

Quality Protects Research Briefing No 7

Leaving Care

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Quality Protects Objective:

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 For young people who were looked after at the age of 16 to maximise the number engaged in education, training or employment at the age of 19.

5.2 To maximise the number of young people leaving care after their sixteenth birthday who are still in touch with SSD, or a known or approved contact, on their 19th birthday.

5.3 To maximise the number of young people leaving care on or after their sixteenth birthday who have suitable accommodation at the age of 19.

Introduction

Every year approximately 7,000 to 8,000 young people leave care at the age of 16 or over and the majority of these young people move to independent living. Despite the diversity of their past experiences, studies have consistently highlighted the range of problems associated with leaving care and made connections between these and the difficulties experienced by young people prior to and during the time they have been looked after. Although many young people have valued time spent in public care, it has not always provided sufficient compensation for poor pre-care experiences and may have created further problems

Problems associated with leaving care

Young people are expected to leave care at a much earlier age than other young people in the general population (2) (20). A majority will move to independent living before the age of 18 compared to fewer than one in ten of their peers (25). While some young people are attracted to the idea of independence and 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 about the right time to leave (3). An explicit aim of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 is to delay transitions from

care and, although we should be cautious about the accuracy of such data, the most recent statistics point to a slight downturn in the numbers leaving before 18 (15).

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 (3) (10) (20). Many young people have also received inconsistent preparation for adulthood, leaving them ill-equipped to face this journey, and the particular needs of some groups of young people - young parents, black young people and young people with special needs - have not always been consistently met (17) (35) (40).

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 (27) (31) (38). This risk may be heightened where young people leave care early (at 16 or 17), especially where their departure is unplanned, or where young people have had unstable care careers that affect negatively their preparation for independence (5). 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 reduce the social isolation to which they can be exposed requires consistent support (3).

The poor educational attainment and economic participation of looked after young people during and after care is well documented (1) (3) (7) (20) (23) (24). 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 5 or more GCSEs A-C (15), although this does represent progress on previous years. Data for 1999/2000 also suggests that just around one half (50.4%) were engaged in education, training or employment one year after leaving (28). In career terms, this legacy may also have long lasting effects (8).

There is evidence that those who make better educational progress tend to be female, to have been looked after longer, pre-dominantly in foster settings, to have had relatively stable care careers and pro-active support from carers, social workers and teachers (3) (28). 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 young people's ability to manage in other life areas (3).

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 (2) (19) (20). 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 (3) (26). In addition, there is evidence that where young people lack positive family support, they are more likely to have poor post-care outcomes and greater difficulty making and sustaining relationships with others (3).

The development of specialist services

In response to these problems, there has been a steady piecemeal growth in leaving care services, including the development of specialist teams (6) (7) (37). 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 (3) (7) (12). Where a specialist service is being considered, it is likely to work best if it is properly integrated into the continuum of throughcare services for young people (3) (18). However, where young people have experienced poor planning and support while they are looked after, 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 (3). Specialist schemes have been found to be successful in helping young people find appropriate accommodation, providing support to help them maintain their homes and to develop their life skills. They have tended to be less successful in improving outcomes for young people in the area of education and employment, at least until recently, and for young people 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 encourage young people to return for help when they need it (3) (33) (36).

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 that have taken place in the areas of policy, inter-agency links and partnerships, widening the range of accommodation resources and highlights initiatives in the fields of education, employment and health (13). However, consistent with earlier findings, it also stresses the low service base from which many local authorities are starting and points to serious regional and local inequities in the services that are provided (3) (7) (12). 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 in these areas. 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 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 (14).

The need for comprehensive assessments and pathway planning should help to bring a sharper focus at the leaving care stage. Whether or not young people continue to be accommodated, every young person will have an assessment, an allocated 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, providing continuity of support for the young person through transition and in identifying the resources and services that are required to meet their needs. The pathway plan will need to address all the core areas of young people's lives - for personal support, accommodation, education and training, employment, family and social relationships, life skills, financial assistance, health and contingency planning (14).

The role and responsibilities of local authorities in this area of work are now more clearly prescribed and 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 this to be effective, local authorities need to develop a clear policy and practice framework for leaving care (11) (12) (18). Local authorities 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 (14). It would be helpful for this framework to incorporate the following elements (36):

- Clearly written, comprehensive and accessible leaving care policies, procedures and practice guidance; including guides for young people. These should specify the full 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 in which they are situated. Most local authorities are adopting specialist schemes, although the forms these take 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 (12).

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 over time, 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 (3) (9) (36).

Guidance to the new Act identifies three broad aspects to preparation (14):

- 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 currently 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 (41) will provide a new 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 young people's needs, skills and abilities and sources of support is undertaken at this stage. 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 (36).

Leaving care schemes can have an important role to play in preparation programmes for looked after young people by offering advice and consultancy, developing resource packs, providing training and through direct work with young people individually or in 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 (3).

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 (36):

- 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 in this area. 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 a range of accommodation options for young people and flexible support packages to assist them in their homes (3) (7) (33) (37). These options include 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 young people with particular support needs are enduring concerns for local authorities (7) (13).

The development of accommodation resources requires considerable investment and formal partnerships with housing providers. Some local authorities have developed multi-agency housing forums to audit needs, develop resources and facilitate young people's access to appropriate accommodation (13) (36). 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 (14). Evidence suggests that, when planning accommodation, the following actions will assist positive outcomes (14) (21) (22):

- 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 (3). Such crises need to be envisaged 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 along this continuum according to the changing needs of young people.

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.

Careers planning for care leavers should build upon the foundation of educational progress while young people are looked after. There are few substitutes for a stable and positive educational background. The Guidance on the Education of Young People in Public Care (42), the development of Personal Education Plans and of the Integrated Children's System should provide valuable resources to improve educational planning and support for looked after young people.

These should provide the starting point for pathway plans. 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 to meet young people's needs 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 (3) (12). Although progress is still patchy, there have been some significant developments in this area, especially amongst authorities that have invested in specialist leaving care services. These initiatives include (13):

- 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, prepare them for work or training and to assist them with opportunities for Lifelong Learning.

Evidence from practice suggests the following steps may help with preparation (30):

- 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 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 young people (3).

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 (29) (32). Evidence of early parenthood also points to needs around sexual health. The costs involved in accessing leisure pursuits are also prohibitive to many young people (12) (32).

Pathway plans to promote healthy living should build upon the health assessments and records required for looked after young people (12) 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 (36).

Partnerships with health professionals are likely to facilitate the development and delivery of services of this kind. Young people's access to specialist health services may be helped through imaginative strategies to overcome existing barriers (referral timescales and waiting lists) and attempts to make these services more engaging (16).

There is evidence that 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 a young person's material circumstances and social relationships to their physical and mental health (29).

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 also note a range of initiatives that may be helpful (13) (28). 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

Staying in touch with young people who leave care is a significant challenge for local authorities. We know that young people tend to be mobile in the early years after care and that losing touch is associated with instability in young people's lives and with poorly planned and unstructured transitions (3).

Personal advisers have responsibility for maximising and co-ordinating networks of support to assist young people through transition. Pathway planning should explore all the potential supports available to young people - from family, friends, past carers, social workers, specialist schemes and other professionals - and assess their ability to make and sustain relationships (14). Such an approach may help to provide continuity for young people, assist staying in touch and reduce the risk of social isolation.

Wherever possible, efforts to maintain or create links between young people and their families is likely to be helpful. Even if relationships with parents have broken down, members of the extended family may be able to offer support (26).

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 after moving on. The potential for continuing care by foster carers, including the possibility of staying on, will require greater recognition and the provision of modest funding to promote an enlarged role for them in the leaving care process (19) (39). Further efforts to recruit and retain foster carers would help to increase the range and supply of placements and reduce the pressure for young people to move on at an early age.

Inspections and reviews have also found that authorities that have invested in specialist schemes tend to have more comprehensive, effective and age appropriate

services for care leavers (12) (13). Specialist schemes can help young people to form new links and relationships. Provision of 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 (3). 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**

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- **policy and practice guidance**

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