

7

Leaving care

Every year between 7,000 and 8,000 young people leave care at the age of 16 or over and the majority move to independent living. Despite the diversity of the leavers' past experiences, studies have consistently highlighted the range of problems associated with leaving care and the connections with difficulties experienced prior to and during the period of being looked after. Many young people value time spent in public care, but it does not always provide sufficient compensation for poor pre-care experiences and it may have created further problems.

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH LEAVING CARE

Young people are expected to leave care at a much earlier age than others in the general population. A majority will move to independent living before the age of 18 compared to fewer than one in ten of their peers. While some are attracted to the idea of independence and will push to leave, moving on is also influenced by a number of push factors, including placement breakdown, limitations in the supply of placements, problems in managing challenging behaviour and traditional expectations. An explicit aim of the Children (*Leaving Care*) Act 2000 is to delay transitions from care and, although the data should be treated with some caution, the most recent statistics point to a slight downturn in the numbers leaving before 18.

Not only do young people leave early, the main elements of transition to adulthood tend to be compressed. Learning to manage a home, gaining a career foothold and starting a family tend to overlap in the immediate period after leaving care. Many young people will also have received inconsistent preparation for adulthood, and the particular needs of certain groups – for example, young parents, black young people and young people with special needs – have not always been consistently met.

It should not therefore be surprising to find that, while some young people have positive experiences and go on to do well, others experience considerable difficulty, including a high risk of homelessness. Surveys of the young homeless have consistently highlighted the over-representation of young people with experience of care. This risk may be heightened where young people leave care early (at 16 or 17), especially where their departure is unplanned, or where they have had unstable care careers that hinder their preparation for independence. Finding appropriate accommodation for young people is a major challenge and increasing the numbers in good accommodation is a clear objective for Quality Protects (QP). However, helping young people to sustain a home and to reduce the social isolation to which they can be exposed requires consistent support.

The poor educational attainment and economic participation of looked after young people during and after care is well documented. QP provides a focus for raising attainment and participation levels, but local authority responses also suggest how far there is to go. Statistics for 2000/2001 suggest that 63% left care with no GCSEs/GNVQs and only 5% left with five or more GCSEs A-C, although this does represent progress on previous years. Data for 1999/2000 also suggests that around a half (50.4%) were

objective 5 to ensure that young people leaving care, as they enter adulthood, are not isolated and participate socially and economically as citizens

sub-objectives: 5.1 making sure that young people who were in care when they were 16 are studying, when they are 19

5.2 making sure that young people who leave care after their sixteenth birthday are still in touch with SSD, or a known or approved contact, on their 19th birthday

5.3 making sure that young people who leave care on or after their sixteenth birthday have suitable accommodation at the age of 19

engaged in education, training or employment a year after leaving. In career terms, this legacy may also have long lasting effects.

There is evidence that those who make better educational progress tend to be female. They are likely to have been looked after longer, predominantly in foster care settings and to have had relatively stable care careers and pro-active support from carers, social workers and teachers. Economic participation is important not just for its career benefits but because it can help to bring structure to young people's lives, develop friendship networks and improve self-esteem. Loss of structure may have a reciprocal impact on the ability to manage in other life areas.

Young people are unlikely to manage in adversity without a network of formal and informal support. However, research has shown a tendency for support from social workers and past carers to fall away soon after leaving care. Direct work with families, including the potential of support from extended family members, has often been given a low priority at the leaving care stage. In addition, there is evidence that where young people lack family support, they are more likely to have poor post-care outcomes and greater difficulty making and sustaining relationships with others.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIALIST SERVICES

In response to these problems, there has been a steady if piecemeal growth in leaving care services, including the development of specialist teams. Evidence from research and inspections suggests that specialist services make a helpful contribution to the co-ordination of leaving care policies and services, to leaving care planning and the provision of support to young people, and to the development of resources to assist them. Where a specialist service is being considered, it is likely to work best if it is properly integrated into the continuum of throughcare services. However, where young people have previously experienced poor planning and support, it will be difficult for a specialist service to provide adequate compensation.

There is also evidence that specialist services can help to improve outcomes for young people leaving care. They have been found to be successful in helping young people to find appropriate accommodation and in helping them to maintain their homes and to develop life skills. They have tended to be less successful in improving outcomes in the area of education and employment, at least until recently, and for those with very poor social networks and relationship skills, for whom overall outcomes tend to be poor. However, the informal and flexible approach to service delivery adopted by many schemes may help to reduce the risk of social isolation, through a mix of support and social activities, and to encourage young people to return for help when they need it.

Leaving care has been an arena for continuing innovation and change. A recent review of local authority Management Action Plans (MAPs) in the leaving care field points to significant developments in the areas of policy, inter-agency links and partnerships and in widening the range of accommodation resources, and it highlights initiatives in the fields of education, employment and health. However, it also stresses the low service base from which many local authorities are starting and points to serious regional and local disparities. It is this pattern of uneven development that the Quality Protects programme and the *Children (Leaving Care) Act* are designed to address.

THE NEW LEGISLATION AND GUIDANCE

The main QP objective for leaving care promotes social inclusion and targets three key areas against which to assess progress – housing; education, training and employment; and staying in touch with young people to provide support and monitor outcomes. Performance indicators have been devised to measure progress. Achieving these goals will also connect to other QP objectives for looked after young people, especially those concerned with attachment and stability (Objective 1), and health and educational performance (Objective 4). What happens while young people are looked after, the quality of their experiences, is closely related to what can be achieved once they leave.

The *Children (Leaving Care) Act* provides a new framework for leaving care services. Its purpose is to delay transitions, improve preparation, planning and consistency of support for young people, and to strengthen arrangements for financial assistance. At its heart are new duties to assess and meet needs, provide personal advisers and develop pathway planning for young people up to the age of 21 (or beyond if continuing in education). Pathway planning is envisaged as a multi-agency task, co-ordinated by the personal adviser, and subject to regular review. Regulations and Guidance specify the core areas that must be addressed.

The need for comprehensive assessments and pathway planning should help to bring a sharper focus at the leaving care stage. Whether or not they continue to be accommodated, every young person will have an assessment, a personal adviser and a pathway plan as soon as practicable after they reach 16. Pathway planning should identify immediate needs and look forward to a longer-term future beyond care. It will need to be continually monitored, reviewed and adjusted in the light of experience. The role of the personal adviser is pivotal in helping to construct the plan, in providing continuity of support for the young person through transition and identifying the resources and services required to meet their needs. The plan will need to address all the core areas of young people's lives – personal support, accommodation, education and training, employment, family and social relationships, life skills, financial assistance, health and contingency planning.

The role and responsibilities of local authorities in this area of work are now more clearly delineated. The remainder of this briefing will therefore draw on evidence from research, guidance and inspections to consider what may help to improve services and outcomes for young people leaving care.

POLICY FRAMEWORK

The new Act primarily addresses the need for individual planning and review. For it to be effective, local authorities need to develop a clear policy and practice framework for leaving care. They are required to produce a written statement of philosophy and practice on preparation and aftercare services, incorporating the views of young people, to link them to Children's Services Plans and to publish them in an accessible form. It would be helpful for this framework to incorporate the following elements.

- Clearly written, comprehensive and accessible leaving care policies, procedures and practice guidance; including guides for young people. These should specify the range of services available, the criteria governing entitlement and arrangements for meeting diversity of need – including the

- particular needs of young black people, young parents, and young people with learning or physical disabilities.
- A model of service delivery appropriate to the numbers and diversity of young people leaving care and to the geographical context. Most local authorities are adopting specialist schemes, although forms vary.
- Arrangements for the systematic monitoring of individual and service outcomes, consistent with the objectives of QP.
- Arrangements for consulting young people on service development and evaluation. Involving young people can help to ensure that services are relevant, realistic and accessible. The potential contribution of young people has been insufficiently tapped in the past.

PREPARATION AND PLANNING FOR LEAVING CARE

The Children Act 1989 introduced a duty to prepare looked after young people for adult life. Preparation, in its broadest sense, should begin at the point young people are first looked after and is best achieved in the context of placement stability, permitting the gradual development of skills, where there is continuity of important links and relationships, where educational progress is positively encouraged and where preparation is formally integrated into child care planning.

Guidance to the new Act identifies three broad aspects to preparation:

- enabling young people to build and maintain relationships with others (formal, informal and sexual relationships)
- enabling young people to develop their self-esteem (including knowledge of their own personal histories and that of their families, cultures and communities)
- enabling young people to acquire practical and financial skills and knowledge.

The *Looking After Children* materials provide a framework for linking work on preparation into the child care planning and review cycle, and the development of the Integrated Children's System will provide a unified framework for assessment and planning that is consistent with this approach. The new duty to assess and meet needs prior to a young person leaving care should help to ensure that a thorough assessment of needs, skills and abilities and sources of support is undertaken. Such an assessment should help practitioners to gauge whether a young person is ready to leave and what more work needs to be done, since those leaving with incomplete skills tend to fare worse.

Leaving care schemes can have an important role to play in preparation programmes by offering advice and consultancy, by developing resource packs, by providing training and through direct work with individuals or groups. At the aftercare stage, schemes have also been shown to be effective in contributing to more positive outcomes in the life skills area by providing compensatory support, especially for those who have had less stable care careers.

The introduction of pathway planning and, within this, the central role of the personal adviser is intended to improve the co-ordination and consistency of support to young people through transition. Evidence suggests that it helps for leaving care planning to:

- take place early, well before a proposed move
- involve all those with an interest in the support of a young person (including,

- where appropriate, social workers, past carers, family members and staff from partner agencies)
- involve specialist schemes at an early stage, since they can offer specialist knowledge and help to focus planning
- proceed at a young person's pace
- be holistic and explore all dimensions of young people's lives
- ensure young people are aware of future sources of support and how to access them.

ACCOMMODATION

The Guidance to the *Housing Act 1996* recognised the vulnerability of homeless care leavers. The new *Homelessness Act 2002* extends the priority needs groups to include former care leavers who are homeless between the ages of 18 and 21. QP emphasises the need to maximise the number of care leavers in suitable accommodation, although no reliable data are yet available on progress. Despite obvious concerns about the risk of homelessness, young people leaving care are a diverse group whose needs for accommodation are likely to vary widely.

Specialist leaving care services have been successful in developing accommodation resources including arrangements for young people to stay on in placements after they cease to be looked after, supported lodgings, trainer flats, supported hostels, floating support schemes, access to foyers and to independent tenancies in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors. However, shortages in the supply of accommodation, problems with the quality of homes available and with provision of specialist accommodation for those with particular support needs are enduring concerns for local authorities.

The development of accommodation resources requires considerable investment and formal partnerships with housing providers. Historically, the degree of investment made by local authorities in this area of work has varied markedly.

The pathway planning process envisages that social services and housing authorities will undertake joint assessments when planning for the accommodation needs of individual young people. Evidence suggests that, when planning accommodation, the following actions will assist positive outcomes:

- avoid moving young people who are settled, wherever possible
- assess young people's needs and help them to prepare; avoid unplanned moves
- offer choice in the type and location of accommodation, where this is practicable
- develop a clear support plan
- develop a clear financial plan
- where young people have physical, sensory or learning impairments (or other particular support needs) ensure that the proposed accommodation is suitable for their needs.

Leaving care has tended to be final. Where young people have experienced a crisis in their ability to manage, they have rarely had an option to return to more sheltered accommodation. Such crises need to be anticipated at the planning stage, and the Guidance to the new Act

reinforces the need to set out clear contingency arrangements. Pathway planning involves a journey towards greater autonomy and should allow for movement back and forth according to changing needs.

EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Improvements in the participation and performance of care leavers are a central objective for QP. The new Act also seeks to strengthen the financial and support arrangements for young people in education, training or employment.

There are few substitutes for a stable and positive educational background. The Guidance on the Education of Young People in Public Care, the development of Personal Education Plans and of the Integrated Children's System should provide valuable resources to improve educational planning and support.

The new Act requires financial assistance and social support to be available for education, training or work up to the age of 21 (or to 24 if continuing in education). Personal advisers have responsibility for securing the resources and will need to establish close links with other agencies, especially the Connexions/Careers Service.

Initiatives to promote education, training and employment opportunities for care leavers have been relatively under-developed in the past. Significant developments, especially among authorities that have invested in specialist leaving care services, include:

- multi-agency steering groups to improve access, co-ordinate support and monitor outcomes
- creation of specialist posts or secondments (including dedicated education/social work teams)
- partnerships to develop educational projects and access to apprenticeships/work experience
- mentoring schemes
- financial support and incentive schemes.

Many young people will lack confidence and skills. They will need particular help to identify their strengths and weaknesses, to prepare them for work or training and to assist them with opportunities for Lifelong Learning. The following steps may help with preparation:

- gather information about a young person's achievements and potential
- assess their skills and abilities for employment
- work creatively to increase their employability
- ensure employment initiatives are flexible
- provide adequate and continuing emotional and financial support
- raise awareness of needs of young people in the employment field.

Continuing contact and support is likely to be critical in order to offer encouragement and motivation and to make available financial assistance to those who may decide to return to education or training some time after leaving care. There is also evidence that young people may have more success in launching their careers from the relative shelter of supported or semi-independent accommodation, which suggests that the pressures of coping with a multiple set of transitions may be unrealistic for many.

HEALTH

Recent surveys of care leavers have highlighted a range of health needs, including high levels of drug and alcohol use, chronic physical health and mental health problems. Evidence of early parenthood also points to needs around sexual health. The costs involved in accessing leisure pursuits are also prohibitive to many.

Pathway plans to promote healthy living should build upon the health assessments and records required for looked after young people and take account of the Guidance in Promoting the Health of Looked After Children.

Accessible information on healthy living should be available to staff and young people and include information on leisure, sexual health, sexuality, the needs of learning and physically disabled young people and on the health, cultural and dietary needs of young people from minority ethnic communities.

It may be more helpful for health issues to be viewed from the perspective of the young person and for health to be viewed in a holistic way, linking material circumstances and social relationships to physical and mental health.

Recent reviews of local authority MAPs draw attention to the low starting point of most authorities, especially with regard to disability and mental health services, but they also note a range of initiatives that may be helpful. These include the emergence of:

- service level agreements with Primary Care Teams and CAMH services
- multi-disciplinary teams or secondments (including CAMHS staff)
- partnerships with Health Promotion to audit needs, provide training and information
- peer education initiatives to offer advice on healthy living to looked after young people
- initiatives around sexual health and teenage pregnancy.

INFORMAL AND PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT.

We know that young people tend to be mobile in the early years after care and that losing touch is associated with instability and with poorly planned and unstructured transitions. Pathway planning should therefore explore all the potential supports available and assess each young person's ability to make and sustain relationships. Such an approach may help to provide continuity and so reduce the risk of social isolation. Wherever possible, efforts should be made to maintain or create links between young people and their families. Even where relationships with parents have broken down, members of the extended family may be able to offer support.

Very few young people have had an option to continue living with foster carers after leaving care and only around one third have continued to receive support. The potential for continuing care by foster carers will require greater recognition and the provision of modest funding to promote an enlarged role for them. Further efforts to recruit and retain foster carers would help to increase the range and supply of placements and reduce the pressure to move on too soon.

Inspections and reviews have also found that authorities that have invested in specialist schemes tend to offer more comprehensive, effective and age appropriate services. Social groups and drop-ins, guidance on social and relationship skills and links with youth and leisure provision can help care leavers combat isolation and strengthen their resistance to exploitation by others. The informality of schemes is valued by young people and may therefore assist them to stay in touch or return for help when it is needed.

KEY RESOURCES

RESEARCH

Biehal N, Clayden J, Stein M and Wade J, 1995, *Moving On: Young people and leaving care schemes*, HMSO

Broad B, 1998, *Young People Leaving Care: Life after The Children Act 1989*, Jessica Kingsley

Corlyon J and McGuire C, 1997, *Young Parents in Public Care*, National Children's Bureau

Department of Health, 1996, *Focus on Teenagers*, DH

Marsh P and Peel M, 1999, *Leaving Care in Partnership*, HMSO

Stein M, 1997, *What Works in Leaving Care?*, Barnardo's

Stein M and Wade J, 2000, *Helping Care Leavers: Problems and strategic responses*, Department of Health

POLICY AND PRACTICE GUIDANCE

Department of Health, 2001, *Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000: Regulations and Guidance*, DH

Department of Health, 2000, *Quality Protects Management Action Plans: A thematic review of leaving care services*, DH

Department of Health, 2000, *Getting it Right: Good practice in leaving care resource pack*, DH

Department of Health, 1997, *'When Leaving Home is also Leaving Care': An inspection of services for young people leaving care*, Social Services Inspectorate, DH

Department of Health, 1991, *The Children Act 1989 Regulations and Guidance, Volume 4, Residential Care*, HMSO

First Key, 1996, *Standards in Leaving Care*, First Key

Researched and written by Jim Wade, Senior Research Fellow at the Social Work Research and Development Unit, University of York. Jim is grateful to Nina Biehal, his colleague Senior Research Fellow, and to Martin Hazlehurst, Assistant Director at First Key, for their comments on earlier drafts.

This Briefing has been independently and anonymously reviewed by an academic and a practitioner with special interest in services for those leaving public care.

For a fully referenced version of this Briefing visit the **research in practice** website:

www.rip.org.uk/mainmenu.html?publications/qpb/index.html

