing the risk of homelessness and rough sleeping"* and the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 subsequently required that Local Authorities ensure that all care leavers are placed in 'suitable' accommodation.

In the Guidance to the Act⁵, suitable accommodation is defined in Regulation 11 as:

- a) Accommodation which so far as reasonably practicable is suitable for the child in the light of his needs, including his health needs;
- b) Accommodation in respect of which the responsible authority has satisfied itself as to the character and suitability of the landlord or other provider; and
- c) Accommodation in respect of which the responsible authority has so far as reasonably practicable taken into account the child's:
 - (i) wishes and feelings; and
 - (ii) educational, training or employment needs.



The guidance goes on to state that:

"As a general rule it would not be sensible for 16 and 17 year olds to live independently and to carry the responsibility of sustaining their own tenancy without appropriate support. Similarly, Bed and Breakfast accommodation would not be regarded as suitable although very occasionally its use may be justified as a short-term emergency measure."

⁵

In 2005, in 'Opportunity for All'⁶, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) defined 'decent homes' as 'homes that are warm and weatherproof with reasonably modern facilities'.

Transitional period

Young people felt there could be a transitional period between being in care and being fully independent which did not involve living in semi-independent accommodation. One suggestion was that once young people have left care they are able to return to their foster carers a few times a year for a night until they become fully settled. It was felt that foster carers could be paid for this transitional support. Again, when young people compared this to 'normal life' they felt that young people would not just leave home and then never return.

Availability of housing

It was felt that the availability of housing was a real problem. In a few cases care leavers felt workers were just using this as an excuse to get them to take the first option available, however, in general the groups recognised that limited availability was a real problem. Therefore young people felt there should be increased investment in semi-independent housing which offered them both physical and emotional support with either on-site staff or workers on the end of a phone:

"A lot more semi-independent housing because you need to be prepared to go into the big wide world on your own and there's nothing there, half of these problems wouldn't happen if you were settled." (Female, 19)

In 2004, then Housing Minister Keith Smith recognised that although there was a problem of shortage, care leavers were such a small minority of the general population, and indeed of the population needing social housing, that it should be possible for Government to find a solution to this problem.

"The statistics are still showing poor outcomes for care leavers. Whilst there has been improvement in some local authorities, still in 2003 only 49% of 19-year-old care leavers were in education, training or employment. And care leavers continue to risk homelessness and are more likely than other young people to become teenage parents. Young people who have been in public care have not been getting the life chances that they deserve....."



But although there are always limited resources, let us face it: we are here to talk about a relatively small group of people. Last year there were 6,500 young people who left care age 16 or over in England. So we should be able to give this issue the attention it deserves.....

Care in the broad sense shouldn't stop just because you leave a care setting, just as it doesn't for any young person leaving their parent's home.

*I believe in a caring society. I believe that society has a duty of care - this shouldn't just be a technical term applied to children and young people placed in care. It is about creating a society, which values **all** of its members - which truly cares for all of them and provides the support that is needed for all of them to reach their potential.....*

Care leavers need to be able to concentrate on education, training or finding a job, and making as smooth a transition as possible to an independent adult life. They should not have to worry about trying to find a decent home at the same time; they should be able to rely on positive help and support from those responsible for ensuring that their basic needs are met.....

At the moment finding a decent home can be very difficult for young people leaving care. I have already talked about the support that can be offered to young people to help them in the process of setting up home.

.....I have emphasised that young people themselves should be involved in the service design and delivery and care leavers need to have the opportunity to provide continuous feedback about their housing. From the Charter we can see that young people don't feel that this is happening."

Extracts from a ministerial speech made to the Conference 'Facing a Brick Wall', produced for National Care Leavers' Week by the Chartered Institute of Housing. Housing Minister Keith Hill was responding to the 'Charter for Suitable Housing' produced for National Care Leavers' Week by campaigning charity, A National Voice.⁷

In the Green Paper 'Care Matters', Government speaks about "improving housing options for young people through establishing a capital investment fund to support dedicated supported accommodation, underpinned by an evaluation of models of supported housing."⁸

Care leavers now need to see not just that Government has understood the need for an increase in the supply of suitable tenancies but is really going to do something to change this.



An example of good practice

Tower Hamlets have an agreed policy with their Housing Directorate which has allowed them to develop supported housing specifically for care leavers where they are not ready for independence, currently offering 30 places.

The range of accommodation is large, with different levels of support including some specific accommodation for single parents and disabled care-leavers. This dedicated accommodation for care leavers means that young people are with their peers and together as a group of young people with the same corporate parent, helping the local authority to ensure they are supported effectively.

Informal support networks

Care Leavers felt there should be an informal network of people who could support them after they left care. It was felt that this could lessen the impact and stresses faced by workers. Examples of having an older care leaver as a sponsor or buddy that could be called when they were needed were given. It was felt this would alleviate pressures on professional workers as much of the time young people mainly just need someone to talk to about the things they are going through. This should be very different from counselling. Some of the groups had poor experiences of counselling. For some, although they recognised that referral for counselling was an acknowledgement that they were asking for support, it was not always successful. It was sometimes thrust upon them and some felt that in being told to seek counselling, the real practical problems were being minimised and the underlying message was that they were to blame for what was happening to them.

It was also suggested within one group that internet sites such as Facebook and Myspace could be used to encourage young people who have been in care together to get back in touch with each other. One group explained that a worker had set up a Facebook page to enable this to happen; however they had been presented with barriers due to the sensitive issues discussed and the vulnerability of some of the young people using it.

www.careleaversreunited.org offers care leavers the opportunity to register their former children's home and look for others who may also have joined the site.

Income and benefits

It was felt that all care leavers should get the same amount of Leaving Care Grant and Birthday Allowance. There were discussions about the amount of money received by young people and many felt that it was not fair that some care leavers received more money while others struggled on lower.

"I think all Boroughs should work together... all benefits, all the support and everything should all be the same and all work together cos they're gonna make it a lot stronger by all of them working together." (Female, 19)



The issue of support for setting up home was raised pre the 2000 Act:

Young people living independently for the first time need help with the start-up costs associated with furnishing their flat and starting work or higher education. Many local authorities give young people leaving care grants to meet these costs. We expect local authorities should meet these costs to help young people make a good start to living independently.⁹

It is clear from what the young care leavers in our sample said, there is still a wide variation in what young people receive when they leave care and whether this is sufficient to establish a basic level of household amenity.

Social opportunities

For many young people returning to old friends was not always the best way for them to start to rebuild their lives. However having peers around them who understood what they had been through was important. It was therefore suggested that there should be more opportunities for young people to get involved in social activities organised by after care services. Some of the participants were involved in such a group, and explained that they were able to go on trips and even spend evenings away, something which many had not experienced. There was a particular emphasis in some groups on having opportunities to simply have fun and forget about their problems. Again this was compared to 'normal' families and young people who would go on days out and hang out with their friends in a safe environment.

This lack of opportunity to socialise was felt by many of the cohort to be a factor in care leavers turning to negative coping strategies, particularly drug use, which both provided a temporary feeling of relief and also served as a 'social activity' – something they could do with their other care leaver friends. A lack of money to participate in leisure activities such as swimming or going to the cinema was highlighted. One suggestion was to provide young people with a leisure pass:

"I think there should be more stuff for you to do cos you're taking drugs as well 'cos you're bored and there's nothing for you to do, there needs to be more opportunities for you to go out, even like a leisure pass or something or a cinema pass... you don't have the money to do it." (Female, 19)

Again, good practice in many local authorities does provide for this kind of support, although none of those in our groups were beneficiaries of such schemes.

Education

It was felt that there should be more encouragement by workers to re-engage care leavers in education, even if they had missed teaching time whilst being in care. Many felt that going on to college was not an option and instead felt forced into claiming benefits. They wanted to know exactly what was available to them and what they could achieve and it was felt that this type of information and support should come from their workers. However to ensure that their time at college was successful, stable housing was needed:



"The more settled you are the more settled you're going to be with your education, with your work, with your money... you're not going to feel lost."
(Female, 19)

"More support in education and employment." (Male, 23)

It was felt that going from care and then into full-time education could be overwhelming for some young people and therefore their chances of succeeding were slim. To overcome this it was suggested that young people should be able to take gradual steps back into education, perhaps attending two or three days a week at first, with this time increasing as they feel more comfortable and settled.

Choice

All young people wanted to feel in control of their own lives. This desire was increased if young people had had little control over their life while in care. It was felt that young people should be able to make their own decisions about what was best for them. For example, if they really needed counselling or if they felt another person may benefit from having that resource. Young people were willing to make mistakes and felt that this would happen to any 'normal' person leaving home for the first time. They wanted their workers to give them the correct information and tell them about all the options available to them and then allow the young person to make the final decision for themselves. This would allow their lives to be their choice and enable them to learn from their own mistakes.

Preparation for leaving care

Overall it was felt there was still much to be done to improve the preparation people receive for leaving care. Primarily this was related to the provision of correct and up to date information. If armed with the information about options, young people would be more likely to make positive decisions for themselves without being 'dictated' to by workers. If it was felt that if young people were able to make their own decisions when leaving care, they would be more likely to succeed.

Pathway Plans

The Pathway Planning process was perceived to be 'boring' and not appropriate for a child leaving home for the first time. Young people felt that less people should attend this meeting, that ideally it would be one key worker who could make it less formal and more interesting, in turn making it more relevant and useful for the future.



7 Conclusions and Recommendations

The following section offers conclusions from this study and work previous to it.

7.1 Conclusions

Care leavers in this study were full of optimism when leaving care and anticipated making decisions about their future for themselves. However they ultimately felt disappointed with the realities they faced. Unable to choose accommodation, key workers, education or employment, they were left disillusioned and open to negative influences.

This research has not told us anything new but it has reaffirmed messages from before the Leaving Care Act of 2000, messages from the Blueprint work, Start with the Child, Stay with the Child, messages conveyed very clearly year on year through the various activities and forums taking place in previous National Care Leavers' Weeks – and in particular National Care Leavers' Week in 2004 'Facing a Brick Wall' where messages from England and Wales echoed those of the young people in this study.

Identical too are the concerns voiced by Government in the Green Paper, White Paper and now Bill which is about to go through Parliament and bring into force another set of improvements to a care leaving service which it openly acknowledges is far from good enough.

Seven years ago Frank Dobson stated:

"In developing the new arrangements I asked everyone involved to look at things from the point of view of the young people and to ask... Would this be good enough for my own children?"⁹

Today, Alan Johnson has the same message:

"...our care system fails to enable most children who enter it to achieve [their] aspirations. [This paper] starts from the premise that our goals for children in care should be exactly the same as our goals for our own children."⁸

Should we draw the conclusion that nothing *has* changed and so nothing *will* change? Should we also assume that the next pronouncements seven years down the line will be made in similar terms? Has anything actually improved in the experience of children leaving care and can we expect significant improvements as a result of the new Children and Young People's Bill?

The reality is that things have changed, for those care leavers who have benefitted from the targeted help and support that is now more available than it was pre-2000. Post-2008, care leavers targeted for support and living within areas where this help and support is implemented fully, thoughtfully and effectively, will also be better off.

Successive cohorts of care leavers have demonstrated that legislation alone is never enough to change lives and there are wider issues of intention, implementation, and

integration that need to be addressed if we are not to keep producing the same results and finding similar levels of frustration, dissatisfaction and abandonment among populations of care leavers in the future.

It may be that care leavers will always experience instability, feelings of abandonment and a sense that their 'first home' is a let down as a result of a fantasy and idealised thinking for many years before it becomes a reality.

They may have these experiences not because of poor leaving care services, not because of 'damage' done to them by the care system but as a legacy of their pre-care experiences. Many care leavers will have experienced neglect, chaotic families, or abuse. No service can work at such a micro level that it will perfectly meet the needs of all of its service users. We are not looking for perfection, but would suggest that there is ample evidence that care leaving services for young people can, and must, do an awful lot better.

Care leavers themselves are imperfect beings and like all of us in the process of growing up need to be permitted to make mistakes without judgement and allowed to be competent and make important choices in their own lives. These two aspects are not mutually exclusive.

Our study sample has issued a cry for 'normality'. 'Normal' growing teens and early twenties require space of their own, not to be crowded and to be seen to be 'fiercely independent'. They also need and want the support of their family to be close at hand and on demand as and when they need it. That is what families are about and that, as far as we are able, is what we should aim to replicate in creating effective services for care leavers which will enable them to make their way in the world feeling cared for, cared about, significant, loved and valued.

Of course care leavers are not unique among groups of young adults in experiencing poverty, poor housing, chronic unemployment, isolation and systems which sometimes seem to trap them in a cycle of social exclusion. All of these groups would benefit from more access to safe and sustainable housing, relief from poverty, improved assistance to get on the ladder of employment, address mental health problems etc. However society does have a unique responsibility towards this small sub group of socially excluded young adults because it has taken on the mantle of corporate parenting and as a corporate parent has a responsibility to do its best to help care leavers on their way as young adults.

The work that has already taken place through the Care Matters agenda and the forthcoming Children and Young People's Bill, which is due to be enacted within weeks of this report's publication, have and will result in further incremental change and improvement. There has been a significant shift in Government thinking in recognising that the needs of care leavers in transition extend well beyond their eighteenth birthday and there are some real and practical measures that will address some of the important issues, as well as some significant gaps and lost opportunities in the new Children and Young Persons' Act.



There are also moves afoot in other Government departments to work harder to 'join up' strategies in relation to socially excluded young adults, particularly through the delivery of the PSA16 target¹⁰.

However it is not all about legislation and regulation. If everyone who comes into contact with care leavers in their various roles – housing officers, Connexions workers, community psychiatric nurses, employment advisors or university tutors - can become just a little bit more aware of the messages from care leavers in this report, messages that have come down consistently over the years, perhaps when the next group of care leavers is asked the same set of questions in the future, there will be fewer who need to express the same feelings of frustration, dissatisfaction and abandonment.

The Children and Young Persons Act and the Regulation and Guidance which follows will make it more difficult for responsible authorities to move young people into independence before they are ready, it will offer additional support both financial and emotional to care leavers who enter universities, it will require that care leavers' voices are heard in the shaping of services. It leaves gaps in terms of specific requirements relating to housing and setting up home, gaps in relation to care leavers with complex needs and enduring emotional/behavioural/mental health issues and gaps and weaker than hoped for provisions in relation to other extra vulnerable groups such as children leaving care from custody and unaccompanied asylum seekers leaving care.

However a change in culture and continued improvements in cross governmental working are just as important in making this possible as new laws. At the time of writing, care leavers are on the agenda of the Department for Work and Pensions, the Social Exclusion Task Force and the new Centre for Excellence and Outcomes. In local authorities throughout the country care leavers are increasingly represented through a range of participation activities and partnerships with a direct input to Council members and senior managers. This spreading good practice needs to be widely shared and built upon if we are to be able to say in future years that care leavers have been truly listened to, their voices heard, their opinions acted upon and those responsible for the actions held to account for demonstrating real improvement.

As a corporate parent, the state cannot achieve all that it wishes for its care leavers through legislation and regulation, and it cannot be a 'forever parent' to all of them. What it can do is put measures in place to ensure that all those who share duties of corporate parenting across Government and local Government departments take that responsibility seriously and talk to each other about how to support these uniquely vulnerable young adults. In families, good parents talk to each other about how best to manage and support their struggling, sometimes wayward, growing and learning offspring and the more they talk to each other and work together the more likely they are to be good parents. In broken families there is little or no good quality communication between parents. Not hearing what other family members have to say and shouting over the chaos increases the sense that there is no de facto 'safe space' to be and that teenagers have to just get on and work it out on their own. Which kind of parent does the state want to be?

Finally, as they find their way, care leavers have the right to expect that key adults will be there alongside them on that journey, with varying degrees of closeness or frequency of



contact at different points, but always there to hold them psychologically even when everything seems to be going wrong.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on the priorities expressed by the care leavers in this limited study, the legacy of studies that have gone before, and the case histories of a number of older care leavers who have also contributed their reflections to this piece of work, we put forward a small number of key recommendations aimed at improving the experience of all care leavers of their initial transition from care towards 'independence'.

The first three of these recommendations relate to practical and specific issues, the following four are more difficult to pin down but are no less important.

1. No compromise on housing standards

In the 2008 study, care leavers often felt they had no choice over housing. This resulted in them being housed in inappropriate locations and properties. They did not feel that they could refuse inappropriate housing due to the communication received from key workers about availability of housing; there was a general feeling that they had to accept whatever they were given.

No care leavers should be placed in hostels, Bed and Breakfast accommodation or lodgings, nor should they be placed in localities where their health and welfare is seriously jeopardised. The local authority has control of the housing stock in its area and the date of a child's 16th or 17th birthday, or a young adult's 18th does not come as a surprise. There is ample time to plan for every care leaver to move into a suitable tenancy or housing project. Local authorities should have a statutory duty to provide a sufficient quantity and variety of leaving care options – including self-managed and supported tenancies as well as more supported housing projects – within their own area, just as they will have a new statutory duty to provide for the placement needs of their own in-care population.

2. National Minimum Standards for Leaving Care

This study shows that the age at which care leavers access semi-independent housing was important for care leavers. It was felt that although young people may feel ready to leave the care system at 16 this decision was often made out of resentment towards the system, and in hindsight those who had left at 16 could see that they were not ready and regretted the absence of any robust support options to turn back to once they had made that decision. This was compared to 'normal' family life where a 16 year old may feel ready to leave the family home, however parental influence may prevent this from happening, or the young person would quickly be able to return after a short foray into the world of independence.

A set of National Minimum Standards (NMS) for Leaving Care were updated in 2007 by the What Makes the Difference project (WMTD) and the National Leaving Care Advisory Service (NLCAS) from original work carried out by the Leaving Care Project Group within

the then Department for Education and Skills. Although we understand there is no intention from Government to legislate for the inspection and regulation of leaving care services, we would like to see the DCSF take a strong lead and back a programme of voluntary adoption and self-assessment against these standards. Many of the areas raised by our cohort, including the 'softer' issues around relationships and the need for safe accommodation and contingency plans when things go wrong, are covered in these standards.

3. Basic setting up home grant

Unsurprisingly this study shows lack of money had an impact on care leavers in securing stable accommodation as the cost of living often resulted in people not being able sustain their accommodation or turning to crime to substitute their income.

There is still a wide variation across local authority areas in the amount of 'leaving care' or 'setting up home' grant allocated to care leavers. The local authority as the corporate parent should retain responsibility for ensuring that all care leavers are enabled to equip their first furnished tenancy to a reasonable standard. Most would agree that a reasonable standard would provide a bed, at least one table, chair and piece of soft furnishing and floor coverings where the floor is concrete. Work has been done in the past on what an agreed list of essentials should be and how much it is likely to cost (see box below).

As many Local Authorities have neither followed these rates, recommended by a major charity working in the sector, or operated entirely within the spirit of the Regulations and Guidance on the Children (Leaving Care Act), we recommend that Government regulates for this minimum amount to be made available to all care leavers on an equal basis through the local authority leaving care service, independently of reliance on social fund applications.

For relevant and former relevant children, the Pathway Plan should cover the help which the responsible authority is to provide when they leave care, such as the resources needed to set up home. Authorities should be clear about what they would expect to provide for this purpose. They will also need to recognise that not all young people will be successful the first time they try to live independently and that they may need this help more than once. Chapter 9.14 Leaving Care Act Regulations¹¹

In its 2003 'Report Amplify', leading care leavers charity A National Voice (ANV) called for a minimum amount of £1400 to be set for the Leaving Care Grant and in 2005 revised this figure in line with rising costs to £2000. It stated:

"A National Voice have increased our recommended amount for the Leaving Care Grant to be set at £2000 minimum. This amount reflects our own national research and is based on a Care Leaver moving into a one bedroom flat. This grant should be set nationally to ensure all young people setting up home for the very first time receive the same wherever they may live." A National Voice¹²



A review of the 2008 costs for basic provisioning of a single person's flat will be undertaken by ANV in association with The Care Leavers' Foundation during National Care Leavers' Week 2008.

4. Corporate parenting to become a reality for care leavers

In 2008 young care leavers felt a lack of up to date and relevant information also impacted on the informed choices young people were able to make, especially regarding their education and employment. Many felt they had no choice except to claim benefits; the longer lasting impact of this was a dependency on state benefits and a lack of confidence and resources to gain suitable employment.

There are many ways in which, as a corporate parent, local authorities can help ease the path of their care leavers. These include employability schemes, leisure and transport passes, access to training and education and priority housing. Councils are also able to influence other services in their local areas that impinge on the lives of care leavers such as benefit services and health services. Every council should be required to produce a strategy document and an action plan which outlines what they propose to do to ensure that services are working together and have a joined up approach to care leavers, spanning all the areas mentioned above. Corporate parents should be prevented from evicting their corporate children from flats in all but the most extreme circumstances and should establish a fund to assist in cases of hardship where care leavers are unable to meet rent arrears or utility debts.

5. Relationships, emotional support and inclusion

The normality of having a social network when leaving home was important to the 2008 care leavers. Care leavers wanted friends around them who will provide informal support and an opportunity to socialise. Age was also important in relation to the discontinuation of care leaving services at 21 years old. Again care leavers compared themselves to 'normal' families feeling that families would not simply leave you at 21 to live your own life and never be in touch again.

Social exclusion, isolation and instability often characterise the leaving care pathways of many care leavers. There is no 'quick fix' to address what are often complex issues in this regard, however local authorities should be required to develop an action plan which covers the following areas:

- Specific training for leaving care workers which supports their understanding of the nature of relationships between children leaving care and key adults
- Support workers should communicate clearer lines of responsibility
- Resource packs such as 'Get Ready for Adult Life'¹³ should be made widely available both when first leaving care and at later stages through care leaving teams, Connexions, libraries and so on

- The provision of a range of mentoring, peer support and specialised support services which will go some way to meeting the needs of all care leavers in having a reliable, committed and consistent adult in their life who will stick with them through thick and thin;
- The promotion of the social networking site www.careleaversreunited.com and other care leavers organisations such as A National Voice www.anationalvoice.org The Care Leavers Association (CLA) www.careleavers.com and Voices from Care www.voicesfromcarecymru.co.uk
- Proactive liaison with local police, magistrates, social landlords and mental health teams so that problems can be identified early and suitable interventions considered before crisis point is reached;
- A consideration of how elected members will be involved in developing an integrated approach to supporting their corporate children through their leaving care pathways, promoting ownership and inclusion.

6. Training of Leaving Care Workers

In 2008, many care leavers felt that issues were not resolved until they reached crisis point, which they felt would not occur in a 'normal' stable family environment. For many this experience after leaving care reflected their in-care experience of lurching from crisis to crisis. A common experience within this group was that the structure and resources within leaving care teams did not support a pro-active approach and inevitably the necessary attention was only diverted in their direction when a crisis demanded it.

There is, in some leaving care teams, a misapprehension that the role of PA or LC worker is entirely practical and should be concerned basically with 'teaching budgeting and cooking skills' and signposting to other services. Aftercare workers are sometimes encouraged to believe that if they allow care leavers to become close to them or offer the 'over and above' levels of support and caring that care leavers consistently tell us they need, they are somehow perpetuating their dependency and not 'helping them' to become independent. Whilst going through this difficult period of transition from youth to adulthood, from being looked after to being independent, these young adults need more than ever to know that their relationships with key adults are enduring and the emotional security that goes with that is crucial. Functional independence springs spontaneously out of successful dependency; it is not created by the forcible breaking of connections and bonds.

The development of a specific set of qualifications is needed for leaving care workers. It should cover all practical areas of their role, including understanding legal, housing, employment and welfare issues as well as addressing the need to understand the emotional and psychological journeys undertaken by this group. It is important that there is an understanding of the impact a 'helping' worker, particularly at stages when they may seem to be superfluous or discarded, has on a care leaver. It should also include how to recognise serious mental health problems and continue to support care leavers through



these difficulties even when additional specialised services may be brought in to work alongside.

7. A Voice for Care Leavers

Young people in this study expressed themselves as being fiercely independent and craved the opportunity to make decisions for themselves, but were also able to recognise that they still had a significant need for support.

Choice of worker was seen as important as ultimately it was felt that a good relationship with a worker would result in increased choice in other areas of their lives and more positive outcomes. Although it was understood that full choice of worker would not be practical, a choice of gender of worker, at a minimum, was considered necessary.

In their preparation to leave care there was a lack of choice over those who attend Pathway Planning meetings. The more people in these meetings, the less choice care leavers felt they had over their own future as decisions were made for them.

Young people leaving care should have access to independent advocacy services in relation to any matter relating to problems arising from services received from their local authority, education service, local health trusts, independent housing associations and debt and loan sharks. Many young people are still reporting that they have no choice in when they leave care or where they live. These decisions have a momentous impact on their lives and it is essential that young people are heard and their voices represented.



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Research