

June 2013

Children brought up in public care still face significant adversity when trying to make their way in adult life. Like everyone else, most care leavers simply want a stable home, secure relationships, and a job or useful occupation so that they can enjoy a reasonable quality of life and make a contribution to society.

Despite many improvements in legislation over a decade, and lobbying from a wide number of children's charities campaigning for some common sense and humanity in care leaving policy, there are still huge systemic barriers getting in the way of those simple ambitions.

Set up in 1999 to make small grants to care leavers in the same way a good parent would, The Care Leavers' Foundation, which has led major initiatives in recent years to address the lack of joined up policy for care leavers and the culture of low aspiration and expectation which surrounds care leavers in many local authorities, has written to the Department of Education this week to highlight continuing problems in the systems designed to support care leavers.

Three recent applications received by the Foundation for support showed very clearly that policy is not working for care leavers who want to get on in life.

S is close to completing his apprenticeship in the construction industry. He is 30 years old and is determined to have a trade and a decent life after problems with mental health led to him abusing alcohol and spending a short period of time in prison. Cycling many miles across London to his workplace to save on fares, S now takes home £30 less than he would get on the dole and often can't afford to eat ***"Some days I feel like just quitting and going back on benefits. But I don't want to do that"***. The Foundation has provided small payments to help with essentials and so that S can buy tools, but thinks it is wrong that vulnerable care leavers should still face such string disincentives against entering the workplace. Trustee Janet Rich said "We know it isn't the intention of Government to make it hard for vulnerable care leavers to get into education or work, but Government still needs to work harder to join up policy so that it achieves what is intended and doesn't unintentionally penalise the most vulnerable groups."

M is working in a prestigious restaurant and showing talent and promise as a chef. Shunning the criminality and chaos within his birth family he has made a real effort to get his life on track. Having missed out on any opportunities to get an education while in care, M now wants to ensure he has the basic qualifications he will need to further his career. He needs to find almost £3,000 to pay course fees

for these basic college courses and despite being a care leaver is not eligible for any form of Government support towards his education.

22 year old J is currently jobseeking and likes to keep himself busy at the same time by engaging in voluntary activities. He enjoys helping others and says that this also helps him keep from sinking back into depression. When J takes a day out to help others, building his confidence and CV at the same time, he is penalised by the Job Centre because this is not classed as relevant activity. In weeks when penalties are applied J has a whole week's benefit taken off him, leaving him with nothing, unless he is lucky enough to be successful in applying for a hardship payment of £15 for that week.

25 year old C will finish her university degree at the end of this month. On the day when most young graduates are celebrating, she will leave university without a penny to her name and no idea where she is going to live. 'My leaving care team have given me money to live on while I was studying but no one helped me plan what happens next. When I walk out of here it will be just like a prisoner coming out of prison with no money and nowhere to go.' C has signed on the homelessness list and was told it would be two months before her claim for benefits is processed.

The Care Leavers' Foundation is calling for common sense, fairness and compassion to be applied to welfare rules, which currently make it hard for many care leavers to study or to get off benefits and into work and has led a number of initiatives designed to address issues identified through its grant applicants.

Access All Areas: began with the launch of a set of reports in 2012; this is an ongoing activity involving discussions with all major Government Departments about 'care proofing' their policies.

New Belongings: A new project funded by the Department for Education, which is working with five local authorities in England to at how they can improve the service they provide to care leavers. Care leavers need services which are integrated, easy to access, embedded within local communities, and which treat them with respect.

National Care Leavers' Week, 24-30 October 2013: Bringing together a number of organisations working with care leavers, the Week highlights the needs of care leavers and encourages the agencies responsible for looking after them to work in a more coordinated and effective way.

Charter for Care Leavers: Published jointly with the Department for Education, the Charter sets out key principles for the Government and local authorities in delivering the best possible services for care leavers.