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Supporting care leavers' successful transition to independent living

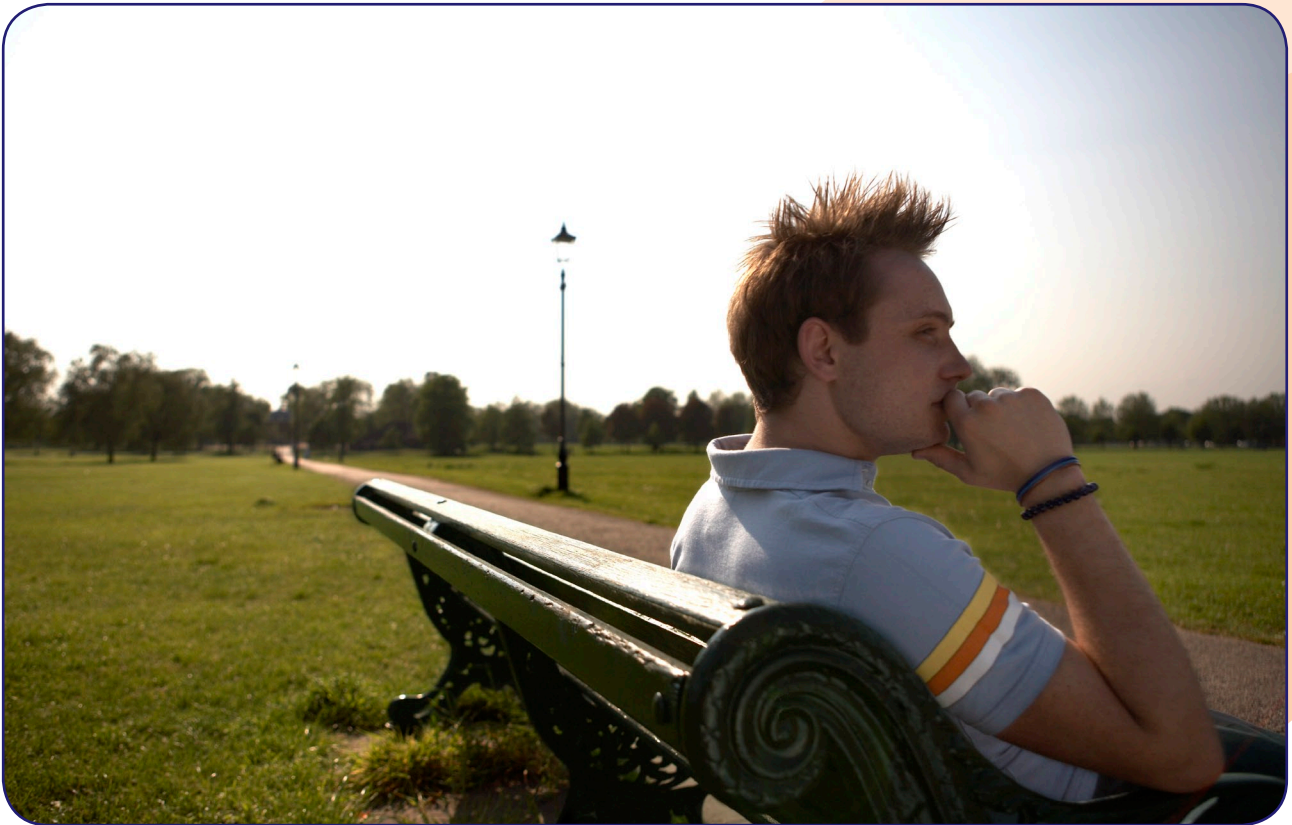
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This research summary highlights the evidence of 'what works' in supporting young care leavers' successful transition to independent living. This summary is the first stage of a five-year research programme with youth charity The Prince's Trust examining the best model of one-to-one support to help care leavers into education, training, employment or volunteering, and to sustain these positive outcomes.

The 'From Care to Independence' project run with The Prince's Trust aims to:

- increase knowledge about supporting care leavers
- improve skills for practitioners supporting care leavers
- influence policy to improve support for care leavers
- raise awareness among the general public of the issues facing some care leavers.

In looking at 'what works' in supporting care leavers, this summary uses existing research to highlight some of the gaps in provision. This information can help us understand where extra support is required. The 'From Care to Independence' project seeks to add value to the current provision and to work in partnership with all those involved.



Overview

Relative to their peers, young people leaving care tend to:

- have lower levels of educational attainment
- be unemployed
- live in unstable and poor quality housing or be homeless
- be young parents
- have mental health problems
- have relatively high levels of drug use
- be over-represented in prison (Hannon *et al.*, 2010).

These poorer outcomes are related to their pre-care experiences and intensified by instability, placement movement and disruption while in care (Stein, 2005). Further, care leavers are expected to become independent and self-sufficient much earlier than their non-care peers, thus accelerating their transition to adulthood. Some care leavers cope well, but many find the path to independence precarious. A successful transition to independence is inevitably linked both to the quality of the care experience in general and the specific support directed at the transition itself.

What support do young care leavers receive? Annual Ofsted surveys present a mixed picture with many young people receiving some sort of support, but too many reporting shortfalls in planning and preparation for adult life, and some saying they get no help at all.

Findings from the Children's Care Monitor 2011

Young people soon to leave care

- 75% getting support to prepare for life as an independent adult, 56% getting help to prepare for higher education and 52% getting help to prepare for getting a job – but 13% getting no support.

Care leavers

- 60% had pathway plans, 12% did not – the others did not know.
- 85% had a social worker or caseworker.
- 64% were in education, 6% in work, 6% in in-work training and 29% not in education, employment or training (NEET).
- 71% rated their accommodation as very good or good, 18% as okay and 11% as bad or very bad.
- 59% were getting help to prepare for life as an independent adult, 40% to prepare to higher education and 32% help in getting a job – but 23% reported getting no help at all, up from 17% in 2010.
- 24% said they were being bullied because they had been in care.

(Ofsted, 2012)

Similarly, a report from the Children's Rights Director for England on young people's views on leaving care reported that nearly half felt that they had been badly prepared for independent life after leaving care (Children's Rights Director for England, 2012).

Research examining young care leavers' perceptions of public services revealed that young people had some unfavourable perceptions, including believing that services were not relevant to their situations, not trusting that service providers will treat them with respect and respond to their needs, perceiving that services were bureaucratic and complex, feeling reluctant and embarrassed to ask for help and wanting to demonstrate independence and solve problems independently (Consumer Focus, 2011).

Given the importance of support for young care leavers – and their perceptions of the support they receive – existing research on effective practice in leaving care services is reviewed in the following section.

Leaving care services

Specialist leaving care services were initially developed to assist care leavers¹ with their core needs including accommodation, financial assistance, education and employment, life skills and support networks.

Preparing for independence

The central message from research focusing on successful preparation for independence is that transitions from care should be defined by young people's needs and not their age (Biehal *et al.*, 1995). Planning should begin early, be collaborative, involve young people and those who help to support them and allow for contingency planning when arrangements break down (Ofsted, 2009 and Stein, 2004). Assessment, ongoing support, opportunities for participation and the gradual learning of skills – practical, emotional and interpersonal – in the context of a stable placement are all necessary. Continuity of workers and carers is an important factor in providing stability and security while preparing young people for independence.

Accommodation

Moving into suitable, safe accommodation of their choice is one of the main concerns of young people preparing for and leaving care. Positive outcomes are assisted by involving young people in planning and decision-making, properly assessing their housing needs, helping young people prepare for

moves, avoiding moving young people who are settled, offering a choice in style and location of accommodation, having contingency plans in place, setting up a package of support to go with the accommodation and having a clear financial plan (Stein, 2004, Stein and Morris, 2010).

Financial support

Leaving care grants seemed to vary from area to area and person to person (Morgan and Lindsay, 2006). Ofsted reported that the majority of care leavers they surveyed felt that leaving care grants were inadequate (Ofsted, 2009). The provision of comprehensive and accessible local guides to inform young people of the help and support they could expect to receive was crucial, as was more informal support, such as occasional meals or ensuring that care leavers had drop-in centres or places to go for company (Stein, 2004). Some leaving care services developed partnerships with Jobcentre Plus (JCP) to accelerate benefit claims for care leavers, leading to improved engagement with other JCP services (Clayden and Stein, 2005). Harris and Broad recommended that leaving care services worked towards increasing young people's autonomy in financial decision-making as they approached independence (Harris and Broad, 2005).

Education, training and employment (ETE)

Several studies have suggested that the educational achievement and employment opportunities of young care leavers are highly dependent on what happened before they came into care (Stein, 2004), with a number of factors while in care further influencing young people's achievement including placement stability, school place stability, time out of school, help with schoolwork, the carers' educational experiences and support for education at home. Continuing support was a key element of best practice for care leavers to facilitate entry into and maintain placements in ETE (Biehal *et al.*, 1995). Specific types of support that seem to be effective include reliable financial support, apprenticeships and work experience, mentoring schemes, interview preparation and help with university forms, special classes or teachers to provide additional support to young care leavers, Personal Education Plans, access to computers, including specific people with educational remit within teams, involving career advisers in leaving care services, employment skills groups and building formal links with colleges, trainers and employers (Biehal *et al.*, 1995, Ofsted, 2009, Stein, 2004 and Wade, 2003).

¹ Leaving care services assist young people who have left care, as well as young people still in care, but where pathway planning should be taking place.

Health and mental health

Looked after children experience many of the same health risks and problems as their peers, but to a greater degree (Mooney *et al*, 2009), and poor transitions from care could exacerbate existing problems (Stein and Dumaret, 2011). Ofsted (2009) cited examples of good practice in mitigating the detrimental influence of poor health and mental health, such as looked after children's nurses having an informal and flexible approach to working with care leavers that may include meeting with them in their homes or in leisure centres, local authorities working with dentists to explain their responsibility to local looked after children and care leavers, and formal arrangements being made between local authorities and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to ensure that looked after children and care leavers had priority access to services.

However, as the Children Act guidance (Department for Education, 2010) notes, differential age thresholds between health and social care remain problematic. Most health services do not recognise those who have left care post-18 as a priority group for service provision. Looked after children nurses are no longer required to provide a service to young people once they have left care and CAMH services stop between 16 and 18. Young people's needs may fall below the threshold for intervention from adult mental health services, so their personal advisors (PAs) or keyworkers must be able to identify alternative sources of support.

Life skills

'Life skills' include practical skills (e.g. personal care, healthy eating, cooking, cleaning, shopping, budgeting), relationship skills and lifestyle skills (e.g. physical exercise, contraception, alcohol and drugs) that are key to successful transitions to independent living. Some evidence suggests that programmes that incorporate personal development (i.e. communication, decision-making, anger management) and independent living skills (i.e. job skills, budgeting, household tasks, finding housing, obtaining legal assistance, using community resources) into leaving care services favourably influenced young people's educational attainment, employment, housing, health and other life skills (Montgomery *et al*, 2006). A recent Ofsted inspection report (2009) provided further practical examples of good practice including driving lessons for 17-year-old care leavers; helping care leavers learn about budgeting through the provision of a weekly allowance, from which they were responsible for buying food, clothes and paying for activities; and staff showing them how to use public transport, cook, wash and iron.

Support networks

Driving the success of the leaving care services described above are the relationships young people cultivate while in care and moving out of care. On a very basic level, young care leavers with successful transitions from care had developed strong attachment relationships to family members, partners or foster carers (Stein and Morris, 2010). In addition to these close, informal ties, more formal relationships with PAs and keyworkers also have a role to play in facilitating positive outcomes for young care leavers.

The legislative framework for leaving care services recognises the importance of addressing young people's need for caring and consistent adults through PAs and keyworkers including local authority leaving care workers, voluntary sector advocates and specialists from other agencies such as Connexions or the local health service. Research suggests that support should be planned and negotiated with young people, proactive (i.e. not there just to respond to a crisis), flexible, able to respond to the diversity and variety of young people's needs and holistic, so address the practical, financial and emotional needs of young people (Stein, 2004). Another study reported that young people want workers who they get on with and trust, do what they say they are going to do and who treat them with respect (Ofsted, 2009). Care leavers in one study indicated that while they valued the support provided by their leaving care workers, they found it easier to go to friends for help and advice, since their social workers were often too difficult to contact (Morgan and Lindsay, 2006).

Mentors operate somewhere between professional and informal support. Young people valued the advice they received from mentors during their transition to independence. Young people perceived that mentors helped them with important practical advice, on subjects such as education, finding work, relationship problems and confidence, although they acknowledged that they would benefit from better matching, greater flexibility and fewer time restrictions (Clayden and Stein, 2005 and Stein and Morris, 2010). There was some indication that young people achieved better outcomes when mentoring relationships were sustained for at least a year (Clayden and Stein, 2005).

This same research on mentoring found that most of the direct support given to young people during the transition from care was provided by their residential or foster carers (Clayden and Stein, 2005). One review reported that both foster and residential carers provided support to young people who had left their care, although this received little formal recognition in terms of pathway planning (Stein and Morris,

2010). The final evaluation of the Staying Put pilot programme, which offered young people making the transition from care to adulthood the opportunity to remain in their foster placements until the age of 21, revealed that 'staying put' allowed young people to prepare for independence while receiving ongoing support and gave young people greater control of the timing of their transition from care to independence (Munro *et al*, 2012). Further evidence is needed on the contribution carers have made to care leavers' successful transitions.

Finally, the evidence about maintaining or creating links with young carers' birth families was mixed. Best practice required a realistic assessment of the young person's sources of family, carer and informal support, and the response would be based on that assessment. Family group conferences could provide a means to help the young person's family take part in leaving care and pathway planning.

Specific groups of care leavers

Additional challenges are faced by specific groups of Care Leavers who have multiple needs and may require input from a number of agencies. Section 6 of the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations for care leavers (Department for Education, 2010) focuses on three other groups that require additional specialist support including disabled care leavers, unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, and care leavers in the youth justice system. Black and minority ethnic (BME) care leavers and young parents also face significant disadvantages.

Conclusion

Across all the research reviewed on the effectiveness of leaving care services, certain elements stood out as crucial. First, young people benefit from stable placements while they are in care, particularly placements that enable them to develop strong relationships. Second, access to and continuity of both professional and informal support for young people as they prepare for and during the transition out of care are also important. Young care leavers, with the assistance of their support systems, need to plan ahead and prepare for their transitions to independence, including solid contingency planning. Young care leavers need access to a range of support services as success in one arena of their lives seems to pave the way for success in others. Young people need to be involved as key partners and decision makers throughout the planning and transition period, including garnering their views on their readiness to leave care. Finally, equipping young

people with key practical and life skills gives them the underlying capacity to live independently.

Recent developments that are likely to affect current practice include:

- increases in the numbers entering care, which is likely to lead to an increase in the numbers of care leavers in the future
- increases in the proportion of young people remaining in care until their 18th birthday
- measures in section 104 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 that provide that 'a child who is remanded to youth detention accommodation is to be treated as a child who is looked after by the designated authority', which could lead to an increase in the numbers of young people entitled to leaving care services
- public spending cuts affecting staffing and resourcing of leaving care services
- reform of or a reduction in other services that had been working with or providing specialist support to local leaving care services (e.g. Connexions, CAMHS, youth services, careers advice, further education), which may lead to a reduction in particular areas of expertise or specialist provision
- increases in higher education tuition fees may deter some care leavers from going to university.

While the research provides us with some general messages about how to effectively support young care leavers' transitions to independent living, the existing evidence is quite limited. Further research, including large enough samples of care leavers for robust quantitative analysis, complemented by detailed qualitative research, is needed to better understand the type and nature of support care leavers receive, and how this support affects their short- and long-term outcomes.

Legislative and policy framework

The statutory framework for children in care and leaving care is set out in the Children Act 1989 as amended by the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and the Children and Young Persons Act 2008. The 2000 Act was introduced to clarify local authority duties regarding children leaving care and care leavers and tackle disparities in the range and quality of services available to them. Local authorities are under a duty to assist young people leaving care to the age of 21 or longer if they are in education or training, assess and meet the needs of young people in and leaving care, appoint a PA and prepare a pathway plan, provide financial support and maintenance in suitable accommodation, and keep in touch with the young person.

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