



CARE LEAVERS POLICY: TRANSITION FROM CHILDREN SERVICES TO ADULT SERVICES: TRANSITION FROM CHILDREN SERVICES TO ADULT SERVICES

National Youth Advocacy Service

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Introduction

Young care leavers often face difficult life challenges compared to other young people in the general population, faced with becoming independent at an earlier age than most, many face the risk of homelessness, poor mental health, becoming involved in crime, leaving education early and becoming parents themselves. There is increasing pressure on services to provide support for care leavers as the number of young people leaving care is growing. Local government association report (2017) highlights that councils are facing a £2 billion funding gap for children's services by 2020, and were forced to overspend on their budgets by £605 million across England in 2015/16. This shows the extent to which the system is struggling to support young care leavers, loss of support through cuts in services leaves care leavers as one of the most neglected groups in society. The National Youth Advocacy Service is a socio-legal charity which provides advocacy to children, young people and vulnerable adults. They have recognised the lack of support care leavers receive from local authorities and want to understand how services can be improved to help meet the needs of care leavers. HM government report (2013, p.4) highlighted that services are failing to help assist young care leavers with a successful transition to adulthood "care leavers come into contact with a range of services... yet they are often not recognised as a priority group for services... They need services which are integrated, easy to access, embedded within local communities, and which treat them with respect".

The aim of this project is to gain a deeper insight into what local authority provision for young people leaving care consists of to identify how to ease transition into adult life through improving the outcomes of young care leavers in access to employment, education, housing and health services. The main aspects of the project can be summarised into the following: an in-depth analysis of the role of the government as 'the corporate parent' what this actually means for how much support or lack of support young people receive, a community profile of Merseyside looking at what services are available to young people in this authority and how austerity has impacted on the local authorities support for young people in the North-West region and examining what role the voluntary sector in the UK has in providing support to care leavers. This project will reveal what is required to improve the life chances of young care leavers and those transitioning to adult services and will encourage thinking around how to assist young people in their integration into communities.

Corporate Parent Principles

The role local councils play as the ‘corporate parent’ for care leavers is incredibly important in enabling young people to have positive outcomes in their life. The Department of Education (2018, p.6) statutory guidance report for local authority’s states that ‘the critical question that local authorities should ask in adopting such an approach is: ‘would this be good enough for my child?’. This means that effective corporate parenting involves giving looked-after children and care leavers safety, emotional support and building confidence in themselves to be resilient against setbacks. The Children and Social Work Act (2017) is the most recent legislation setting out the corporate parenting principles that local authorities are supposed to adhere to, the following principles highlights how local authorities should function to support young care leavers, “to prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living” and “to help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners”. The act refers to services relating to: health and wellbeing, relationships, education and training, employment, accommodation and participation in society. There are also new legislative duties for local councils which have made amendments to the Children Act 1989, support for care leavers is extended, the local authority must provide care leavers with a personal adviser until the age of 25, a ‘local offer’ which involves authorities informing care leavers about the services available to them in their communities and assessment of care leavers needs with preparation of a pathway plan for young people to set out their goals for the future (Children and Social Work Act 2017). For young people who stay in the care system and transition to adult services, the Care Act (2014, p50-51) provides legislation which states that a “child’s needs assessment” has to be conducted which assesses what needs the child has for support in day to day life, what the child wants to achieve and how local authorities can contribute to the care and support needed by the child after 18. Following this assessment, the local authority must give the child information about what support is available after they turn 18 and what will be put in place to make sure care and support is provided successfully in the future for the child.

Despite the government outlining the corporate parenting principles that councils must follow and implementing legislation changes for care leavers and those transitioning to adult services, the reality is that there is a gap between policy and practise of local authority duties to young people in its care. The government has not provided the necessary financial support to deliver on its principles which makes it harder for local authorities to provide the services for many vulnerable young care leavers to be prepared for independent living and young people who need ongoing care. The inconsistency of support given by local authorities has a lasting impact on the outcomes of young care leavers compared to other young people. There is increased pressure and insecurity for care leavers to deal with complex issues that would be difficult for those with a family network to resolve.

Housing insecurity

A key challenge that young care leavers and those transitioning to adult services face is housing insecurity. The Department for Education report (2015, p.58-59) states that local authorities must provide both young care leavers and those who make the transition to adult services with suitable accommodation planned with a personal adviser chosen by the council, local authorities “should commission a range of semi-independent and independent living

options with appropriate support, for example supported accommodation schemes, foyers, supported lodgings and access to independent tenancies in the social and private rented sectors with flexible support". Housing is an essential aspect of young care leavers move to adulthood, it is important for young care leavers to have a home where they feel secure and comfortable just like everyone else. Wade and Dixon's study (2006, p.203) highlights the importance of housing stability for young care leavers, "housing emerged as a critical area for leaving care services, one in which positive post-care interventions could (and should) make a substantial difference to young people's early housing careers and to their over-all sense of well-being". There is positive research which demonstrates how leaving care services can be effective in providing good housing for care leavers. Stein and Morris's research (2009, p.26) argues that "the success of this process is underpinned by good relationships between the care leaver and the leaving care team and good communication between leaving care teams and housing providers". Therefore, this shows that for local councils to be successful in delivering effective assistance to young care leavers there needs to be good communication with care leavers and organisations responsible for independent living plans.

Nevertheless, there needs to be improvements made in access to housing for young care leavers and those transitioning to adult services to ensure good corporate parenting. There are issues with young care leavers not feeling as though they have a choice in where they live, a report by Barnardo's (2014, p.8-9) found that "many believed that they were just given the first available property, rather than one that suited their needs...Decisions made about accommodation seemed to be made without consulting care leavers and often with little warning". This shows that some young care leavers are experiencing limited involvement in making decisions about accessing and using housing services. A report by Gill and Daw (2017, p.25) demonstrates the impact lack of support from professionals has across local communities, "too many care leavers are being forced to live in unsuitable conditions, sofa surf or sleep rough. Problems with the housing market, shortfalls of housing stock and young people's practical and emotional readiness to live independently all impact on care leavers future outcomes". This research conveys that local authorities are struggling to provide care leavers with suitable housing an important step to independence which can influence outcomes for young people. Local authorities are failing to provide young people with appropriate housing through a lack of social housing. ONS housing statistical release (2018) highlights the decline in affordable housing, local authorities in England owned only 1.60 million dwellings in 2017 and there were 1.16 million households on local authority waiting lists in 2017. This has meant that young people in the care system are not the priority of housing services and the common options left to councils are to place care leavers and those transitioning to adult services in either temporary housing which is often unsafe or the private rented sector which is unsustainable as rents are too high for a young person to manage. Drive forward foundation report (2017, p1-2) highlights that "in recent years, many local authorities chose to place care leavers in 'affordable' accommodation instead of social rent flats... Traditionally, social housing providers such as Housing Associations have provided care leavers with the necessary support and attention needed to foster their development. Private landlords have no obligation to provide any additional physical or mental support to general needs tenants". This shows that the government needs to create more supported housing accommodation options for care leavers who are vulnerable and require extra support for independent living to avoid negative outcomes.

A further impact lack of suitable housing can have on young care leavers is an increased risk of homelessness. A National Audit Office report (2015, p.6) shows how young care leavers

are more likely than other young people to face housing inequality, in 2010 25% of those who were homeless had been in care at some point in their lives.

The Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities (2018, p.58) states that the Housing Act 1996 requires any person under 21 who is a care leaver who may be homeless eligible for assessment for accommodation. This legislation is supposed to protect young care leavers; however, it needs to be considered that some young people could be deemed as 'intentionally homeless' stigmatising a young person who is struggling to cope with independence. This shows that housing support for care leavers and those transitioning to adult services needs to go further than what is currently being provided in local authorities. There needs to be a better relationship between housing and social services to understand what the needs of young care leavers and those are transitioning to adult services. Simon's research (2008, p.95) shows that "voluntary organisations played an important role in brokering access to housing services for care leavers who had lost contact with their leaving care service. Many such young people received help from personal advisers or key workers in these types of organisations with filing in forms for applications to housing projects on behalf of young people". Therefore, NYAS services can play a vital role in contributing to young care leavers access to housing by providing an advocate to speak with housing providers if a care leaver has difficulties with leaving care professionals.

Finances and Engagement

Another issue young care leavers and those who require ongoing care often face is difficulty in managing finances and paying bills which can lead to debt and financial hardship. Ayre et al (2016, p.8-9) found the quality of support care leavers received about finances insufficient, they found 46.8% of local authorities do not commission financial support for care leavers beyond personal advisers and this has a significant affect as they highlight that care leavers are three times as likely to have had a benefit sanction applied than the general population.

This shows that care leavers are experiencing poorer outcomes through lack of knowledge on how to manage finances in day to day life. Centre for Social Justice (2014, p.5) survey based on 100 care leavers found that 57% said managing money and avoiding debt was difficult when leaving care. This lack of preparation is affected by young care leavers experiences with personal advisers who have large caseloads which limits how much support is given to each individual's needs. A report by Social Finance (2018, p.5) demonstrates how personal advisers are struggling to support young care leavers, "personal advisers spend a large amount of their time supporting young people in crisis (30%) and are required to spend around a quarter of their time on administrative work. Personal advisers described their frustrations; the administrative processes that they must undertake take their time away from being with young people". This report was based on three local authorities in the UK (Leeds City Council, the London Borough of Havering and Southampton City Council). It is clear that personal advisers are overstretched through administrative duties and there needs to be more time spent preventing young people reaching crisis point through building skills and resilience against potential obstacles. Local authorities can make improvements in supporting care leavers move to independence by working with charities in the community like NYAS, who offer independent visitors who work outside the care system to develop friendships with young people. This would be useful to young care leavers as would offer an

alternative mentor to advise and offer a direct line of support which personal advisers are struggling to provide currently.

Moreover, lack of direct engagement with personal advisers and services in local communities can have a significant effect on young care leavers and those who require ongoing care access to education and employment opportunities. The Department for Education (2018, p17) findings present how care leavers have poor educational outcomes compared with other groups in society, only 6% of 19-21-yearold care leavers were known to be in higher education and 39% were known to be not in education, employment or training compared with 12% of all young people aged 19-21 years. These findings illustrate the uncertain futures young people who have been in the care system face in contrast to other young people the same age. There are gaps between expectations and reality for young care leavers and looked after children in their transition to adulthood. There are issues with pathway planning, Coram Voice (2017, p.27-28) found that young people felt their voices were not heard in the planning process by care professionals and there was a lack of connection to the whole process. This highlights how local councils need to improve on transition plans for both care leavers and looked after children, young people's voices are not being heard and to achieve progress they need to be at the forefront of every decision. Ferguson's review (2018, p.87) emphasises the importance of care leavers been involved in decision making to build a positive identity and professionals need to be persistent in offering support to young people after they left care to ensure positive outcomes are enabled. Therefore, it needs to be considered that NYAS work as an advocacy service could be very useful for young care leavers and looked-after children to overcome the limitations of pathway planning as NYAS will listen to the aspirations of young people and offer independent advice on how they can go about reaching their potential.

However, there have been some recent progress by the government to tackle the missing opportunities young care leavers are facing. Apprenticeship funding in England report (2018, p.13) highlights that the government will pay a £1,000 bursary to care leavers who undertake an apprenticeship during their first year in training. This a positive step for young care leavers employment opportunities, there will be less anxiety attached to committing to an apprenticeship as extra financial support will provide an incentive for young people to feel it is worthwhile for both the short and long term. There has also been the launch of the Care Leaver Covenant (2018) which has more than 50 businesses and charities and every government department involved to support young care leavers gain work experience, internships and widen employment prospects. This shows that government strategy is recognising that young care leavers need more opportunities to access suitable work experience placements that will develop skills necessary to be successful in the labour market. These changes are positive for young people, but the current provisions are not enough for the complex needs of care leavers and those transiting to adult services. An Ofsted report (2012, p24) presents young people's views on being a care leaver and found that many were disappointed with the help they received to prepare to leave care, 49% thought they had been prepared badly or very badly and just 24% thought they had been prepared well or very well for independent life. This shows that government policy is not working adequately enough to integrate care leavers into local authorities.

An example: Merseyside

Furthermore, it is important to look at Merseyside as a local authority to have a deeper insight into how corporate parenting principles are applied and what services are available to care leavers and those transitioning to adult services. Young people's life chances after care are being significantly affected by which part of the country they are from. Mayall et al (2015, p.152) supports this view suggesting that the "key issue of support for care leavers is subject to a 'postcode lottery', with local authorities varying widely in their implementation of the children (Leaving care) Act 2000". A report by Ofsted (2017) highlights the varying effectiveness of local authorities' services, the West Midlands and the North West had the highest proportion of their children in need in inadequate authorities rated 39%. This shows how local authorities in the North West are struggling as corporate parents to provide support to care leavers and those who require adult services. Liverpool is a local authority which shows how councils are struggling to cope with increased demand in children and adult social care services, the effect of austerity can be seen in the amount of funding being cut in the city. The council faces budget cuts of £90 million over the next three years and since 2010, £420 million has been cut in central government which means there has been a 68% reduction in funding (Liverpool city council, 2018). It is evident that austerity measures have had an impact on the outcomes of Liverpool's young care leavers. ONS looked-after children statistical release (2018) found that 53% of 19-21 year old care leavers in Liverpool were not in education, employment or training and 12% were judged to be in unsuitable housing. Liverpool is an example of how lack of government funding directly impacts on the quality of support given to young care leavers to progress further in life. Malin et al (2018, p.101) highlights that cuts in funding have embodied 'de-professionalisation' as there has been a reduction in the number, type and range of 'professional' staff employed". This highlights how the government is putting young care leavers futures at risk by not providing appropriately trained staff to deal with complex issues. There is too much narrative about what guidelines local authorities should be following instead of guidance on how to efficiently provide services that have been cut by the government.

Nonetheless, it is important to look at how Merseyside authorities are trying to combat the negative outcomes of young care leavers and those transferring to adult services. Robey, Aylward and Pickles (2017,p.14) research has identified factors that highlight how collaborative local approaches involving local authorities, employers and education providers can be successful to support care leavers: clear objectives and responsibilities of members (the purpose of the collaboration is understood by all members to maximum benefits for care leavers, formal membership arrangements (financial support is given by members to encourage commitment to the cause) and involvement of a range of organisations (multi-agency approach involving leaving care teams, housing providers and employment agencies to tackle the issues facing young care leavers). An example of a network that has provided care and support to young care leavers in Merseyside is the Greater Merseyside Care Leavers Network (Nnecl.org,2019), the main aim of the group is to provide a more co-ordinated approach to support young care leavers in access to further education. This network involves all six local authorities in the region, higher education institutions such Liverpool John Moors and employment services. This is an example of how good practice for care leavers needs to incorporate the involvement of different organisations in the community, such as NYAS, to care for and support young people on their journey to independence.

Voluntary organisations

Consequently, the work of voluntary organisations is crucial in supporting young care leavers and those who require ongoing care throughout the UK. There are numerous organisations

dedicated to helping young care leavers that work to bridge the gap left by the lack of government intervention to tackle the inequality faced by young people who are care experienced. There are two particular charities that provide important services that focus on empowering care leavers through support in emotional wellbeing and providing employment opportunities: the Rees Foundation and Catch22. Young care leavers can face difficulty in building relationships with leaving care team professionals. Gibb and Edward's Study (2017, p.53) highlighted that a "recurring theme among interviewees in this study was the difficulty-and perceived futility-of building relationships with allocated social workers or personal advisers when these changed frequently or were inaccessible when needed". The Rees Foundation (2019) was set up in 2013 the organisation works with care experienced individuals to ensure that young care leavers have support in their transition to independent living. There is an emphasis on building a network of people with experience in the care system to provide advice, work on a range of projects and to effect social change within communities to improve the experiences of other care leavers. The service has a peer buddy scheme which involves care experienced individuals working with young care leavers to reduce isolation when living alone for the first time. This form of mentoring appears to prove useful for care leavers to build a rapport with someone who has experience of going through the care system to share thoughts and feelings with.

Catch 22 (2019) describes itself as a 'social business', a not for profit business with a social mission. It tailors its support for care leavers through its statutory care services across its wider provision. It provides the following services for care leavers: alternative education provision, skills development programmes, housing support and a peer-landlord scheme etc. It also runs the National Leaving Care Benchmarking forum, this brings together over 80 authority leaving care services to support each other to develop more efficient and cost-effective services through developing and sharing best practise. This is a unique service that demonstrates the importance of local authorities working together with charities to ensure the best outcomes for care leavers, multi-organisations should be involved with each other when creating pathways for young people when leaving care.

Conclusion

It seems reasonable to conclude that this report has shown that local authorities are struggling to cope with providing services that offer individually centred care and support to young care leavers and those transitioning to adult services. Professionals in care leaving teams do their best to provide better outcomes for young people by following corporate parenting principles but are undermined by government funding cuts. The challenges young people face after care require a multi-agency approach, there is currently lack of communication between local authorities and services which is making the transition to independence harder for care leavers. It is clear that voluntary organisations play an important role in offering both practical and emotional support to young care leavers and those who require ongoing care. The report has highlighted that NYAS services can bridge the gap in lack of trust in professionals by providing advocacy that is independent from care services whilst ensuring that young care leavers understand what services are available to them.

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