



Care leavers' views on their transition to adulthood:

A RAPID REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE

RESEARCH REVIEW SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

We believe young people with direct experience of leaving care are best placed to evaluate and comment on the care system and how it has worked for them. This rapid review sought to place their voices at the forefront of our development work on well-being and care leavers.

We conducted a rapid review of around 80 UK studies that explored care leavers' own accounts of their experiences and feelings. This is a summary of the key themes and issues that emerged from the review. The quotes used in this review are from the young people interviewed or consulted in the various studies.

This rapid review has informed a new online survey co-produced with care leavers. It complements the Bright Spots' 'Your Life, Your Care' surveys capturing the well-being of children in care, based on what children said was important to them. The survey will be available to new and existing Bright Spots partner local authorities in early 2018, alongside the surveys for children in care.

KEY FINDINGS

CARE LEAVERS' EXPERIENCE OF LEAVING CARE

Young people said that services usually focused on helping them develop practical skills, but felt too little attention was given to preparing them emotionally for leaving care.

I know how to live independent like surviving; I don't know how to live independent as in like being happy and living. (1)

A significant group of care leavers felt they had not received enough preparation support and that they were not ready to take on the challenges of adult life when they left care.

It's not normal for kids to shop/pay bills and live alone at 18. (2)

Young people's sense of control over the timing and decision to leave care varied – for some taking the next steps in life was positive, for others independence came too soon.

The support only came into play once I had left care - it needs to start sooner. (3)

LIFE AFTER CARE

Independence did not always live up to young people's hopes and plans.

I had this glamorised thought of living on my own and having all my friends around and life being a big party but it wasn't [like] that. (4)

Independence also brought uncertainty about the future.

Leaving care was a worry, not understanding fully how it would be, worrying about when you would leave and where you would live. (5)

For many, the best thing about leaving care was gaining independence; being able to make their own decisions, get a job and their own home. In contrast, the worst thing was often the responsibility of managing on their own and struggling on a low income.

I think I do quite well and everybody's quite proud of me ... just being really mature and sensible. I get a wage... and I don't blow it. I'm saving up for a car and learning to drive ... I am better at cleaning and tidying ... I think probably the worst things is just having to make sure I do everything right, I'm very aware of it all the time; not wanting to make any mistakes. (6)

Young people often struggled to manage their money and some wanted more help with this.

Finances is really hard. I'm on the dole. You don't get much money on the dole... I tried to save up every week for oil for the end of the month. I can't save... once you get your shopping... his nappies and milk and food, you're skint... the social workers helped me get oil last month because I couldn't afford it at all. (7)

RELATIONSHIPS

Many care leavers agreed that having people who cared about them helped make their move on from care more successful. Without emotional support their past experiences sometimes continued to affect their lives.

... things I thought I had forgotten about but when you're on your own every day watching TV, things you thought you got over come back to you, that's when emotional support needs to come in. (8)

Young people described difficulties in accepting help and relying on people.

I didn't want to say I needed help with budgeting because a lot of the stuff they said about me was negative so then they'd say: 'she can't manage living on her own' 'cos then it's easier that way and they think 'B is doing well', it's easier. (9)

Many young people felt very lonely and socially isolated since leaving care. Some reported that this affected their emotional well-being and triggered mental ill-health.

I live very far from my friends, I feel very isolated and lonely. I don't like living by myself. (10)

Coping with transitions was easier for care leavers who had a key person to rely on and go to for help. Some care leavers had lost contact with important people, such as former carers, support workers or friends.

I think the thing most folk need is trust. If you can see that somebody trusts you it makes you feel happier, it makes you feel as though you want to get it right in your life. It makes you want to get your life sorted out and basically get on with it. (11)

Not getting the support they needed from workers was a key issue for some care leavers.

[My] second PA would only meet when she needed to and wouldn't be available at any other time... she would only talk about what she needed to get done in paperwork ... she wouldn't make herself available. (12)

Some care leavers struggled to trust others, because past relationships had been disrupted or they had been let down in the past, but trusting relationships had a positive impact.

The personal adviser I have now is the best, she understands me, she listens to me. I like having someone that I can tell stuff to, I am pleased that I can tell her everything I am doing, I can trust her. (13)

Young people valued ongoing support from previous foster and residential carers, including through 'Staying Put' and 'Staying Close' arrangements, but only some could benefit from these.

Re-connecting with birth family members had led to improved and strengthened relationships for some. For others it triggered renewed disappointment or problems.

Seeing my mum, it was like, are you really mum? Like it gave me mixed emotions cos I love her but it's difficult because I don't want to show her too much affection for her to just drop it like she did before. (14)

Similarly, partners were supportive for some young people, but others had volatile relationships.

Siblings and friends could be important sources of support, but some had experienced high levels of disruption of these relationships, losing contact when moving around.

All my brothers and sisters have been in foster care... Our relationship is kind of awkward because we don't really know each other. (15)

Some care leavers felt their lives could be very different from their friends and a sense of shared experiences with siblings or other care leavers was valued.

All the other students in my class were young – the same age as me but they were going home to their families and like it was harsh because I had to realise that five pounds was no longer money for going to the coffee shop, it was electric money and I had a whole different meaning to life and it was so fast. (16)

LIFE AS A CARE LEAVER

The thing about being in care is it doesn't matter even if you have the greatest [foster] family in the world, if you don't know where you're from, who you are, you always have that sense of loneliness and being on your own ... you need to be able to feel that you belong and that people are there for you. (17)

Some young people felt strongly that the care system had not sufficiently equipped them with an understanding of their background and personal history.

It's important to know your first words, your birth weight, what time you were born ... many a time I've thought 'what time was I born?'. When you don't know it's hard. I could wake up at that time and think 'I was born at that time'. (18)

Accessing their care files helped a few understand what had happened in their past.

I began to read and re-read the story of my life ... In reading this material I once again keenly felt those feelings of isolation and abandonment that had ruined my childhood ... Re-connecting with such awful feelings hit me hard. They will stay with me for a long time. (19)

Young people commented on being labelled or judged for being in care and a care leaver.

The sort of prejudice people have towards care leavers is ridiculous... When you move out of care ... whether it's getting a job, whether it's going to find a house, if you tell them you're a care leaver they're thinking negatively unless they've been through it themselves... (20)

However, for some leaving care was an opportunity to put the past behind them and to start again.

Young people valued being listened to and supported, but the level of involvement in decision-making both on an individual and at a collective level was mixed.

I didn't know I had a pathway plan and only found out several weeks ago but this was already after my leaving care social worker stopped working with me. (21)

Some young people described not feeling part of pathway planning and felt it lacked connection to their lives.

It's just people talking about me. (22)

When pathway planning was positive it helped young people to reflect, set targets and keep things on track.

Because it direct[s] me to the path of achievements - it sets clear aims and objectives for me as to what I want in life. (23)

Care leavers were not always clear about their rights and entitlements and wanted better information.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF EARLY ADULTHOOD

Young people emphasised the importance of feeling safe in their homes and neighbourhoods and having good quality housing.

This is the only flat which has been decorated to look homely and I have no infestations in this flat, no holes in walls etc. which I have previously experienced in old flats and nothing was done. (24)

Living in an unsafe area could be stressful and pose additional problems for some groups of care leavers such as parents:

[There is] violence, drugs and my son can't go out to play. (25)

Care leavers were often keen to talk about their goals and aspirations. Education or employment could provide a source of income and stability but also an alternative identity.

I was on a mission ... for a better life. I've been taken out from a situation that was really bad and I'm here... but I thought you know what I'm going to give my best in education and I'm going to try and make something good out of myself. (26)

Disrupted or negative school experiences; low self-esteem and confidence and changes in circumstances such as bereavement, family problems or becoming a parent could be barriers to education and employment.

Young people enjoyed spending time with friends, sport and physical exercise, music, gaming and bowling. Care leavers identified time, money and motivation as barriers to maintaining and pursuing leisure activities since leaving care.

I spent a lot of time drinking and experimenting with drugs and I wasn't that happy. And then I just decided that like it wasn't really fun and I didn't really want to be involved in that stuff ... dancing kind of got me through all that because like when I stopped drinking and stuff a lot of friends didn't want to be around me anymore ... dancing's pretty much all I have. If I didn't do dance I don't really know what I'd do. (27)

In several studies young people said that leaving care had an adverse effect on their general health and some experienced a rise in mental health problems after leaving care.

I don't think I had any health needs when I came out of care, 'cos my depression happened after, well actually it didn't ... um, I guess it happened when I moved into my own place, and I was alone, I had to deal with it. (28)

CARE LEAVERS WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Some care leavers reported negative peer influence, abuse in the community and financial or sexual exploitation.

I took on a lot of bad relationships over that time. I had my own flat, I let people abuse that fact as well because I thought it was the cool thing to do to have parties all the time and have friends live there. (29)

Disabled young people wanted the same opportunities as their peers but sometimes felt treated differently.

Pathway plans are still very childish ... Stop using cartoons that a pre-schooler would use on a document ... Don't treat them like children ... because I have had social workers that will speak down to me like I am a child just because I have got a mental disability... and I am sitting there and I said to them 'I am coming 20. I'm not five'. (30)

Some young parents talked about their parenting skills being more scrutinised because they were in care.

The social workers assumed I was going to be like my parents which I am not... I have never done anything wrong. It is just because I have a social worker myself... My son's first social worker ... told me to give him up for adoption ... because I was too young to be a dad... They were not going to give me the chance, I had to fight for that... I think her problem was she didn't think fellas could raise kids. (31)

Worrying about the future because of uncertainty about what would happen featured both for young people seeking asylum and young people in custody

It's one of the most stressful things ever – going to bed, not knowing if there is a letter going to come in the morning saying you need to leave the country. It's always at the back of your mind. (32)

I haven't had any [visits]. I would like to see [my social worker] because I would like to be kept up to date with what's going on outside. I don't know what is happening. (33)



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CONCLUSION

Care leavers identified that good transitions from care were supported by quality relationships with the people that were important to them, being supported in decisions and help with achieving what mattered to them. Looking across the review strongly reinforces the message that effective services must always start with, and continue to champion, the voice of young people.



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