Care Leavers and Homelessness in England: Protective Factors Offered by Right2BCared4 and Staying Put 18+ Initiatives.

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This paper will explore the relationship between leaving care and homelessness in England and set the context for two initiatives currently being piloted; Right2BCared4 and Staying Put 18+ Family Placement Programme. The protective factors that underpin both pilots will be outlined. In addition, a vulnerable group of care leavers will be identified that may fall outside of these initiatives and may be at risk of the poorest outcomes in terms of homelessness and accompanying challenges.

In England in 2007-8, 8,700 young people aged 16 years or over left local authority care (http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000878/index.shtml). Looked after children, in England are entitled to stay in care until they reach legal adulthood (i.e. 18 years old) and up to 21 if they are in full-time education. Local authorities have a duty to provide support and financial assistance to care leavers and in recent years there have been changes in legislation, policy and practice aimed at improving their outcomes. The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 extended the duties of local authorities to delay transitions from care to independence; improve support and planning for young people around leaving care; strengthen arrangements for financial assistance; assess and meet needs; provide personal advisers and develop pathway planning for young people up to the age of 21 (and old if continuing in education). Although new legislative frameworks have strengthened leaving care policy and practice, evidence suggests that there are still variations in support available to care leavers (Dixon et al., 2006; Morgan and Lindsay, 2006).

Looked after children continue to leave care and move to independence at a much younger age than their peers in the general population who often remain at home until their early to mid twenties (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007) with many returning to the family home on several occasions, after they have left, until they have the resources and confidence to live independently (Ford et al., 2002). Care leavers require additional support because they do not have a ‘responsible’ parent (Wade and Munro, 2008) that they can rely on for support whilst they make the difficult transition to adulthood or the guarantee of
returning to care if they experience difficulties. In addition, care leavers often have limited accommodation options and many still leave care when they do not feel fully prepared (Phillips, 2010). Care leavers not fully equipped with the skills needed to live independently may struggle to sustain their accommodation risking eviction (Centrepoint, 2006). This may lead to them being classified as ‘intentionally homeless’ and consequently their local authority has no further duty towards them. Many care leavers report feeling isolated and lonely, and overwhelmed by the responsibility of managing a home and looking after themselves (Simon, 2008). Furthermore, they are often susceptible to accelerated and compressed transitions to adulthood as they are expected to set up home whilst also studying for educational qualifications or attempting to start a career (Stein, 2004). Faced with these difficulties it is to be expected that care leavers comprise a significant proportion of the young homeless population (Broad, 2005; Quilgars et al, 2008). A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, revealed that over a third of care leavers had experienced periods of homelessness, ranging from a couple of weeks to over a year (2005) and the 2009-10 report by Broadway Homeless and Support showed that 10% of rough sleepers in London had spent time in care (2010). Becoming homeless was identified in the top ten fears of young care leavers (Morgan and Lindsay, 2006).

Wade and Dixon’s study (2006) which looked at the housing and career outcomes of 106 young people leaving care in England found that previous negative care experiences and even periods of homelessness since leaving care were not necessarily associated with a poorer longer-term outcome. Instead, the findings pointed to the reciprocal and interwoven relationships between different areas of young people’s lives and how timely interventions could have great impact. In particular, good housing outcomes were strongly associated with mental well-being. Indeed, where young people were housed in suitable accommodation, experiencing few difficulties and were engaged in education, employment or training, their perception of mental well-being was good. It is in the provision of reciprocal and interwoven packages of support then that the risk of later homelessness can be reduced (Wade and Dixon, 2006).

In England, the needs assessment and pathway planning process brings together housing and leaving care services and better outcomes are assisted by planning a package of support to meet the individual needs of young people; allowing young people to remain with foster carers where they are settled; effective preparation for independent living; assessment of accommodation needs; offering choice in type and location of accommodation; enabling young people to have more say in planning and decision-making; and having a clear financial plan (Stein, 2004).
Care Matters: Time for Change (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007) proposed a package of measures designed to improve the transition process and highlighted the importance of involving young people in decisions about their care and move to independence including, improving placement stability, preparing young people sufficiently for adulthood and ensuring that care leavers live in suitable accommodation. Within these measures two pilot initiatives were outlined; Right2BCared4 and the Staying Put 18+ Family Placement programme.

Outcomes for care leavers are known to be influenced by their experience of being in care and the nature and quality of the support they receive during their transition from care to adulthood (Stein, 2008). Gradual transitions that are planned and properly managed, and involve sufficient preparation for independent living are recognised as protective factors in outcomes for care leavers (Morgan and Lindsay, 2006; Wade and Dixon, 2006).

Right2BCared4 is based on the principles that young people should not be expected to leave care until they reach the age of 18, should have a greater say in the decision making process preceding their exit from care and should be fully prepared for independent living. Under this pilot, significant changes to a young person’s care plan, such as a move to independence, is only permissible after a review. The review consists of a meeting centred around the young person and including people involved in their care such as their carers, birth family, social worker, leaving care personal advisor and other relevant professionals. The review must include an up-to-date assessment of the young person’s needs so that there is clear evidence to support the proposed change. The young person’s active participation is prioritised and there is an expectation that the assessment must take into account their wishes. A range of interventions have been implemented by local authorities to meet the objectives of Right2BCared4 and include introducing or expanding existing advocacy services so that young people are supported to express their wishes and feelings, the establishment of training flats where young people can stay temporarily and experience what it is like to live independently and residential accommodation for young people aged 16 years and over (Munro et al., forthcoming).

Staying Put enables young people, with an established familial relationship with foster carers, to remain with them up to the age of 21 and be supported to make the transition to adulthood in a more gradual way just like other young people in the general population. There is an expectation that within this continuing and supportive relationship young people will engage with and achieve in education, employment and training. This can be interpreted in two ways; as a pre-condition of entitlement to participate in an extended placement, or as an expectation framed as part of the extended placement package enabling disengaged
young people to make a fresh start. How this condition is implemented has ramifications for which young people can access the scheme.

In Staying Put emphasis is placed on relationships and attachments rather than interventions and services. Stability of placement and enduring attachment relationships together with the prioritising of education and training within care planning are known to be protective factors in outcomes for care leavers (Wade and Munro, 2008) including the transition to safe and settled accommodation. A similar scheme introduced in 2006 in Northern Ireland (Former Foster Care Scheme now known as GEM, Going the Extra Mile) found that young people valued continuing as part of a 'normal' family and feeling loved and emotionally supported. They saw the delaying of moving on as a protective barrier against potential isolation, financial worries and coping alone with independent living (McCrea, 2008).

However, there is still a significant proportion of the care leaving population who at present is generally not eligible under the criteria for inclusion in extended foster care placements. Notably, young people who have not enjoyed stable and enduring placements pre-18; those in residential or specialist settings; those with very challenging behaviours and those who are not engaged in education, employment or training where this is a condition of entitlement. A vicious circle can occur whereby these young people are alienated from efforts to provide effective support (Ward et al, 2008). Strict eligibility criteria mean that the availability of extended care may vary inversely with the needs of the leaving care population and those that need the most receive the least (the Inverse Care Law: Hart, 1971).

The introduction of national indicators under a public service agreement (PSA16) has helped raise the profile of outcomes for care leavers (NCAS, 2009). In 2009 local authorities in England reported an increase in the numbers of care leavers aged 19 who were in suitable accommodation to 89.6% (http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000878/index.shtml). However, as this paper shows adequate housing is only part of the solution. Both Right2BCared4 and Staying Put 18+ seek to provide a more holistic package of support that better reflects the complexities of the relationship between leaving care and poor outcomes. Safe and settled accommodation is inextricably linked with supportive relationships, choice, control in decision-making, needs-led (not age-led) transitions, active engagement in education, employment or training and mental well-being. However, regional disparities in providing such resources and services for a heterogeneous care leaving population still need to be addressed (Wade and Munro, 2008).
References


