

ACCESS ALL AREAS - A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

WHY CARE LEAVERS NEED TO ACCESS ALL AREAS OF SUPPORT THROUGH A RANGE OF ADULT ORIENTED PUBLIC SERVICES TO ACHIEVE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL.

WHY SHOULD SOCIETY CARE ABOUT CARE LEAVERS?

1. UNIQUE RELATIONSHIPS

When the State decides to take on the responsibility for parenting children who cannot live safely with their birth family it creates a unique relationship between the child and the State-as-parent that is not replicated anywhere else in the many relationships that exist between citizens and their Government. Children entering public care have already had an extremely rough ride and a difficult start in life. They do not come into care for no reason. The experience of growing up in care can have many positive aspects. In too many cases it can also reinforce rejection, feelings of worthlessness, displacement and inadequacy which are already embedded in the child's psyche at the time of removal from inadequate and harmful families.

When we plan for the child's journey from care into full adulthood and independence we must ensure that we do not create experiences and systems which reinforce strongly held negative beliefs carried forward from childhood. To do so is to negate much of the good work that the care system can do in helping children resolve earlier crises and to seriously impair the child's chances of achieving their potential as young adults. This is wasteful in terms of human lives and also in economic cost. A Government which works together across all adult departments to address the needs of vulnerable care leavers as they establish themselves independently is essential to effectively discharge that State-as-parent duty.

2. LIFE TRAJECTORY

Care leavers do not follow straight trajectories in life. Perhaps they should come with 'small print': 'life chances may go down as well as up'. Even for those who do eventually find a settled and fulfilled place in their life, the getting there is more likely to look like a stocks and shares graph than a straight-line run in an upwards direction. We are looking at long term investment in lives, and will be disappointed if we focus on quick returns.

There is much that can and must be done to improve the experience of care itself in order to optimise the life chances of children brought up in public care and better early intervention and family support may reduce the numbers of children coming into care. These will be small changes. Absolute numbers in care are fairly impervious to change over many decades and now rising again! Whatever improvements are made there will always be children coming into care and children leaving care. Children leaving care will continue to carry with them the legacy of their experiences before the State became their parent. Some will have internalised new positive messages about themselves, others continue to struggle throughout their childhood and adolescence. Even those who appear confident, achieve the right number of GCSEs at the right age etc. are likely to be more vulnerable to the knocks of adult life than family reared peers. Once they leave care, we know that many will be over represented in the statistics for social exclusion in all its various manifestations; homelessness, chronic unemployment, mental health difficulties, drug and alcohol misuse, criminalityⁱⁱ etc.. We should not be complacent about these outcomes and much more needs to be done to improve the life chances of care leavers. However we also should not be surprised that youngsters whose childhoods subjected them to extreme adversity in its many different forms and lacked the stability and unconditional love of a birth family for much of their upbringing struggle to make their way in the world in the first decade after leaving the protection of State care. It is perhaps more remarkable that so many do overcome toxic childhoods and eventually step out as confident and fulfilled adults.

Childhood trauma has long lasting and deep rooted psychological effects and these effects are not always apparent until adolescence or early adulthood. Care leavers who seemed to be doing very well may be the ones who suffer catastrophic crises during their twenties, sometimes sinking forever, sometimes emerging stronger. Others who looked like 'trouble' throughout their time in care may sometimes be the ones who just slowly plod on and sort their lives out in an unspectacular way.

Although we have some clues from concepts like resilience theoryⁱⁱⁱ which set out the personal, social and situational factors which are likely to be protective in enabling a child to handle adversity and trauma, these are not absolute predictors of 'success' or 'failure'; it is almost impossible to forecast accurately among the population of care leavers who will do well and who will fall by the wayside. Aside from providing the broadest statistical overview in measuring particular indicators at arbitrary stages in the lives of care leavers, the statistical snapshots which we take to assist in understand the direction of policy impacts and overall population improvements tells us nothing about the experience or longer term outcomes for individual care leavers. This is partly because their developmental processes are so interrupted by early trauma and subsequent instability that even those who do eventually settle on a reasonably smooth life path with settled careers, relationships, stable homes etc., are likely to be delayed in establishing that settled life and have a turbulent journey to get there.

3. DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT

For most parents there does eventually come a stage where they can redecorate the childhood bedroom and reclaim the space as their own, safe in the knowledge that their 'young' are now fully fledged and henceforth will return as visitors rather than refugees from life's difficulties. When we look at leaving home studies for indicators that a young adult has made a successful transition to independence are generally looking at a population of between 25 and 29^{iv} years of age. Yet we are still 'measuring' the success of care leavers in terms of whether they have successfully established themselves as adults between the ages of 19 and 25. Not only do we fail to recognise the delay in psychological and emotional development that means we should expect them to take just a little bit longer to find their feet in the adult world, we actually expect them to achieve this transition and sustain it with very little support, approximately ten years earlier than we would expect for our own children, or for the general population. Even more anomalous is the conditionality of all the support that is available to older care leavers around education and employment. Of course we should incentivise and support care leavers who, for all the reasons outlined above, are likely to be late entering further and higher education. But does it really make any sense that we now support 21 - 25 year olds who are in education and those who are not – almost certainly the most vulnerable and the most needy - often the 'hardest to reach' are entitled to no on-going support at all?

4. SUSTAINABLE INDEPENDENCE

We are not arguing to make the State a 'forever parent' for the children it takes into its care; this would be neither practicable nor desirable. We are seeking an improved awareness across Government Departments of how and why many of the current policies which impact care leavers have seriously detrimental and unintended consequences and can hold back rather than incentivise care leavers on their beginning journey towards independent adulthood.

We are also not wanting to lower expectations; on the contrary we want everyone involved with care leavers to hold for them the same high expectations that they would hold for their own children (high expectations do not mean for every child an honours degree, every child is different and we hold expectations which are different for each of our own children). In recognising that the majority of care leavers will be set back at some time during their immediate post-care years by more than one significant area of difficulty which is either the result of, or is amplified both by their pre-care and in-care experiences, we are simply naming a reality that is essential to face up to if we are serious about improving long term life chances for care leavers.

In order for a person to achieve successful independence they must first have experienced a significant relationship of responsible and responsive dependency. Many children in care did not have this as an infant or growing child; many fail to find it during their time in care. This sense of reliable dependency can be created by individuals and institutions. Safe, trustworthy caregivers, educators, mentors, role models and nurturing environments with good boundaries in schools, clubs, children's homes, churches etc. all contribute to the upbringing of a confident child or the healing of a troubled child. Someone who has not themselves experienced what it is to be properly looked after and cared for, such that they can rely on adults and structures around them to create a safe and predictable world in which their own role and the expectations placed upon them are clear and fair will struggle to take a full place in their community, build their own family and become a participating and contributing member of wider society. Children who have had a rocky start in life will need opportunities both when in care, and when setting out on their journey through adulthood, to have these solid reliable experiences in order to develop for themselves a strong functioning self^v, or adult ego state, that can survive and succeed in the world.

If we force premature independence on these vulnerable youngsters, and fail to provide adequate supports and safety nets to assist their continued growth in this crucial developmental stage we risk perpetuating dependency. If we work a little bit harder to sustain around them a reliable and dependable network of systems and individuals upon whom they can rely when they are in need the end result will be stronger and more independent care leavers as they grow through their twenties into full adulthood.

5. PREMATURE TRANSITIONS

What we know about leaving care is that it still happens too soon, and the inevitability of a one way street, with no turning back is very different indeed to the experience of a family reared child for whom that safety net is always there and never questioned. Most of the thinking about leaving care currently goes on in the Children in Care Division of the Department for Education. Much of what we now have in statute and guidance is excellent in intent and substance and most of the work left to do is in ensuring local authorities, in whom the Corporate Parenting duty of the state resides, deliver these policies in the spirit in which they were intended with consistency across the country. There are still some anomalies that should be addressed, but on the whole the work at DfE has been done, and many of the barriers which continue to make it so much more difficult than it needs to be for care leavers on their journey towards full adulthood and independence reside in generic policy that is targeted at the overall population of adult citizens.

What we want to encourage and contribute to is a wider debate about the range of policies that affect adult care leavers throughout their first years after leaving care and into their twenties. Care leavers struggling to make their way in the adult world, or determined to get back on track after a crisis or series of bad choices often face barriers wherever they turn. They may struggle to access suitable and affordable housing, to sustain low paid work when this makes them worse off and plunges them from poverty into poverty and debt; they may be denied access to further or higher education without the means to sustain themselves whilst studying. Care leavers also often struggle to access mental health services as adult psychiatry conventionally deals with a very limited set of conditions and those who received help as children and teenagers with post-traumatic or anxiety related or personality disorders may find themselves ineligible for any input through adult services. Children in care can rarely match the CVs of same age peers who have had more opportunities to work as teenagers and gain work experience through family friends and contacts. Even those who graduate from university may find themselves competing in the job market with students who have benefitted from exciting gap years funded from parental coffers.

6. REINFORCING SELF-DOUBT; WHY A BLAME AND SHAME POLICY APPROACH NEVER WORKS

For care leavers, the frequent experience of doors being closed in their faces, even after they may have tried the best that they know how to look for work, complete a course, or even just get through the week, stay alive, and manage their bills, reinforces the many negative beliefs they bring with them from childhood which continue to influence them consciously and subconsciously throughout their lives. 'I'm not good enough' 'It must be my fault' 'I'll never amount to anything' 'that good life that I see out there, and on television, and being lived by my neighbours, is for other people, not for people like me'. The systems they encounter are generally punitive – fail to turn up at the job centre because you didn't have enough money for the bus fare and you lose benefit the following week; take the risk of stepping into employment and you could very quickly find yourself in significant housing arrears; have the audacity to change your mind about what you said you wanted to study when you drew up your Pathway Plan age 14 and your local authority may refuse to support your new choice. Make the mistake of having a birthday at the wrong time and you might have to just give up your stable home – the first one you had in your life – because the single person's rent allowance doesn't cover the social housing you were placed in by your leaving care team. There are lots of small nuances of policy that hit care leavers particularly hard, that go against natural justice and common sense, and that do so much to make a hard journey even harder. These same problems hit high achieving and able care leavers who may also struggle to find their way after achieving a top degree; often those same strengths that drive some care leavers to fight their way through adversity towards success, also lead them to have quite spectacular crashes. The messages that they have internalised as children 'I have to take care of myself because no one else will take care of me' 'I have to be strong to survive' 'I don't need help from anyone' can become paralysing and explain why so many care leavers who seem to be doing exceptionally well suddenly go off course. This can take the form of eviction (this group will never

tell anyone they are in trouble with their rent until it's too late), depression or mental breakdown (because they drive themselves so hard, hold such high expectations of themselves and are so hard on themselves that eventually something has to give). They will also be the ones who often 'self-destruct' at the last minute, just when it seems success is really within their grasp and these patterns of self-destruction will be well established; there will almost always be a 'plausible' external reason for the turnaround or failure and if you look beneath the surface they are not pressing the eject button because the plane is going down, the plane goes down because they ejected! conditions and those who received help as children and teenagers with post-traumatic or anxiety related or personality disorders may find themselves ineligible for any input through adult services. Children in care can rarely match the CVs of same age peers who have had more opportunities to work as teenagers and gain work experience through family friends and contacts. Even those who graduate from university may find themselves competing in the job market with students who have benefitted from exciting gap years funded from parental coffers.

7. STRENGTHENING THE HIDDEN PSYCHE

These are very subtle and often unconscious psychological processes that affect career, relationships, and every aspect of adult life. Whilst generally propelled in life and decision making by a thought process that is positive and underpinned by a belief in self-worth and self-efficacy, there is an underlying emotional belief, usually pre-verbal and embedded as a very young child, that carries those worthlessness messages 'I don't really deserve to succeed' 'one day they will find out what a useless/worthless/bad person I really am'. This can be played out in education and career terms by managing to get ill just before the final exam, pulling out of the interview just before the promotion, or in relationship terms by never allowing yourself to be accepted and loved for who you are; if you constantly fear rejection 'I'm going to reject you before you reject me' is the safest response. This applies not just to personal relationships but to interactions with professionals, with 'system' people. Recognising and understanding these predictable psychological patterns can help us to make attitudes and responses to need and the interactions between a whole range of public services more robust and able to cope with these destructive and rejecting responses. What generally happens is that systems punish these kinds of behaviour and therefore reinforce the underlying beliefs. We often make the mistake of trying to help care leavers by talking to them in purely rational terms when in fact their responses are being driven by something much more deeply embedded than thought. Understanding this underlying psyche is not a prophecy of doom for children brought up in public care; many can and do eventually overcome some of these negative internal processes. To do so they need to have enough positive experiences, relationships and beliefs to erase earlier patterns of thinking and feeling. This process is begun when a child finds stability in just the right placement for them; it is continued when they encounter an extremely supportive and thoughtful team to guide them through the process of leaving care. It is rarely completed by the time a care leaver is 18 or 19, or even 21. Developmental adolescence is a process that takes place between the ages of 15 and 25 and throughout that time we remain very susceptible to change and psychological growth which eventually creates the more settled adult patterns of thinking that tend to stay with us. Systems which punish instead of supporting can do a great deal of harm when care leavers are in their twenties. The experience of the premature ejection into adult life is difficult enough; often this creates an overwhelming sense of instability and uncertainty ironically just at the time when the child may have begun to feel settled in a good care placement for the first time. When everything else around them starts to wobble too, this can be simply overwhelming. Understanding this is essential to creating policies which enable care leavers not just to survive, but to thrive in their adult lives.

8. BEING AN EFFECTIVE STATE-AS-PARENT

Just a little more thought from all Government Departments whose policies have a significant effect on care leavers about the specific impacts those policies have on this vulnerable group could make a big difference in making those journeys from care a little bit less rocky and improving the life chances of children leaving public care. A child in care should not be 'nobody's child' but everybody's child. Government acts for wider society in protecting our most vulnerable children and society expects better outcomes for the children that are looked after on our behalf.

'Care proofing' policies against unintended consequences for care leavers will take some creative thinking and the will to make a difference; we are not seeking big policy changes. This is a group that both Government and society have a unique responsibility towards and who have a very particular set of needs; to fail to meet these needs sets up another generation to potentially repeat the cycles of despair and underachievement that blighted the lives of their own inadequate parents causing them to be brought up in care. The State as parent needs to align its policies across all relevant Departments so that it provides a predictable, supportive and transparent set of expectations and institutions for the delivery of services that care leavers will need as vulnerable young adults. It needs to recognise that far from costing more, this approach will bring economic benefits, both immediate and in the longer term. Improving the coherence of whole Government support for care leavers in their most crucial final steps towards adulthood will not increase dependency but will create a firm foundation from which real and sustainable independence can be achieved. Care leavers currently face barriers and obstacles at every direction they turn. When care leavers turn towards a public service which should be there to support them in their journey through adulthood we want them to be able access all areas of support and not be excluded, rejected and neglected in a way that repeats and reinforces the experiences of the traumatised child.

9. ALWAYS A CARE LEAVER?

Being a care leaver is a life-long circumstance; the community of adult 'care leavers' is a distinctively invisible and inherently vulnerable population. Every care leaver is an individual and as they grow as adults will variously reject, or positively integrate their care experiences into their developing identity; whether they see these experiences positively, choose to remain 'out' as adult care leavers, or seek to leave their time in care behind them, their experience of growing up in care, like all childhood and previous experiences, remains part of them in some way.

One of the perennial problems in getting children care 'on the agenda' as a major concern across Government is that there simply are not that many of them. This is not an issue that impacts on whole populations in the way that schools, hospitals or the closure of old people's homes do. This should be seen as a positive; the relatively small scale of the population we are talking about should mean that there is no excuse not to open up thinking and open up policy so that care leavers can freely access all areas of support that they need until they are established in their adult lives. This is a small enough problem to be solved if there is the political will to do so. Although care leavers a population are differentiated in all the ways described, there is also a good deal of intersection between care leavers and other vulnerable cohorts. If Government is successful in creating integrated policies that work for this small group, there may be many useful lessons learned that can be transferred into much wider benefits in the future.

The state cannot and should not be a forever parent for care leavers. It can and should be a better and a more thoughtful parent for care leavers as they make their transition through the final developmental stages of adolescence from 15 through to 25, and remain a vigilant, if more distant, parent to its care leavers throughout their first crucial decade after leaving care.

This is not just a moral responsibility it will enable more care leavers to fulfil their potential and give back to society; it will reduce the economic waste which occurs when mismatched policies produce unintended consequences and it will provide a model of good parenting by a responsible Government that understands the value of families and the enormous responsibility it takes on when it steps in to take over the parental role in the interests of protecting children at risk.

- ⁱ Department for Education, England Summary Tables: SFR21/2011/B1
<http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/datasets/a00196857/children-looked-after-by-las-in-england>
- ⁱⁱ Centre for Social Justice, 2008, Breakthrough Britain: Couldn't Care Less, p.11
<http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/Couldn't%20Care%20Less%20Report%20WEB%20VERSION.PDF>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Resilience and Young People in Care, Overcoming the Odds, Mike Stein, JRF, 2005 <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/185935369x.pdf>
- ^{iv} Eurostat, Average Age of Young People when Leaving the Parental Household, 2007
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- ^v Berne, E. (1957). Ego states in Psychotherapy. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*

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