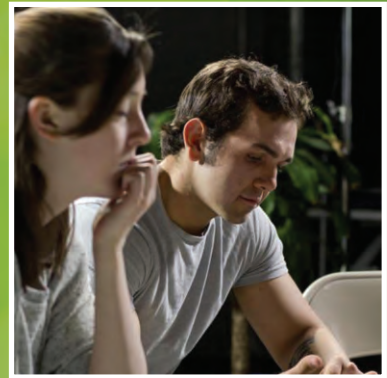


New Belongings

Report of the Independent Evaluation



“A better deal for care leavers”



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NEW BELONGINGS



1. Introduction

For most young people today moving into their own accommodation; entering further or higher education; finding satisfying employment or training; and achieving good health and a positive sense of well-being, represent important landmarks during their journey to adulthood. As a group, research studies show that care leavers are more disadvantaged than other young people in achieving these landmarks. Whilst some successfully move on from care, other young people just survive and get by, and some young people struggle greatly¹.

In the year ending 2014, 10,310 young people aged 16 and over left care and it is the responsibility of their corporate parents to ensure that *all* these young people fulfil their potential. This will require comprehensive responses across their life course, including whilst they are in care, at the time of leaving care and on their pathways to adulthood.

The introduction of the *Transitions Guidance* implemented in April 2011, (revised in May 2014) and the Government's *Care Leaver Strategy* (from October 2013) provide a framework for improving the role and quality of corporate parenting.

To support our work on leaving care we have in place an excellent framework of legislation², guidance^{3 4} and research⁵.

In this context, the New Belongings project represents an opportunity for '*a better deal for care leavers*'.

2. Summary of Findings

It has been the case that over the past year, under New Belongings, all nine participating authorities will have seen significant improvements in the development and delivery of their services to care leavers. It has been quite remarkable what they have been able to achieve in such a relatively short space of time.

Whilst it would be wrong to try to attribute all of their achievements and progress to their involvement in the New Belongings project, it would equally be a mistake not to recognise the impact that it has had in helping drive forward some real innovation and change.

As one of the care leavers on the New Belongings team put it:

"If this is the effect that New Belongings can have in just a year just imagine what it could achieve if it was to carry on."

New Belongings has got participating authorities doing things now for care leavers that they might otherwise have not been doing; or, perhaps not doing as soon or as thoroughly. From what they themselves have told us, they are doing things now that they were not doing before.

The truth in assessing the impact of New Belongings is that it has genuinely captured the imagination of those local authorities taking part, encouraging them each in their own way to do more and better things for their care leavers. It has enabled them to bring forward a good many things that they will have been wanting to do, but were needing the profile and influence of a project such as New Belongings to help them get things moving. New Belongings has not changed the local authorities that have been participating in this 'Pilot' Project, they have done that for themselves; but it has, to varying degrees, inspired and challenged them along the way.

New Belongings has helped to raise the profile and status of leaving care, and has achieved the highest level of commitment from participating authorities. Most now have robust measures in place at executive, strategic, operational and practice levels for embedding and sustaining their improvements. It would seem that the positive experience that these nine participating authorities have undoubtedly had with New Belongings could now be of great benefit to other local authorities. They too will be facing many of the same challenges and issues when it comes to meeting the needs of their own care leavers, and the nine participating authorities have been given the time and space in which to find some good solutions.

¹ See Stein, M. (2012) *Young People Leaving Care, Supporting Pathways to Adulthood*, London, Jessica Kingsley, (for a review of UK and international research studies)

² Children Act 1989; Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000; Children and Young Persons Act 2008; Children Act Higher Education Bursary (England) Regulations 2009; Children (Leaving Care) (England) Regulations 2010

³ The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers, 2010

⁴ *Care Leaver Strategy: a cross-departmental strategy for young people leaving care*, Department for Education, 2013

⁵ Stein, M. and Munro, E. (2008) *Young People's Transitions from Care to Adulthood: International Research and Practice*, London, Jessica Kingsley

Participating authorities have, in the main, been embedding the Charter for Care Leavers, 'Access All Areas', and engaging with the local communities; and have shown that the principles behind these are both sound and applicable within the context of different local priorities.

We have consistently seen:

- ✓ better accommodation choice and options;
- ✓ improved documentation to support pathway planning;
- ✓ better provision of advice and information;
- ✓ more opportunities through employment and apprenticeship schemes;
- ✓ more care leavers supported to stay on in their education;
- ✓ better engagement with young people when it comes to improving services; and,
- ✓ more care leavers getting what they are entitled to

The overriding concern about these improvements will have been about their lack of reach, especially to many young people who will be leaving care from placements that are away from the local area of their 'responsible authorities'.

This independent evaluation has found that New Belongings has been so beneficial to the local authorities engaging in it that, if judged against the many changes and improvements reported, it must be in the interests of both care leavers and the future progression of leaving care services in this country to persevere with it in some form or other.

3. About New Belongings

This has been an initiative that was started by care leavers; which has become unique in many ways, not least the broad range of care leavers working across generations and backgrounds to contribute something towards the success of the New Belongings Project.

New Belongings is the third piece of work, alongside the Charter for Care Leavers and 'Access All Areas', which originated from the ideas and priorities of the Minister's Care Leavers' Group. Together these were intended to address the thematic concerns of:

- i) The need to change culture and expectations,
- ii) To have a more coherent approach across Government and services, and
- iii) To work towards a more consistent set of expectations and entitlements for care leavers wherever they lived in the country.

"There was a Care Leavers Charter, and New Belongings was set up to see that it was being implemented properly. I think it all started with a couple of care leavers raising it at a Ministerial Quarterly⁶, saying that there needed to be more 'care-proofing' and wrap-around care."⁷

Care leavers told the Minister that they wanted support to address isolation, disconnect with services and uncertainty about their entitlements.

New Belongings is a national change partnership between the Department for Education, the Care Leaver Foundation and the nine participating 'pilot' authorities⁸ to explore how

⁶ These are regular meetings that the Children's Minister, Edward Timpson MP, holds with a group of care leavers

⁷ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁸ Cheshire East Council; Herefordshire Council; Portsmouth City Council; Sheffield City Council; Staffordshire County Council; Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council; Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council; Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council; and, Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council

- i) the Charter for Care Leavers⁹;
- ii) 'Access All Areas'¹⁰; and,
- iii) engaging the community

could be used to create a replicable 'gold standard' in supporting care leavers.

The crux of the project was to find out what, with external challenge and support, local authorities were capable of achieving by way of making improvements in the development and delivery of services to care leavers.

*"I suppose it's fair to say that we acted as a sort of 'critical friend' to local authorities."*¹¹

The interest that has been shown in New Belongings is undeniable, with 31 local authorities indicating their initial 'expressions of interest', and many others since becoming involved through various disseminations that have already taken place through national and regional networks.

It has captured the imagination of care leavers from all over the country too, with 17 expressing interest in becoming involved in the national project; and many more than this who have directly got involved at a local level.

*"I'm really glad that I got involved and feel that on balance I have made a difference under New Belongings."*¹²

New Belongings has encouraged local authorities to re-engage in conversation about what they should be doing for their care leavers. That conversation has been all the richer for being wider than just amongst themselves. It has been a conversation with other departments from right across the council, with other local authorities, with partner organisations, with local business and community groups, with Government, and with the New Belongings team, but most of all; it has been a conversation with the young people they are working with. Above all, by creating the time, space and permissions, it has reignited the passion of many working in the leaving care field to now achieve for care leavers things that they have been wanting to achieve for years.

It needs to be acknowledged though that many other local authorities, who were not engaged in the New Belongings Pilots, will also have been making significant progress, over the same period of time, in the development and delivery of their services. Most will have signed up to, and will be actively implementing, the Charter for Care Leavers; achieving a more integrated common purpose, as per 'Access All Areas'; and, engaging constructively within their local communities. And, they will have been doing all of these things without the New Belongings framework to guide them, because these things are intuitively the right things to be doing.

The New Belongings 'Pilot' Project has though, helpfully, provided a framework for developing a more considered and inclusive approach to meeting the needs of care leavers, by having:

- ✓ a time-limited and systemic focus on re-prioritising their needs, with built in triggers to embed the practice and learning;
- ✓ high-level strategic commitment and sign up;
- ✓ effective partnership working, information-sharing and external challenge; and
- ✓ effective and sustainable processes for engaging young people in the changes that need to be made

4. About the independent evaluation

This independent evaluation of the New Belongings Project has been carried out for the Care Leavers Foundation and the Department for Education by **Dr Mike Lindsay** [an independent children's rights expert]; with consultancy from **Prof Mike Stein**, [Social Policy Research Unit [SPRU] at the University of York].

⁹ Charter for Care Leavers (Department for Education and The Care Leavers' Foundation, 2012)

¹⁰ Access All Areas (Princes Trust, A National Voice, The Care Leavers' Foundation, NCAS and Catch 22, 2012)

¹¹ A Member of the New Belongings Central Team

¹² A member of the Care Leavers Panel

A real challenge for this evaluation has been to decide whether you say how well local authorities have been doing from the perspective of where they started from, and within the broader context of the difficult times they are working in; or, from the not unreasonable expectations that many care leavers, up and down the country, will have of what they should be providing them with. I think a care leaver has found just about the right balance here:

“The evaluation report needs to be positive and upbeat, but honest about what needs to be done.”¹³

Within that spirit, therefore, this evaluation of the New Belongings Project is intended neither to be an inspection, nor a beauty contest. Instead, this report has tried to focus on ‘showcasing’ what can be achieved, even in difficult circumstances, by different local authorities each taking their own approach to New Belongings to challenge themselves to improve services to care leavers.

It has been local authorities themselves that have been driving change. However, in looking to evaluate the contribution that New Belongings may have made, we need to distinguish between a number of things that would have been happening already, and those things that may not have happened without New Belongings providing some sort of catalyst. This has not been easy given that things that local authorities were already wanting to do before New Belongings, such as carrying out surveys, reviewing ‘Staying Put’ policies or developing more apprenticeship schemes and accommodation options for care leavers, may all have been given some extra impetus and focus through their involvement as a ‘pilot’ authority in this Project.

This evaluation has tried to strike a tri-partite balance, subject to the availability of evidence presented to it, between what the participating authorities, the New Belongings team and care leavers have been telling us about what they have been doing under the New Belongings ‘Pilot’ Project, and what they have been making of its impact.

With the benefit of hindsight, it can be seen that expectations that participating authorities would be in a position, after a one-year ‘pilot’, to be able to show clear outcomes for care leavers was probably being too unrealistic. However, what they have been able to show though is a genuine commitment to:

1. listening more to their care leavers;
2. working better in partnership with others; and,
3. putting things in place now, under New Belongings, that are likely to lead to better outcomes for care leavers in the future

5. The New Belongings Challenge

5.1 The Charter for Care Leavers¹⁴

The Charter for Care Leavers was put together by a group of care leavers working with the Care Leaver Foundation, and with support from the Department for Education. It includes **seven basic promises** that Government have asked local authorities to sign up to and implement.

- 1. To respect and honour care leaver identity**
- 2. To believe in care leavers**
- 3. To listen to care leavers**
- 4. To inform care leavers**
- 5. To support care leavers**
- 6. To find care leavers a home**
- 7. To be a lifelong champion to care leavers**

¹³ A member of the New Belongings Care Leavers Panel

¹⁴ ‘Charter for Care Leavers’, Department for Education/Care Leavers Foundation, 2012

There has been local ownership of the Charter for Care Leavers, and in some areas local care leavers have adapted the wording a little to something they liked more and which they felt was more relevant to their own experiences. For instance, **Trafford** have written out the Charter as a contract to their care leavers; making clear and explicit: 'What we will do for you', and 'What we expect from you'. Others have used the Charter as:

*"... a way into a set of conversations."*¹⁵

Some have embedded the Charter into their local pledges.

*"I think in a way we have brought the Charter to life."*¹⁶

5.2 Access All Areas¹⁷

'Access All Areas' is a report to Government setting out how it can work better together and more coherently in the interest of promoting better opportunities and outcomes for care leavers.

One important thing that New Belongings would appear to have encouraged locally is an important change of culture to now thinking that leaving care is no longer the responsibility of one small, dedicated leaving care team. New Belongings has encouraged participating authorities to adapt the principles behind 'Access All Areas' to the local situation, and have identified **six common areas for action**:

- 1. The vulnerability of care leavers, and the particular requirement to prioritise their needs, is explicitly recognised in policies.**
- 2. A clear and explicit understanding of what provision care leavers are entitled to.**
- 3. Where discretion is being applied there is a favourable supposition that this will be applied in favour of improving outcomes for care leavers.**
- 4. There will be robust systems of information and data sharing between different departments, agencies and services.**
- 5. Joint working and protocols are in place between different departments, agencies and local services and leaving care services.**
- 6. Services to care leavers are experienced by them as responsive and personalised.**

New Belongings has contributed towards inspiring a new culture of joint working, through multi-disciplinary approaches to delivering leaving care services and support across authorities; and, through the sharing of learning and good practice between authorities. In turn, this is encouraging even greater efforts towards delivering a more holistic approach to meeting care leavers' needs (across children's social care, education, employment, financial support, the benefits system, adult social care, health, housing, leisure, the justice system and through on-going support).

5.3 Engaging the Community

New Belongings has given local authorities greater impetus to engage better with local communities to develop new opportunities for care leavers, and some have been inspired by this to develop a range of in-house opportunities themselves for care leavers.

One of the benefits of engaging the community is that it provides opportunities for others to see what care leavers are really like, including their potential; and for challenge to some of the more negative attitudes and perceptions that may well be contributing towards holding them back.

¹⁵ A member of the New Belongings Central Team

¹⁶ A member of the New Belongings Central Team

¹⁷ 'Access All Areas: Action for all Government Departments to support young people's journey from care to adulthood', Princes Trust, A National Voice, Care Leavers Foundation, NCAS and Catch 22, April 2012

Many participating authorities have engaged the local press well, in reporting their involvement in New Belongings, thereby creating potential to widen awareness of, and interest in, care leavers within their own local communities.

6. Starting points

Each participating authority submitted their application bid to take part in New Belongings, setting out where they saw themselves in respect of the support and services they were providing to their care leavers, and what their hopes were for how they might improve things under New Belongings.

6.1 General

Prior to the outset of New Belongings, it was evident that not all nine participating authorities were starting from the same base levels in terms of:

1. how well their leaving care services had been developed
2. what resources they had committed to supporting and improving them
3. the relative skills levels and experience built up in local leaving care teams

Some had well-established, experienced teams, well-versed in preparing and supporting their care leavers. Whilst others were relatively newer to the task, mainly due to restructuring that had taken place in their Authority; and they were needing to learn quickly, quite often as a team, whilst taking on responsibility for delivering on their local New Belongings Project.

6.2 About the participating authorities

Each participating authority had different demographics and characteristics, such as five were inner-city metropolitan boroughs, two were counties and the other two were each cities.

The four North West local authorities worked together as a 'Cluster', with each one taking a lead on a key priority area: **Cheshire East** (Education, Employment and Training); **Trafford** (Transitions); **Wirral** (Accommodation); and, **Stockport** (Health). A fifth theme of 'Benefits' would be added later in the project. **Staffordshire** and **Walsall**, in the West Midlands, partnered each other; whilst the other three local authorities, **Herefordshire**, **Portsmouth** and **Sheffield**, were each standalone.

In addition to having their own distinctive local issues to contend with, all were reporting challenges of having to overcome high levels of social deprivation. Each of their leaving care services were typically working with cohorts of care leavers from some of the poorest and most deprived social backgrounds in terms of safe and affordable housing, educational under-achievement, poverty, high unemployment rates (particularly amongst young people), low incomes, poor health outcomes and a higher prevalence of crime and anti-social behaviour. This has placed enormous pressure on leaving care services to prioritise finding for their care leavers suitable accommodation; education, employment or training opportunities; and pathways to a better, more promising future. For example, one of the participating authorities, **Portsmouth**, ranks amongst the highest quarter of most deprived areas in the country.

6.3 On being given permission

Firstly, being given the commitment and priority from the highest levels of central and local government; and, secondly, the time and permission in which to do it, were the things that really made the difference.

"Local authorities have put themselves forward voluntarily for a variety of reasons. Most will have been motivated by a desire to improve leaving care services. There were things that local authorities wanted to do and thought that this process would be helpful."¹⁸

¹⁸ New Belongings Project Director

*"I've had local authorities say to me that they have had these ideas for years, but haven't had to implement them."*¹⁹

6.4 Immediate benefits for care leavers

There are some actions taken by authorities, participating in New Belongings, that are having immediate or early benefits for care leavers. These include highlights such as:

- ✓ implementing the Charter for Care Leavers in a way that expresses it in terms of a 'local contract' or a 'local pledge'
- ✓ a greater involvement of care leavers, both through the project itself, and through the surveys that have been carried out for it
- ✓ the setting up dedicated websites to inform and advise care leavers about their entitlements
- ✓ increases in the 'Setting Up Home Allowance' to at least £2,000 (*sometimes referred to as the 'Leaving Care Grant'*)
- ✓ reviews of financial policies and entitlements, resulting in greater support and accessibility for care leavers
- ✓ establishing more 'Staying Put' options
- ✓ creating more places and opportunities for care leavers on apprenticeship schemes
- ✓ better partnership working with the Department for Work and Pensions and Job Centre Plus to ensure that care leavers have immediate access to benefits they are entitled to from their 18th birthday
- ✓ approving the provision of 'drop in' facilities where care leavers can meet and get advice
- ✓ creating or extending 'passes' to give care leavers access to a range of local learning, leisure and community facilities

An example has been taken from each of the participating authorities of something that they recognise as having brought about some immediate benefit to care leavers. This is not intended to be in any way exhaustive, but just to provide a simple illustration of what we might call a few of the 'quick wins'.

Cheshire East has increased its Leaving Care Grant to £3,000; and succeeded in making a well-established apprenticeship scheme more accessible to care leavers.

Herefordshire has acquired and furnished a property to house a new multi-agency²⁰ drop-in facility for looked after children and care leavers. Its 16+ Team was also recognised for the quality of its work with young people:

*"The quality of plans contrasts sharply with the views that young people expressed to inspectors, which were very positive about the care, support and practical help provided by the 16+ Team. One young person said: 'They go the extra mile for you'. Workers build trusting relationships over time through regular contact and review."*²¹

Portsmouth, which is committed to *"doing more for, and better by, our care leavers"*²², started out its involvement in the New Belongings Project by comprehensively using the Charter as a framework against which to reflect on local systems and practice [See APPENDIX 3 in the 'New Belongings Companion Appendix']. It intends to repeat the process later this year, particularly to capture the impact of its engagement in New Belongings.

¹⁹ A member of the New Belongings Central Team

²⁰ This is supported by CAMHS, health, drug and alcohol support, housing, education providers, police and welfare rights, with ongoing efforts to expand this to include Job Centre Plus, voluntary groups and councillors.

²¹ Taken from Herefordshire's Ofsted Report, 30 June 2014

²² *New Belongings Implementation Project Brief*, Portsmouth City Council, 23 January 2014

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Sheffield has recently moved to a 'one-stop' shop with partners from Youth Justice, CAMHS and Sheffield Futures (the new Connexions service), which being shared by all young people from across Sheffield has the advantage of being less stigmatising for the care leavers that want to use it.

Sheffield has also been very keen to use New Belongings as way into working more closely with its young people:

"Having young people work directly alongside us in the development of the service ... would be both challenging and rewarding"²³

Staffordshire are looking to improve engagement through its 'Foundation to Work' scheme, an approach developed to open up employment pathways and apprenticeships for looked after young people and care leavers.

Stockport has recently introduced a Care Leavers Forum to give care leavers a more distinctive voice in improving local services; and has supported, with its partner organisation Pure Innovations, the setting up of a local charity led by care leavers called 'Pure Insight'.

It has also increased its 'Setting Up Home Allowance' to £3,000

Trafford are introducing Pre-Payment Cards for care leavers, which they can use at an ATM to draw on their Leaving Care Grants; or, in some cases, emergency payments.

Walsall has brought together a New Belongings Project 'Task and Finish' Group, which is co-chaired by care leavers.

Wirral are improving their website and the development of Apps for looked after children and care leavers.

6.5 Care leaver surveys

The New Belongings Project started out with a very simple proposition to each of the participating authorities: **'Could you survey your care leavers and ask them these seven simple questions':**

Question 1: *What do you think is the best thing about being a care leaver?* (Please select up to three)

Question 2: *What do you think is bad about being a care leaver?* (Please select up to three)

Question 3: *In your opinion, what three things could have prepared you for independence?*

Question 4: *What advice would you give other young people who are preparing to leave care?*

Question 5: *Three things you would like to change right now for yourself on leaving care / having left care*

Question 6: *What three things do you think the local authority should change for care leavers?*

Question 7: *Is there anything else you would like to say about being a care leaver?*

²³ Taken from 'New Belongings: submission by Sheffield Children, Young People and Families – Permanence & Throughcare Service', 19 June 2013

Some of the more experienced leaving care practitioners wondered whether this set of questions was too open-ended to provide useful responses, but as the New Belongings team explained, as a starting point:

“That’s quite a useful test because it also asks: Do you have contact details for your care leavers? Do you know how to approach them? Can you ask them these questions?”²⁴

“Their surveys have made them realise what they are not doing.”²⁵

6.6 Restructuring

Some of the participating authorities have been changing structures to improve strategic planning, shared information and practice, and joining up services. **Staffordshire**, for example, have used New Belongings to help them further develop their ‘Throughcare Model’, which places greater emphasis on progression, rather than leaving care being seen as a single, one-off event.

A few of the participating authorities, such as **Herefordshire** and **Stockport**, indicated in their Action Plans that they were either planning significant re-organisations of their leaving care teams and services; or were already in the process of doing so, but with some rather mixed results.

“Each time when we thought that we were making progress there would be a change of senior officer. We would be back to square one, sometimes meeting with people in the Authority who had not even seen the plan.”²⁶

“Bringing in a Participation Worker from another project seemed to do the trick. All of a sudden communication improved, we found out about things that were happening that we had never been told of before; such as a peer-mentoring scheme that they were starting.”²⁷

Herefordshire

“The 16+ team, which provides services for older looked after young people and care leavers, is emerging from a long period of instability, management changes and a legacy of under-resourcing, well below the national average. Over the last year, clear direction from a new team manager, development of the No4 centre as a team base and centre for young people, and additional qualified staff, have all had a positive impact on the service. Staff morale is now high and a strong team ethos is developing. However, many policies, procedures and practices are new and their impact on improving outcomes for care leavers has not yet been fully demonstrated.”²⁸

7. Plans and interventions

At the outset of the New Belongings Project, each of the participating authorities was asked to provide details of their Action Plan setting out the activities that it was proposing to engage in, as informed by what their own care leavers were telling them.

New Belongings represented a new opportunity and impetus for each participating authority to re-engage with delivering what is needed to support care leavers in making better transitions to adulthood. They have all started from a strong motivation of wanting to do better for their care leavers, and this was clearly reflected in all of the plans they came up with. However, care leavers themselves were fairly split on how much credit participating authorities should get for the plans they were drawing up.

“When people came up with their plans for New Belongings I thought what is all the fuss about, they should be doing these things in any case.”²⁹

²⁴ New Belongings Project Director

²⁵ A member of the New Belongings Central Team

²⁶ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

²⁷ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

²⁸ Taken from Herefordshire’s Ofsted Report, 30 June 2014

²⁹ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

"I think it is right to praise local authorities for doing those things they should be doing, because they weren't doing them before and getting slapped down for it."³⁰

The evidence shows that local care leavers have had varying degrees of impact in the development of New Belongings Action Plans. Some have had great influence on shaping local plans, encouraging change and innovation.

Evidence emerging from the projects suggests that working in partnerships or 'Clusters', with other local authorities, can be a highly effective way of delivering improvements. This is partly due to the shared planning, target-setting and accountability that tends to come through a partnership arrangement; and, in part, because of the greater opportunities it provides for sharing in each other's good practice.

"In discussion with managers from the North West 'Cluster', it is apparent that a group approach to service delivery and innovative practice has led to better outcomes in terms of New Belongings."³¹

It is also the case, as both **Staffordshire** and **Walsall** may have found, that bringing care leavers together under such a partnership arrangement encourages each to raise their game, not least because those care leavers will not have missed the opportunity to compare what they are getting from their respective authorities.

Trafford, supported well within the North West 'Cluster', have been giving real meaning to the concept of "care-proofing" by ensuring that the needs of looked after children and care leavers are on everyone's agenda.³²

The plans that were produced were, in the main, detailed, comprehensive and considered. Moreover, they were reflecting what care leavers were telling their local authorities they needed to be doing, even if at times this proved difficult to achieve.

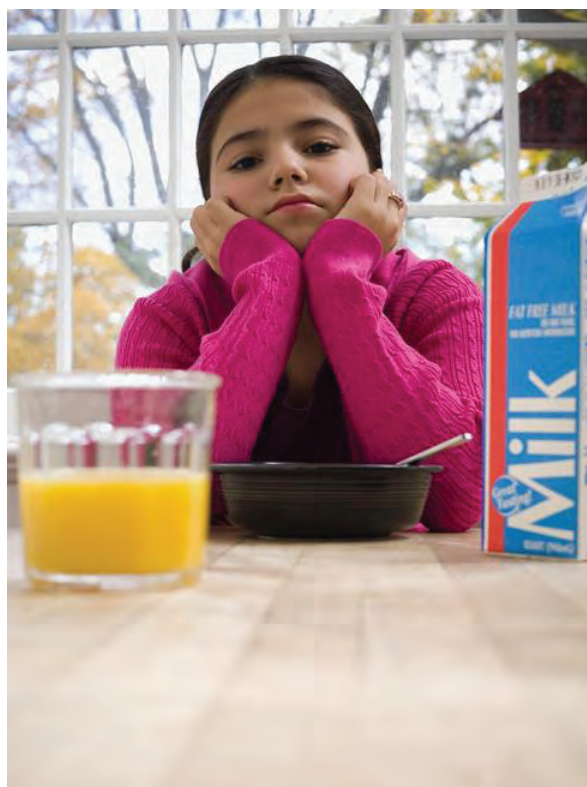
"We originally started with about 15 action areas. It was too much and we made progress once we had filtered some out and were focusing on 8-10 areas."³³

7.1 Engaging care leavers

Listening to care leavers has been one of the highlights of the New Belongings Project. Each participating authority has been addressing different degrees of challenge, and New Belongings has helped them to refocus local activity on listening to the voice of care leavers; and using their views and experiences to tailor services so that, to quote **Staffordshire**:

'... they are able to access the right services, at the right time, and in the right place.'³⁴

Participating authorities came into New Belongings with varying backgrounds of giving a voice to young people in their area; and below are just a few brief illustrations, taken from their New Belongings Action Plans, of how they are doing this.



³⁰ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

³¹ Manager of one of the 'Pilot' Leaving Care Services

³² By using the support of the CEO to get the needs of care leavers prioritised on every council committee and group

³³ 'New Belongings – Programme Evaluation Report', Portsmouth City Council, September 2014

³⁴ 'Families First: Throughcare Service for Young People, Expression of Interest to the New Belongings Project', Staffordshire County Council, June 2013

REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

Cheshire East has a number of care leavers who are on its Children in Care Council; have contributed to a number of consultations, including the influential 'Task and Finish' its Review; have been involved in staff recruitment; and, who are assisting with the New Belongings Project.

In **Herefordshire**, children and young people are represented by a Children in Care Council ... which is regularly consulted on how to improve the support they receive.

A Care Leavers Council and 'champions' are embedded into the Children in Care Framework.

Portsmouth, "... have a robust, challenging and effective Children in Care Council ... [but need to] increase the number of care leavers."

Sheffield has a relatively new intake on its Children in Care Council, which is now supported by the National Youth Advocacy Service. The Children in Care Council has completed a review of, and updated, the 'Local Pledge'.

Staffordshire came into New Belongings with a strong record of achievement in listening to the views of young people, and have developed a forum [4US] for care leavers. They saw New Belongings as an opportunity to engage better with their older group of young people.

Stockport have also introduced a Care Leavers Forum to give care leavers a voice in improving services, and the Forum has helped to develop a survey which routinely asks care leavers about their health; how safe they feel; their education and employment status; and their experience of leaving care.

Trafford are engaging young people in helping to bring planning processes together, such as joint Care and Pathway Plans, and shaping what these should look like.

They were also establishing a Care Leavers Forum.

In **Walsall**, "Young people are given a voice through 'Council for Kids' (C4K), and this has some care leavers on it."

Wirral have developed a drop-in service for care leavers

"The drop-in is provided fortnightly on a Friday and provides young people access to information and advice and also provides an opportunity to talk to other care leavers. It is run by the apprentice care leaver."

What each of their respective plans show is that, in spite of where they have started from or, indeed, where they are now, there is a strong commitment to getting better at ensuring that care leaver's views are properly informing services.

7.2 Conducting surveys

All nine participating authorities have been conducting surveys, as an integral part of the New Belongings Project; and engaged local care leavers, to help inform service improvement and the development of their action plans.

It is appreciated that these surveys will have been delivered often by staff working under considerable pressure of limited time and resources. However, that accepted, opportunities will have been lost due to some rather disappointing results in terms of the overall response rates to these surveys; which were, for the results from five participating authorities, 6%, 7%, 7%, 10% and 26% respectively.

"[On the surveys] it was said that if we can get 10% that'll be ok!"³⁵

"It was skipped over ... we only had seven responses and no-one asked why."³⁶

This evidence calls into question of whether care leaver views were representative enough, when a broader sampling might well have reflected a wider range of issues and priorities.

"If you were doing a survey properly you would have 'inclusion criteria' to tell you about those groups you weren't engaging with."³⁷

"The answers to the surveys, when taken to meetings were quite powerful, and that was positive; but they were not representative of all care leavers."³⁸

This means that significant numbers and cohorts of care leavers will not have been heard.

Whilst the take up of surveys was generally quite disappointing, we have probably seen enough to be confident that this is something that local authorities can improve upon if they continue to do them as a regular part of their service improvement. They will understand that you cannot improve your services without talking to your service users; and it therefore stands to reason that the better you become at talking to your service users the better your services are likely to be.

Learning from New Belongings suggests that local authorities, in engaging care leavers to develop leaving care services to ensure that these are meeting their needs, will find it helpful to carry out regular surveys, over a much longer period to increase opportunities for contact through regular activities such as drop-in sessions, visits, reviews and events. Some targeting of particular groups for inclusion might also help, as should efforts by some participating authorities to engage with new technologies, including social media. However, there may also be people already working in or with local authorities who have particular skills and expertise in consulting children and young people, and who might be well placed to help with this sort of work.

Some care leavers working for New Belongings also questioned whether more could have been done to help prepare and support some local young people who had never been consulted before.

"It was a very new experience for them. They had never been asked for their opinion; and some had never seen a worker for six months. To be invited into a group and asked their opinion on writing a Pathway Plan and changing the system was unrealistic and wholly out of context."³⁹

However, young people who had previous experience of being consulted were not always that well-motivated either to give their views.

"One young person told me that they did not want to be involved as there was no point, and the last time they were given a voucher for something and then had their benefits stopped."⁴⁰

³⁵ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

³⁶ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

³⁷ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

³⁸ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

³⁹ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁴⁰ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

It is clear, however, from the surveys that have been carried out under New Belongings that, in spite of their limitations and generally poor take up, they have been used effectively to inform some quite significant changes of thinking and policy.

“It has made a massive difference, just that awareness.”⁴¹

This is important because all five participating authorities, who returned data from their surveys, said that they intended to do these again, probably on an annual basis. Doing so, will help to familiarise the practice as a regular thing, and give care leavers a growing confidence that what they say through it is being listened to and making a real difference.

7.3 Keeping in touch

Some participating authorities have been working on finding better ways of keeping in touch with their care leavers. There were some good examples shown of drop-in centres, some dedicated for care leavers and others generic, and the development of better and more accessible information for care leavers through websites and social media.

As part of its New Belongings Action Plan, **Portsmouth** included:

“To establish relationships and ways of keeping in contact with care leavers, which encourage and support them both in shaping local services and to keep in touch in crisis situations; also involving the knowledge and experience of care leavers at a national level to generate ideas and identify “what works”.

In addition to existing local Children in Care Councils, many participating authorities have used the influence of New Belongings to introduce a bespoke care leaver’s forum, giving local care leavers a stronger and more distinctive voice in improving and developing services.

7.4 Entitlements

New Belongings has encouraged a comprehensive review of entitlements for care leavers, with greater commitment to ensuring that information about these is more widely and easily available to care leavers.

Most participating authorities have reviewed their financial policies under New Belongings, now resulting in much clearer statements about what care leavers are entitled to; and often with more beneficial outcomes (e.g. widespread increases in the ‘Setting Up Home Allowances’).

Below are just a few illustrations, taken from their New Belongings Action Plans, of how participating authorities have been addressing this issue.

Cheshire East

- ✓ *All care leavers are aware of, and receive, what they are entitled to as set out in the Care Leaver Financial Policy*
All care leavers across the New Belongings cohort to have equality of entitlement to support and services
- ✓ *Joint protocols with Job Centre Plus enabling care leavers to receive their benefits entitlements from their 18th birthday; and, an agreed strategy to reduce the use of sanctions against care leavers failing to engage with Job Centre Plus. The option of housing benefit for care leavers on low wages or living independently is also being explored*

Herefordshire

- ✓ *Children and young people are helped to understand their rights and responsibilities*
- ✓ *Care leavers are provided with information about their legal entitlements*

⁴¹ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

NEW BELONGINGS

Portsmouth

- ✓ *To establish and run a small “task and finish” group, to include local care leavers, which will look at the best ways to provide information to care leavers about their entitlements, including the production of a Transition from Care entitlement information pack*
- ✓ *To plan and deliver a programme of training and awareness-raising for social workers and other key local professionals about care leaver entitlements*

Sheffield

“The close working with the Department for Works and Pensions and Job Centre Plus has ensured Sheffield young people are able to establish their benefits claim early so there is little or no delay post their 18th birthday.

This has resulted in a substantial saving for the service as we no longer have to financially support our young people for weeks before they receive their money (from the DWP).”

Staffordshire

- ✓ *Ensure that young people, relevant staff and all others involved with children’s services are clear about care leaver’s rights and entitlements, through promotion, training and information*

Stockport

- ✓ *Support care leavers to receive financial advice and guidance, so that they can maximise and manage their income, and reduce the risk of getting into debt*

Care leavers are provided with a young person-friendly leaflet called ‘Your Starter for 10’, which sets out their legal entitlements.

Trafford

- ✓ *Providing a clearer understanding of care leaver entitlements and welfare rights*
- ✓ *Replacing the system for paying Leaving Care Grants with the introduction of ‘Pre-Payment Cards*
- ✓ *Ensuring all care leavers are aware of their entitlements to education, employment and training; and know how to access them*
- ✓ *Ensuring equal access to entitlements*

Walsall

Working to clarify and re-state entitlements for care leavers

Wirral

Wirral have been developing young people friendly policies, starting with the Leaving Care Financial Policy.

“Young people have been very clear about being able to access policies and procedures in a way that they can understand. To date, young people friendly policies have been written on the Complaints process, Your Health policy, Delegation of Authority, Guide to the Payment of Foster Carers and the Leaving Care Financial policy.”

The website enables young people to access policies and procedures, and information about entitlements

Prior to this fresh start, New Belongings was beginning to indicate a certain level of distrust amongst care leavers about whether their local authority would always be motivated to consistently do what was best for them.

“In the real world we cannot afford to rely only on compassion, so we have to have all of the entitlements and rights the same across the board.”⁴²

“We are constantly told that this is happening because the law says that it should be happening, but what do I care what the law says if I’m the one not getting what I should be getting.”⁴³



The New Belongings Project started with young people going to the Minister⁴⁴ frustrated at not getting what he was telling them they should be getting.

“The Minister told us that we have written it in law, and put it in our policies, so it should be happening.”⁴⁵

What is clear, looking at findings from New Belongings, is that you cannot always rely upon legislation and guidance to guarantee that care leavers will consistently receive all of the help and support they are entitled to.

“I haven’t yet met anyone who has ‘stayed put’ even though their policies say that they are entitled to.”⁴⁶

One of the many successes coming out of New Belongings has been the encouragement it has given to local authorities in re-examining entitlements, and this has been to the greater benefit of many care leavers.

One of the quickest and most effective ways of testing your services is to bring a group of care leavers together, from different local authorities, and let them compare what each other are getting.

“Whereas most local authorities [doing this] worried that care leavers would want more money, most of them simply wanted somebody to care enough to listen to them.”⁴⁷

“It was a huge problem that some care leavers we met did not know what they were entitled to, and some authorities were not openly giving it.”⁴⁸

“There should be a savings scheme whilst they are still in care, to help fund things for when they leave. Isn’t that what any sensible parent would do?”⁴⁹

The **North West ‘Cluster’**, which has been looking into benefits as one of its key themes, offered the following observation:

“We are all working hard to reduce hardship for all care leavers, but still too often we are faced with immediate sanctions with young people resorting to other means to get finance.”

⁴² A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁴³ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁴⁴ The Children’s Minister holds quarterly meetings with a group of care leavers

⁴⁵ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁴⁶ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁴⁷ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁴⁸ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁴⁹ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

7.5 Education, Employment & Training

Involvement in New Belongings has supported a further strengthening of opportunities for care leavers through education, employment and training. Participating authorities have recognised such opportunities as providing the best pathways to achieving successful outcomes for care leavers. Below are some brief illustrations, taken from New Belongings Actions Plans, of things participating authorities have been doing on employment, education and training.

Cheshire East

Cheshire East has been working in partnership with Trafford, Stockport and Wirral to form a New Belongings North West 'Cluster', and has been taking the leading role on the key theme of education, employment and training. Statements set out in its own Action Plan indicate Cheshire East's commitment to:

- ✓ *Making their well-established apprenticeship scheme more accessible to care leavers*
- ✓ *Working in partnerships to develop more apprenticeship opportunities*
- ✓ *Working with universities to ensure better information about the opportunities and support available to care leavers*
- ✓ *Council contracts only to be awarded to providers agreeing to offer work experience or apprenticeship opportunities to care leavers [see also Trafford]*

Herefordshire

Herefordshire are using the support of the Project to help them improve in-house work experience opportunities for their care leavers.

"We want our young people to have improved outcomes through employment, apprenticeships and work experience."

Portsmouth

At the outset of the New Belongings Project, as a snapshot, Portsmouth's leaving care services were supporting 78 care leavers. Of these, 8 were at university, 26 at college, 5 were in work, 4 were completing apprenticeships, 2 others were on courses with training providers and 32 were stated as not being in education, employment or training; leaving one care leaver unaccounted for.

Under the heading '**What we do well**':

"We hold high aspirations for our care leavers."

"All care leavers have access to a qualified careers adviser."

"We take time to understand the goals each young person has for themselves."

"We have developed apprenticeship and work placement opportunities within the council and some partner agencies."

Under the heading '**What we could do better**':

"To further reduce (from 27%) the proportion of care leavers without education or employment."

"To ensure all colleges and training providers are able to offer quality education opportunities and associated support for care leavers."

"To develop apprenticeship opportunities within partner organisations including the community, voluntary and private sector."

REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

Sheffield

Partnership working with education and training providers is looking to raise awareness about the particular needs of care leavers; and increase access and support to education. Other initiatives are being worked up with colleagues from the National Care Advisory Service to introduce the 'From Care2Work' initiative. As a service, there are no apprenticeships or work opportunities identified for care leavers. This is something that Sheffield would like to see change under New Belongings.

Staffordshire

Staffordshire are looking at ways of improving engagement within its 'Foundation to Work' Scheme; an approach developed to open up employment pathways and apprenticeships for looked after young people and care leavers, with New Belongings seen as an enabler in helping to drive this forward and give it much needed influence.

Virtual School Head Teacher has been developing partnerships with further and higher education providers, under an initiative called 'UNIFY', which aims to increase the proportion of care leavers going onto university from 5% to 10% over the next three years. New Belongings is being seen as providing a stronger platform upon which to develop this work.

Stockport

Stockport works in partnership with Pure Innovations to improve care leavers access to, and support in, education, employment and training. Pure Innovations run a weekly drop-in session looking at developing skills in applying for courses or work. In addition, care leavers are specifically targeted for the Council's apprenticeship schemes.

Educational support to over 16s includes transition from school to further education, with local colleges showing great innovation by employing someone to act in a similar role to that of the Designated Teacher in schools. There are systems in place to support care leavers claim their entitlements to an education bursary (worth £1,200), if staying on in further education; or, the Higher Education Bursary of £2,000, and support with their vacation accommodation, where going on to university.

Stockport are building on the good access to apprenticeships, working with Human Resources to ensure better commitment to employment opportunities for care leavers. There is opportunity for this owing to a strengthening of links, through the Children's Trust Board, with Job Centre Plus, and the 0-25 strategy for those care leavers with disability or special needs.

Trafford

Pre-employment training schemes are being developed, with a new project being formed. The aim is that this will lead on to young people, including care leavers, going into an apprenticeship provided by Trafford College.

Trafford, at the outset of the New Belongings Project, had four care leavers on its Apprenticeship Scheme, with one other application being processed. Upon completion, they will be guided into permanent employment where possible.

We are exploring some innovative changes when awarding of Council contracts so that these may now only be offered to providers giving work experience or apprenticeship opportunities to care leavers [see also Cheshire East].

There are also eight looked after children involved in an 'Activity Agreement', a scheme to increase their chances of securing long-term employment or training opportunities.

A partnership with the Manchester United Foundation is beginning to reap opportunities for care leavers in a range of football-related professions.

Connexions hold regular Open Days; and quarterly 'Employment Surgeries' for more extensive work with young people not in education, employment or training.

Walsall

Some of the young people involved in designing Walsall's bid suggested looking into the possibility of them acting as models for trainees on a local hair and beauty therapy course, feeling that this might help boost their own confidence for going onto a college course.

7.6 Accommodation

Perhaps one of the most challenging issues faced by all of the New Belongings participating authorities was how to find safe and suitable accommodation to meet the needs of young people leaving care. In some areas, such as **Herefordshire**, the sparse availability and choice of local housing stock drastically affects options for care leavers, whether in the private or socially-rented sector.

“Herefordshire suffers from poor housing affordability, which makes it a challenge finding accommodation that suits the needs of those with complex and challenging behaviour. 46 care leavers are currently seen as difficult to place and work is ongoing with partners and commissioners to address this.”

In spite of these obvious barriers to finding accommodation, **Herefordshire** has been recognised as having increased choice and options for care leavers.

“A range of suitable accommodation and housing meets the needs of young people and this includes supported housing, foyers provision and tenancies. 91% of care leavers are in suitable accommodation, which is above the national average of 88%. Young people told inspectors that they felt safe where they lived and benefited from practical support and regular contact with personal advisors and housing workers, helping them to develop independent living skills. The Staying Put policy has increased choice for those who want to remain in foster care with a level of support well matched to individual need. Eleven young people have chosen this so far, with carers trained for three more. The 16+ team works well with the youth offending service to meet the needs of young people in custody in preparation for their return to the community.”⁵⁰

Below are a few other illustrations given that have been taken from what participating authorities have been telling us they have been doing on accommodation.

Cheshire East are working with Commissioning and Housing to ensure sufficiency of provision for care leavers.

Portsmouth has an effective Young Persons Housing Panel helping to provide a range of accommodation options which meets young people’s needs. There has been a good take up of tenancies in council properties, although work is ongoing to develop more supported housing options for young people with more complex needs. Portsmouth currently offers two training flats to provide a supportive environment to learn skills for independence. Portsmouth’s plan, under New Belongings, is to:

- develop a broader range of semi-supported accommodation, with an increasing emphasis on shared accommodation facilities and less reliance on sole occupancy settings
- analyse both the future housing needs of 16-17 year olds currently in care and current local care leaver accommodation options and identify key gaps and weaknesses in the current accommodation offer
- ensure that there is effective support in place for those young people who wish to return home at 18 or who wish to “stay put” with their current foster carers

Sheffield will be establishing ‘Staying Put’ following consultation with key stakeholders, including foster carers. On-going work is taking place with Housing and third sector accommodation providers looking to ensure that suitable, affordable and sustainable accommodation can be accessed by care leavers.

Sheffield are to establish a ‘tenancy ready’ course to help prepare young people with the skills and understanding they need to maintain their tenancies. A specialist post is being developed to support this.

⁵⁰ Taken from Herefordshire’s Ofsted report, 30 June 2014

REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

Staffordshire

Within Staffordshire's 20-point Action Plan is included a commitment to improve accommodation for care leavers.

In line with many other local authorities, they too are developing a 'Staying Put' Policy to support some young people staying in placements with their foster carers beyond 18 years of age.

Stockport

Ensure that care leavers are living in safe and suitable accommodation that meets their needs and reduces risks of homelessness.

Trafford

- Ensure that all care leavers are aware of what housing or accommodation is available to them
- Identify all accommodation options across Trafford for care leavers; and ensure that there are joint protocols in place with Housing
- Identify all accommodation options across Trafford for homeless 16 and 17 year olds
- Look into what emergency accommodation there is in Trafford, and whether this is meeting the needs of care leavers

"Enabling young people to remain in placement post-18; through our 'Staying Put' Policy to include residential care."

From within the **North West 'Cluster'** there has been a helpful clarification with Ofsted that exemptions can be made, with the Registered Managers of children's homes, for young people in residential care to also have an option of 'Staying Put' post-18. The exemption principally relies on an interpretation of Section 1(3) of the Care Standards Act 2000, which defines a 'children's home' as "*wholly or mainly for children*". Importantly, it does not say that a children's home should be exclusively for children (i.e. only up to the age of 17), but allows for a wider, more permissive interpretation where it may be in the interests of a young person aged 18 or over to 'Stay Put' until such time as they are ready to leave. Trafford's 'Staying Put' policy, which is being adopted by their partner authorities, is a progressive recognition that children living in children's homes are entitled to equal treatment and consideration, with the same expectations of care and support that are provided within the policy to children in foster care.

Wirral

Wirral has been working as part of the North West 'Cluster', taking the lead on Supported Accommodation and Housing issues.

Through close partnership working Wirral have focused on the following activities:

- Development of Emergency Accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds
- Reconfiguration of existing 'Supporting People' funded Supported Housing Services for Looked After Children
- Establishment of a Young Persons Strategic Housing Group
- Discretionary Housing Payments

Wirral has been offering a 'Staying Put' Scheme since October 2013, for young people aged up to 21 in foster care in, or actively seeking, education, employment or training.

The **North West 'Cluster'**, which has been looking into accommodation as one of its key themes, offered the following observation:

"As corporate parents we give care leavers priority housing status but deem them intentionally homeless when they leave their accommodation when the risks are very high. We should be developing Housing Protocols that remove the 'intentionally homeless' clause for care leavers as we are their Corporate Parents."

7.7 Health

Most of the participating authorities have recognised the health care needs of care leavers within their New Belongings Action Plans, but some have given greater attention to this than others.

Herefordshire

The health needs of care leavers are clearly assessed, prioritised and met.

Care leavers have access to and understand their full health history and are provided with all key documents they need to begin their lives as young adults, for example national insurance numbers, birth certificates and passports.

"Young people are encouraged to live healthy life-styles and make informed choices about their health, relationships and behaviour. The looked after children nurse runs a weekly drop-in session at No4, with the option of a full health assessment for all aged under 18. The take-up is currently low but is improving and non-attendance is followed up. Young people have good access to youth counselling, substance misuse and sexual health services. Ten young people make regular use of the free gym membership that is available to all care leavers. Personal advisors ensure that young people have relevant identity documents, national insurance numbers and birth certificates. Only three young people currently have a copy of their full health record and action is being taken to ensure that they all do."⁵¹

Portsmouth

Part of its Plan is:

To provide adult mental health services where needed for care leavers up to their 25th birthday.

Stockport

Promote and improve the physical and emotional well-being and mental health of care leavers.

The **North West 'Cluster'**, which has been looking into health as one of its key themes, offered the following observation:

"There is too much bureaucracy, no commitment to jointly assess, resistance to use terminology or processes that mention automatic entitlements. Thresholds do not include emotional need and personal issues are often clouded by mental health diagnoses. There is limited alternative provision to support care leavers with emotional needs, when CAMHS ends for them at 18 years old."

7.8 Disability

Portsmouth

"To provide tailored specialist support to young people with disabilities and other at risk/vulnerable groups with specific needs."

As part of its commitment to improving its services to care leavers with disabilities, Portsmouth have a Personal Adviser in the Careers Guidance Team, who has disability as one of their specialist areas.

⁵¹ Taken from Herefordshire's Ofsted Report, 30 June 2014

Cheshire East too are *“Exploring the potential to recruit a Personal Adviser with specialist knowledge in respect of Disability”*.

8. How New Belongings supported these

What has come out of the material, provided for the evaluation, is a sense of the cultural change that has taken place in terms of high level support and prioritising; departments across the authority working better together; and the greater impact that the voice of young people has had on the development and delivery of services.

“They have been shifting culture, belief systems and documentation, which is very hard to capture. They are focusing on process; and because they haven’t had sufficient time in which to show outcomes process is very important. It is hard to say about achievement when it is really about process, but these are things that are going to make a difference in future.”⁵²

8.1 Supporting care leavers’ involvement

A feature of the New Belongings Project has been the extent to which young people have influenced it, at both national and local level. Participating authorities have been encouraged to re-define their services, to a greater or lesser extent, around the experiences and views of care leavers.

“They seem to have taken on board stuff we’d said, even when I recommended having a special Personal Adviser to work with disabled people.”⁵³

Other participating authorities also looked at the model of developing specialist areas for their Personal Advisers, some around structures such as housing and benefits; whilst others, like **Portsmouth**, focused their specialisms on need, such as disability, mental health or seeking asylum.

“From the young people’s perspective, they have been really positive about their Personal Advisers, although there are issues about who makes decisions and how long they take.”⁵⁴

“The Personal Advisers that had the respect of the young people were the ones that went that extra mile.”⁵⁵

8.2 The role of the Central Team

Prior to the outset of this project, the Care Leaver Foundation brought together, as a “Central Team”, a group of experts from different backgrounds in government and third sector organisations; and a national panel of care leavers many experienced in campaigning on care and leaving care issues.

What New Belongings has brought fresh to each of the nine participating authorities is free expert support and advice. It has brought was considerable experience and expertise in organisational skills, project management and a keen understanding of the environment in which local authorities operate. Some of the participating authorities made great use of this aspect, whilst others not so much. Many already came with their own very experienced and well-respected experts in leaving care; and at the outset of the project a few questioned what, in terms of ‘added value’, the Central Team had to offer them. However, what the ‘Central Team’ has done has been to help them open many useful doors that were not necessarily open to them before the start of New Belongings; and they have shown them many better ways to get things done.

What the care leavers on the ‘Central Team’ have brought has also been quite widely appreciated. They have helped to empower and enthuse a whole new generation of care leavers to stand up and have their say in local services.

“They (local authorities) have used Central Team care leavers very well in terms of motivating their own care leavers.”⁵⁶

⁵² A member of the New Belongings Central Team

⁵³ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁵⁴ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁵⁵ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁵⁶ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

“Because we wanted this to be their [local care leavers] time to shine we stood back a little.”⁵⁷

“At the beginning of the Project, a lot of care leavers I spoke to felt that they had been dumped, but now they feel better supported and helped.”⁵⁸

Evidence from care leavers on the ‘Central Team’ has tended to speak very highly of the support they themselves received. The few exceptions that they themselves have raised have been on needing better communication; and, at times, access to better expert advice, more relevant to some of the technical issues about leaving care that they were trying to address. It has been difficult, without the latter, for the Central Team to provide as effective support to its care leavers, or challenge to participating authorities, as they might otherwise have done.

“If we don’t know what they [local authorities] are supposed to be doing, and they don’t know what they are supposed to be doing, how does anybody know if they are actually doing it right?”⁵⁹

Managing the synergy between the role of local care leavers and members of the ‘Central Team’s’ Care Leavers Panel has been a real challenge; and one which, for the most part, the New Belongings Project has managed well. However, that said, some of the care leavers on the national panel were frustrated that they did not appear to have as much of a say as they would have wanted.

“I believe that most of the care leavers on the Panel would have wanted to do more.”⁶⁰

Whilst they spoke highly of the support and advice they received from the Central Team, many felt that they appeared overly concerned, at times, about them saying anything that might upset the local authorities they were working with.

“I think one of the problems [with New Belongings] was that everyone was treading on eggshells, whether about expectations of us as care leavers or of the local authorities we have been working with.”⁶¹

“I think the Central Team have been fantastic, there has been so much passion; but I’ve felt well not deflated, but that it has not quite lived up to all the ‘let’s make a change’ that it promised.”⁶²

“There is pressure on being an involved care leaver to act as a good ambassador so that they do not reinforce bad stereotypes about people with care experience.”⁶³

Another aspect of care leavers own involvement concerned the extent to which there were, at times, failures to hold them to account for their work.

“Accountability is important, even for care leavers, instead of treading on eggshells. One piece of work I did I got in late and if that was another job I would have expected someone to say that wasn’t acceptable. We cannot take pride in our work if nobody else does; and, positive discrimination doesn’t help us if it lets us think that anything less than our best is good enough.”⁶⁴

Others appreciated the support they received, but questioned whether it was lacking in some aspects of the expertise that they were looking for.



⁵⁷ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁵⁸ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁵⁹ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁶⁰ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁶¹ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁶² A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁶³ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁶⁴ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

“The Central Team has been amazing, but sometimes it’s been difficult because some of these people are new to social care issues and have been learning alongside us.”⁶⁵

“With entitlements, I found that I had to look up a lot of that stuff myself. That probably took most of my time.”⁶⁶

Many care leavers on the panel thought that it would have been helpful to have someone they could check these tricky issues out with; and also felt that communication between each other could have been better.

“I stopped using the New Belongings email address because I knew that nobody else was using it.”⁶⁷

“It would also have been good to have had better ways of finding out what was happening elsewhere. It would have been very useful to be able to go to other care leavers and ask how they were managing to do certain things in their region.”⁶⁸

The New Belongings Project has itself experienced a few difficulties around communication. There have been some delays in getting meetings or sharing key information about progress; and, misunderstandings about expectations that the Central Team had which some participating authorities felt were over-demanding and unrealistic. However, for the most part, there have been effective working partnerships between participating authorities and the New Belongings team.

Whilst there are improvements that could be identified, the Central Team has performed a highly effective role in engaging with both its care leavers and participating authorities and driving them onto achieving outstanding progress in such a short period of time.

9. Some issues raised by New Belongings

9.1 Capturing best practice

Recording change at the best of times is both difficult and time-consuming, and these participating authorities were all working under the greatest possible pressure to deliver against limited resources and within very challenging timescales. Due to this, it was noted⁶⁹ that, perhaps in less trying circumstances, some local authorities could improve on how practice worth keeping is written down and shared.

Whilst it was clear that local authorities were getting on with things, some were seen as not necessarily being quick to let others know about it, including their own colleagues, the New Belongings Team or the independent evaluation team.

“It’s great that you are doing these things but it is taking me a hell of a job to find it out”⁷⁰

“If we (myself and two care leavers) had not been so tenacious we could have easily assumed that nothing had been done”⁷¹

“[a named local authority] have been doing good stuff, even though it might not match what they have written down”⁷²

It is potentially a false economy not to have captured prior learning and expertise; only to have to replicate much of it again once a new team is put in place. New Belongings has revealed some examples of re-invention taking place, at both local and national level, due in part to people newly tasked with responsibilities for leaving care having to revisit many of the same issues that someone before them has probably already come up with perfectly good solutions to.

⁶⁵ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁶⁶ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁶⁷ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁶⁸ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁶⁹ In evidence from members of the New Belongings Central Team and Care Leavers Panel

⁷⁰ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁷¹ A member of the New Belongings Central Team

⁷² A member of the New Belongings Central Team

Some of the learning from this project has been so valuable in moving forward on progress with leaving care, that we probably need to find more effective and reliable ways of capturing the practice from all of those involved.

9.2 Towards a 'Gold Standard'

The aspiration that we should all have for our care leavers, was introduced by the Children's Minister, Edward Timpson MP, in a speech that he gave at the launch of the New Belongings Project on 2nd September 2013.

In setting out their bids to become one of the New Belongings 'Pilot' Projects, each participating authority, in effect, pledged an aspiration:

'to create a 'Gold Standard' in relation to services for care leavers, which could be replicated in other local authorities ... by:

- i) working closely with communities to respond proactively to the challenges faced by care leavers;*
- ii) joining up local services to ensure a more holistic approach; and*
- iii) listening to care leavers to ensure that services are better meeting their needs'*

[wording is a paraphrasing from the **Cheshire East** and **Trafford** bids].

However, the pursuit of a 'Gold Standard' was never going to be straightforward.

*"I'm quite nervous about a 'Gold Standard' because as soon as you define it people will begin to see it as setting the limits of what they should be doing. A 'Gold Standard' must therefore imply setting the highest of standards possible ..."*⁷³

Having raised the issue of a 'Gold Standard' for leaving care it would seem reasonable that the next step must involve defining what that is, and what a local authority would need to do in order to achieve it. For it to be worth anything, it must have a high level profile and credibility from both within the sector and amongst care leavers. This would need to be done within the wider context of understanding that leaving care is one of the few remaining services within children's social care that is not subject to some sort of formal Standards, although Ofsted has produced an inspection framework against which it judges local authority leaving care services.

It has been problematic throughout that New Belongings has been working within the context of "Towards a Gold Standard" that has yet to be properly defined.

*"We think we will have something at the end of the Project that says this is what we think a 'Gold Standard' might look like."*⁷⁴

All the same, the New Belongings Project has raised several important questions already for the participating authorities to consider, and both **Cheshire East** and **Trafford** have helpfully attempted to describe 'What 'good' looks like', within their Action Plans. This could usefully be the start of an essential practice-based input towards any future development there might be of any national Leaving Care Standards:

- ✓ *Young people leaving care, and preparing for leaving care, receive support and help to assist them in making successful transitions to adulthood.*
- ✓ *Plans for them to leave are effective and address their individual needs.*
- ✓ *They are safe and feel safe, particularly where they live.*
- ✓ *Young people have the necessary skills and resilience to make successful moves towards living independently.*
- ✓ *Care leavers are able to access education, employment, training and safe housing.*
- ✓ *They enjoy stable and lasting relationships with staff and carers who meet their needs.*

⁷³ A member of the New Belongings Central Team

⁷⁴ New Belongings Project Director

For some care leavers, in particular, the role that Ofsted might be able to play in driving forward standards is seen as key.

“Everybody knows that if Ofsted comes to town and say it should happen, it will happen.”⁷⁵

“They should have young people helping them on inspection, that’s what they really need.”⁷⁶

This observation, about the involvement of young people in inspection, is well taken. This is something that happened to great effect in the past, under the Social Services Inspectorate and within a number of local authority Registration and Inspection Units. Ofsted could benefit greatly from the additional insights that this would bring them, and research into engaging young people would appear to confirm that this is a highly effective way of getting at the views of some of our ‘harder to reach’ young people.

The experience of New Belongings highly suggests that the creation of some sort of standards could be beneficial. These would be helpful in guiding both service improvement and inspection work. There have been many good things about New Belongings, and many things that have improved; but there are enduring questions about consistency and why, when something can be done so well in one local authority it seemingly can’t in another.

There is something rather intuitive; from within the learning for New Belongings, which tells us that we might, at times, need to transcend local interests if we are to commit more consistently to meeting the needs of care leavers, and eradicating unfairness and inequalities that persist within the system.

“You cannot use local autonomy as an excuse for not providing us with what we are rightly entitled to.”⁷⁷

But striving towards what the Children’s Minister has chosen to call a ‘Gold Standard’, does not necessarily equate to everybody being expected to do exactly the same thing; rather, it should refer to an expectation that care leavers should be getting the same level and quality of service regardless of anywhere in the country they happen to be leaving care from.

“Yes, I think there should be some leeway in what local services are allowed to do, but when we get to our entitlements then that should be made universal.”⁷⁸

This is reflected very much in what we found from these nine participating authorities. Each raised the quality of their work and services significantly, to ensure that their care leavers were receiving more of what they were entitled to, but went about it in their own unique and different ways.

9.3 Strengthening ‘corporate parenting’

As mentioned previously, many participating authorities have been looking to embed aspects of New Belongings into their local Corporate Parenting Strategies. This is good because, ultimately, any true test of ‘Gold Standard’ leaving care services has to be informed by what we would expect ‘if these were our own children’.

We know that the ‘good’ parent does all that they can to support their children upon leaving home and after:

- Many even save for that eventuality
- They support their children mainly in leaving to live with someone else or others⁷⁹ (*typically when going to university, getting married or ‘living’ with a partner, working away from home, sharing rented accommodation or moving in with friends*)
- They make sure that their children are living in a safe place, with safe people, in a safe area

⁷⁵ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁷⁶ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁷⁷ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁷⁸ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁷⁹ Which require a different set of skills and preparation for ‘inter-dependent’ living

- They encourage and help their children to find work, training or to continue their education (including, where they have the means, of ‘taking them into the family business’)
- They continue to support and take pride in their achievements
- They continue to fight for their children whenever they are not getting something that they are entitled to
- They encourage their children to come back and see them; and keep in touch with them, with family and with and with friends (making sure they at least have the means to do so)
- They lend their children a bit of money whenever they can, often without any preconceptions of ever getting it back
- They encourage them to eat well and live a healthy life
- They encourage them to stay out of trouble
- They help, where they can, with practical things like driving lessons and getting that first car
- They make sure that their child has all the important documents that they are ever likely to need (*such as their national insurance number, passport, medical card, birth certificate, a bank account etc.*)
- Above all, a ‘good’ parent believes in their child; only wants the best for them; and, will stick by them no matter what

These are all aspects of ‘good’ parenting that we have seen well-reflected in what participating authorities, to varying extents, have been doing under New Belongings; and many have been using New Belongings to strengthen their ‘corporate parenting’.

For the local authority, there will always be competing priorities and demands on their resources, but looked after children and care leavers hold a unique position in being the only service users where the local authority have responsibilities as parents. Good parents always prioritise their children, and one of the most encouraging things we have seen under New Belongings is how these nine participating authorities have been putting in place robust measures to ensure that this will continue to be the case long after the end of this particular project.

9.4 Out of sight ...

The New Belongings Project has raised important implications for every local authority in the country, not least the challenge of whether they themselves are doing enough for care leavers. In particular, in spite of evidence of pockets of good work taking place, there is concern that not always enough is being done to support some of our more ‘hidden’ or hard to reach care leavers.⁸⁰ The evidence from New Belongings strongly suggests a continuing inequality in that local, indigenous care leavers are likely to be more engaged and better supported than are young people leaving care from out-of-authority placements. Not all participating authorities showed that they have adequate measures in place, including through their commissioning processes, to meet the needs of young people leaving care from out of the local area.

“How do you provide a service to a care leaver living 100 miles away? You don’t! From my experience, local authorities can only provide a service to local, indigenous care leavers; not those leaving care outside the area.”⁸¹

If the concerns being expressed here are correct then they suggests that the existing legislation⁸² might be unworkable, in places. A better way forward might be revisions based on the **North West ‘Cluster’** good practice model of ‘adopting’ any care leaver who happens to turn up in their area, with a view to providing them with advice and support. However, it is important that the system does not subsequently penalise them for having taken on financial and statutory burdens that should rightly fall to the ‘responsible authority’, or that the care leaver should expect to receive any less of a service

⁸⁰ Young parent care leavers; care leavers seeking asylum; care leavers with disability; or young people leaving care from custody, hospital, out-of-authority placements or having previously gone missing from care

⁸² New Belongings Project Director

⁸² Section 23A of the Children Act 1989, as amended by the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, established the principle that: ‘The “responsible authority” is the one that last looked after the young person before they became a care leaver.’

than is being provided to local, indigenous care leavers. Given that it is not always consistent with the wishes or interests of a young person placed out-of-authority to be brought back into the responsible authority's area solely to receive leaving care support, it seems that some sort of reciprocal arrangements between local authorities to provide advice and services to all care leavers might be helpful.

*"Where I am they have something called the 'local offer' where they will provide a care leaver from outside the area with some support and services."*⁸³

*"In Wales, they have a cross-county agreement, through the Welsh Leaving Care Forum, that every local authority will provide 'advice and assistance' to any care leaver across Wales."*⁸⁴

A framework setting out similar type reciprocal arrangements has been in place since 2006, through a set of protocols drawn up, and agreed, by the then Department for Education and Skills, the Association of Directors of Social Services and the National Leaving Care Advisory Service.⁸⁵ However, since then, use of out-of-authority placements has increased substantially, thus potentially placing extra burdens upon 'receiving' local authorities. Existing law and guidance does not currently support those 'receiving' authorities being able to recover the full costs of providing these services from the 'responsible authorities', with the risk that in the harsh reality of austerity measures not all local authorities will prioritise providing services to young people who they feel they have no responsibility for. This is an issue requiring urgent attention if we are to avoid thousands of care leavers falling between the limited reach of their 'responsible authority', and the limited resources of their potentially 'adopted' one.



9.5 Managing care leavers' expectations

It would be wrong to underestimate the high expectations and hopes that many care leavers will have had when first getting involved in New Belongings. Young people will have been as keen as anyone to have an opportunity to influence change and improvement to services.

*"It never ceases to amaze me just how amazing care leavers can be."*⁸⁶

Care leavers typically come with expectations that will need to be managed, otherwise there is a risk that they will too quickly become disillusioned with processes that are trying to involve them. It can become all too easy to dismiss their expectations as being unrealistic or unachievable. In doing so, though, we may actually end up lowering both our, and their, ambitions; and only fuel scepticism that getting involved does not actually change anything.

In managing high expectations, we could learn better how to manage the 'emotional literacy' often necessary for responding to some of the care leavers' understandable disappointments, frustrations, and sometimes anger, at what they see as a lack of any real progress; and the inevitable re-visiting of some of their own experiences, good or bad, whilst they were in care.

⁸³ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁸⁴ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁸⁵ 'National Protocol: Inter-Authority Arrangements for Care Leavers', DFES, ADSS & NLCAS, 2nd Edition Revised 2006

⁸⁶ A member of the New Belongings Central Team

“Talking about the care system with other people has been difficult ... I’d forgotten how much it hurt, but it has been good because I’m listened to now and can make a difference.”⁸⁷

“It is sometimes frustrating that things don’t move on, which is something we need to address otherwise it just leaves people feeling frustrated and angry.”⁸⁸

“It’s frustrating having to sit there listening to people saying why it isn’t happening.”⁸⁹

“It was quite disheartening listening to some of the things care leavers were saying, and thinking that this was some of the stuff that was going on for me ten years ago.”⁹⁰

There are, probably quite expectedly in a project like New Belongings, going to be a number of ‘promissory notes’ outlining a range of changes and improvements yet to be delivered. In legacy terms, and for the avoidance of disillusioning care leavers in the future, it is important that these are acted on as care leavers will have reasonably come to expect.

Care leavers have become involved with New Belongings to help make things better for other care leavers; and whilst they feel that they have done that not all of their ambitions for improvement have yet been realised.

“Ofsted would look at what services had written down, which in one case suggested that they were the best in the country. However, when talking to care leavers in that Authority they never saw many of the things that were supposed to be happening.”⁹¹

9.6 Removing unhelpful barriers

If care leavers are to receive the better support that we all agree they deserve then Government needs to make sure that policies across Departments are joined up and coherent so as not to conflict with the good intentions behind what is otherwise an excellent framework of legislation and guidance for leaving care. A number of participating authorities have admitted struggling with conflicting government policies, particularly in respect of housing, benefits and job seekers allowance, as a barrier to making as much progress as they would have wanted to. One standout example was in respect of their ‘Staying Put’ policies, where it was seen that foster carers could face financial detriment by letting young people stay on in their foster care placements beyond 18 years of age.

One of the most commendable aspects of New Belongings has been how it has more effectively involved young people in helping to drive forward improvements that needed to be made. It helps the cause of engaging young people considerably if some sort of reward can be paid to them for work they are engaged in. Participating authorities and the New Belongings Central Team both experienced considerable obstacles to rewarding, through payments or vouchers, young people for the work they carried out on New Belongings; because some of those young people faced being penalised through the benefits system. It is fair to say that the participating authorities and New Belongings Central Team could not have made the progress they have without them.

“I don’t think that local government are vociferous enough in talking with central government about some of the unintended consequences of their policies.”⁹²

“It should not be the role of local authorities, or other organisations working with care leavers, to subsidise the benefits system in this country.”⁹³

⁸⁷ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁸⁸ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁸⁹ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁹⁰ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁹¹ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁹² A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁹³ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

9.7 The impact of absences, change and inspection

Throughout the New Belongings Project there has been massive improvement with what participating authorities have been able to achieve. However, we have also seen that prolonged absences to key personnel; key role changes brought about by restructuring teams; and, the distraction that an Ofsted inspection can sometimes bring have each contributed towards delays in the amount of progress that participating authorities have been able to make.

We have seen that settled, undistracted teams have consistently got more done, built up better learning and skills, and maintained the stronger relationships with their care leavers (see also ‘the twelfth learning’ in Chapter 10).

10. The learning from New Belongings

Many people have given greatly to New Belongings, starting with the Minister, Edward Timpson MP, and his team generously funding the project at a time of austerity and cuts in public spending. Local authorities too have been committing resources and changing ways of doing things in order to improve things for care leavers. Professionals working in leaving care have raised their game and have been working tirelessly to seize the opportunity that New Belongings has given them to make things better for their care leavers. Members of the New Belongings team too have shown considerable commitment, working long and hard; including pro bono and putting in many hours over what they were being paid for, in order to make a success of this project.

However, it is only right that this evaluation also recognises the massive contribution that many care leavers have made to this project. What it has asked of them is much more than it has asked of anyone else. Whereas others have given funding, time and their not inconsiderable efforts and expertise; we should not forget what many care leavers have given to this project is, quite literally, themselves. They have told us, throughout this project, about many things that will have been deeply personal, very painful and, at times, emotionally difficult for them to talk about. But without care leavers unselfishly sharing with us some of their most private thoughts and experiences, there is no learning.

The first learning from New Belongings is that it has shown that the principles behind the Charter for Care Leavers, ‘Access All Areas’ and engaging local communities are both sound and achievable in practice. Further, it has demonstrated itself, across nine very different local authorities, to have replicable qualities.

The second learning is that you need time and space; and, above all, high level permission if you want to do better at leaving care. New Belongings has been the catalyst to helping participating authorities achieve all three of those essential things. The main lesson here could not be clearer; daring to hope to do something better for your care leavers; and then being given permission to do just that, is the best possible start to actually making it happen.

The third learning has been that not only have the participating authorities learned a great deal from their involvement in New Belongings, but for the most part they have also captured this learning quite well and embedded it into their policies and practices [see also ‘the fifteenth learning’].

The fourth learning has been that participating authorities have strongly reinforced the power of listening to your own care leavers as a means of progressing leaving care services and improving outcomes. This is not a delegation of your own responsibility or decision-making, but a sensible and balanced approach towards achieving ‘a better deal for care leavers’.

The fifth learning, following on from that, is that we need to work on finding better and more inclusive solutions to getting care leavers’ views. Crucially, these will help you to see what it is that you still have to do; and young people’s own high hopes and expectations of you will take you ever closer to the ‘Gold Standard’ service that you will be wanting to aspire to.

The sixth learning has been the impact of a genuine improvement agenda. New Belongings was never set up to be an enforcer of standards, like Ofsted, but has shown through adopting a ‘light touch’ approach just how much local authorities can be encouraged to make the improvements and progress they are wanting to make. The evidence from

what we have seen from some of the young people involved in New Belongings, also suggests that they have the sort of skills that could well be put to good use in the inspection of leaving care services.

The seventh learning has been that some participating authorities have used the opportunity of New Belongings to take a detailed and comprehensive look at improving their services to care leavers; whilst others have gone for a more selective approach, focusing on those areas that they have chosen for particular attention and priority. This will have reflected the different stages that participating authorities were at, and local variations that were raising a different set of issues and challenges in different parts of the country.

The eighth learning is that the same ‘corporate parenting’ commitment that we show to looked after children also needs to be applied consistently to care leavers, and the classic test for that has always been to ask yourself: ‘Would this be good enough for my child?’

The ninth learning is that we need to find better ways of guaranteeing support, engagement and entitlements to young people who may have left care from a placement which may well be a considerable distance from their own local authority area. The answer does not always lie in a blanket, authority-wide policy of bringing all ‘out-of-authority’ care leavers back into the area in order to receive leaving care services. Many will have put down important roots where they are already. It may well be that the ‘receiving authority’ is better placed to meet the needs of some of these care leavers than their ‘responsible authorities’ are, and that should be reflected in guidance, legislation and any future allocation of resources.

The tenth learning has been that it is sometimes unsafe to rely on something being in place for care leavers simply because something written in the law or policy suggests that it should be.

The eleventh learning is that it would seem helpful to local authorities for Government to work together, across the different Departments, to produce guidance aimed at:

- i) Removing any remaining obstacles in the benefits and housing benefits system, that treat as income allowances paid to foster carers for the purposes of providing supported accommodation to young people aged 18 and over. Doing this would help to more widely promote the ‘Staying Put’ option.
- ii) Removing unhelpful definitions of care leavers who are deemed to have made themselves ‘intentionally homeless’. Given the chaos and upheaval that many care leavers will have experienced in their lives, including quite often whilst in care, it is not surprising that many find it difficult settling down in their first home after leaving care.
- iii) Removing inadvertent obstacles to local authorities, and other organisations, working better in partnership with care leavers themselves. Many have experienced difficulties in rewarding young people for their work on New Belongings, or similar engagement in projects, because of the risk that this poses to them having their benefits stopped.

The Government’s Care Leaver’s Strategy⁹⁴, referred to earlier in this report, provides a sound basis for finding solutions for care leavers that work across all government departments.



⁹⁴ ‘Care Leaver Strategy: a cross-departmental strategy for young people leaving care’, Department for Education, 2013

The twelfth learning is that there is clearly much value in sustaining good settled teams that are simply allowed to get on with the job. It is a conclusion of this evaluation that one of the key components in driving forward consistent learning and improvement is stability.

“The critical thing is the relationship that they have with their care leavers.”⁹⁵

Those settled relationships with Personal Advisers and Team Managers are vital for care leavers themselves in terms of the personal support they receive. This Project has provided reminders of just how devastating departures of key people can also be to both teams and service users, whether planned or unexpected, and including the loss of those in leadership roles. The need for ‘embedding’ stability is every bit as crucial to achieving best outcomes for care leavers, as it is for looked after children.

The thirteenth learning is that the engagement of care leavers in a professional capacity has added insights and a sense of urgency about getting things done.

The fourteenth learning is that good practice can be highly infectious; and that others will want to do it when they see it, and see that it works.

The fifteenth learning is that some of the evidence could have come together much better. Some participating authorities struggled more than others did to capture as much of the learning as they might have done, or as quickly or as coherently as they might have done.

“For a local authority going through a lot of changes, it is difficult to see how best practice is being captured and embedded if no-one is writing it down.”⁹⁶

11. The effectiveness of New Belongings

You would be more than entitled to take the view that what participating authorities have been able to achieve is little more than what they should have been doing in the first place. However, perhaps a more realistic and balanced interpretation, given the pressures that they are under, is that some local authorities have been achieving some quite remarkable feats under New Belongings.

Without question, New Belongings has got participating authorities doing some beneficial things for care leavers that they might otherwise have not been doing; or, perhaps not doing as soon or as thoroughly.

“It’s taken them a long time to think about it, but now it is in all of their plans, policies and strategies for the next three years.”⁹⁷

“Going in with basically a zero base level of involvement of young people, they listened seriously and liked my ideas for things they could do ... since the Project began we have made contact with 27 young people who are now very much involved.”⁹⁸

Better resources

Whether coincidental, or not, there has also been evidence, under New Belongings, that some leaving care services have benefitted from the injection of some additional resources to support them in their work in the last year, which coincides together with councillors taking a more direct and personal interest in the welfare of their care leavers. Clearly, much of the planning for those additional resources will have pre-dated involvements in New Belongings, but some of

⁹⁵ New Belongings Project Director

⁹⁶ A Member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁹⁷ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

⁹⁸ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

the evidence from participating authorities suggests that New Belongings might have accelerated the process of bringing some of those resources forwards.

Better challenge and support

The 'light touch' approach of promoting and encouraging a drive towards good practice has been widely welcomed by participating authorities, and helped them to accept a necessary measure of external challenge and improvement.

*"Being supported and advised as opposed to being told what we have to do."*⁹⁹

Although one care leaver's perception was that some participating authorities were experiencing New Belongings slightly differently.

*"It's all felt a bit like having Ofsted in, everyone on their best behaviour and then when they're gone they let their collective tummies out."*¹⁰⁰

However participating authorities have each perceived the support they received from New Belongings, it has succeeded in encouraging significant change and improvement for care leavers where legislation and guidance alone, in the past, has not always done so. It is in all of our interests to improve services to care leavers, and the important thing about New Belongings is that it has given local authorities both time and permission to do just that.

*"What you really need is your own permission to do things"*¹⁰¹

*"The rate of progress over the year since the launch of New Belongings has been amazing, but whether it is sustainable is unclear."*¹⁰²

New Belongings has helped local authorities to identify mutual benefits across council departments, and partner organisations, of doing leaving care better.

Better awareness

New Belongings has generated a whole new ethos of learning and understanding around leaving care issues; and young people themselves have contributed significantly to widening awareness and knowledge amongst professionals, elected members and within the wider community.

Better accountability

Accountability has also been strongly featured in each participating authority's approach to New Belongings, through:

- their own internal monitoring and review process
- scheduled progress meetings, including with other partner authorities where applicable
- providing data and updates to the independent evaluation of New Belongings

Better progress

Not surprisingly, perhaps, whilst many of the newly established leaving care teams were showing signs of making good progress under New Belongings, it was generally the more experienced and stable teams, having benefitted from the opportunity to embed expertise and see through initiatives they had themselves started, that were seen to be making most progress.

⁹⁹ A local authority leaving care manager

¹⁰⁰ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

¹⁰¹ A local authority leaving care manager

¹⁰² A member of the New Belongings Central Team

We also found that innovation, creativity and drive were strongly evident in those teams whose expertise included some professionals themselves coming from a care background, or who were systemically engaging experienced care leavers in their work.

“If I don’t get care leavers separately on the agenda of every single meeting in the Authority they will just be part of vulnerable groups. Once they are there they will always be there. So, with CEO backing, we went to every single Committee Group and made sure that they have to consider care leavers as an integral part of their review of policies for vulnerable groups.”¹⁰³

Better engagement with care leavers

As the Department for Education itself has discovered, having a member of the team who is themselves a care leaver adds insights and perspectives that they might not otherwise have. When the Care Leavers Foundation applied to the Department for Education for funding for the New Belongings Pilot Project they told them that they should employ a care leaver in a real job with a role to keep the Department updated and up-to-speed. The DfE care leaver employee is a civil servant, and very much part of the Care Team in the Department.

“I definitely think that me being here has kept leaving care on the agenda, and made people generally more aware.”¹⁰⁴

Putting care leavers ‘at the heart’ of New Belongings is also reflected in the Central Team that was brought together, by the Care Leaver Foundation, to support participating authorities. In addition to the Care Leavers Panel, which ranged from young people in their late teens or early twenties, there were also some older care leavers on both the panel and the steering group. This mix of generations of different care leavers has provided the Project with a unique perspective that can sometimes be missed when the focus is only on young people in transition to leaving care or who have left in the recent past. More experienced care leavers complement what young people have to offer by providing an important longitudinal viewpoint as to what has improved since they left care, allowing us to better measure progress over a period of time rather than just in the immediacy.

We have seen clear evidence, from each participating authority, as to how they have put in place measures intended to strengthen the voice of care leavers in service development and delivery. Most recognise that there is more work to do on this, and have embedded plans for improving how they engage with their care leavers in future.

Better structures

A few of the participating authorities have, during or just prior to New Belongings, been looking at changing their structures, and re-organising how their leaving care teams work. For the most part, these have strengthened teams, added new resources and provided effective ways of professionals coming from a range of professional backgrounds to work together in more coherent and integrated ways. However, local authorities will want to look carefully at the balance between the time and resources it invests in changing teams and structures, and not allowing the doing of these things to divert too much attention from improvements that care leavers themselves most value.

“It is getting what I need that matters most to me ... I don’t really mind who I get it from.”¹⁰⁵

New Belongings has shown that it can sometimes be very difficult to get things done in local authorities, whereas working in partnership with a good third sector organisation, like Pure Insights in Stockport, can be used to help get things done more quickly.

Better recognition for care leavers

We all like to feel valued. Care leavers are no different. We know that young people are likely to do better when their parents, individually or corporate, have high ambitions for them; and are taking an interest in their achievements. A

¹⁰³ An ex-care local authority Leaving Care Manager

¹⁰⁴ an ex-care Department for Education civil servant

¹⁰⁵ a local care leaver from Sheffield

number of the participating authorities are known to recognise care leavers achievements through annual award ceremonies. **Trafford** built in a commitment to carry on doing that in their New Belongings Action Plan.

There is probably no greater recognition that you can have than feeling that you are being listened to. We have seen many good examples of care leaver views being recognised; and being used to make a real difference to how services are delivered.

12. Where we should go from here

It is the conclusion of this evaluation that things under New Belongings have gotten better in each of the participating authorities for care leavers. In fact, the Project has proven to be so effective at providing challenge and improvement to leaving care services that it should continue, in some form.

Most other local authorities have already signed up to the Charter for Care Leavers, and will be using it to inform the making of improvements in their own leaving care services. The next logical progression is to encourage them to adopt New Belongings, as a proven means of strengthening and breathing new life into their Charter commitments, and for its greater emphasis on integrating services and engaging local communities. New Belongings has potential to become a radical new vision for guiding and transforming the development of leaving care services, and stands as the best model that we have seen for doing so in some time.

New Belongings has achieved the highest level of commitment from participating authorities. Most now have measures in place at executive, strategic, operational and practice levels for embedding and sustaining their New Belongings improvements. It would seem that the positive experience that these ‘pilot’ authorities have undoubtedly had with New Belongings could now be of some benefit to other local authorities. They will be facing many of the same challenges and issues when it comes to meeting the needs of their own care leavers, and the nine participating authorities have been given the time and space in which to look for good solutions. The actual impact of the New Belongings Project in helping them to raise the profile and status of leaving care cannot be questioned.



Participating authorities have signed up to a ‘roll out’ contract beyond the life of this New Belongings Project, but after that it is unclear who drives it. There has been some good evidence of some participating authorities already sharing feedback and learning from New Belongings with other local authorities, typically through the auspices of their regional leaving care networks and forum.

The **North West ‘Cluster’**, however, offered the following cautionary observation:

“What happens next for New Belongings? I have already presented to the North West Aftercare Forum for information and for authorities to look at good practice models, but at a time of austerity it has no teeth. There will need to be a balance of statutory changes and guidance.”

If there were doubts about the portability of New Belongings, **Portsmouth** were at least upbeat about the sustainability of it for them:

“... we recognise that New Belongings is the beginning of a longer journey, and in addition to seeking to ensure that the

benefits and progress from this action plan last beyond October 2014 we will seek to ensure “ways of working” are sustained beyond the life of the programme, for example, continuing to shape services based on the feedback care leavers give us.”

Following the same theme, **Staffordshire** advise:

“Continue the work of New Belongings, keep it on the agenda and treat it as a high profile priority.”

This is sound advice indeed because we all know that priorities come and priorities go. Today’s priority is leaving care; tomorrow’s might be something else entirely. The key discipline to keeping leaving care a priority is to keep on listening to care leavers. There will never be a time when leaving care will not be a priority for each and every one of them.

To begin with, you need to decide whether the New Belongings approach to developing and delivering leaving care services is worth continuing with; and then whether or how it should be funded.

You could all too easily take the view that the sort of creative and dynamic activities that will have been happening under the New Belongings project, other local authorities “... will do if they really want to do them”¹⁰⁶.

They don’t get any resources by the way (for New Belongings). I think that’s a pretty good thing because that forces them into deciding what they want to do for themselves.”¹⁰⁷

However, research and practice tell us that legislation and statutory guidance alone is not a sound enough basis for motivating everyone to reducing the inequalities of ‘postcode lottery’; or to greater consistency in achieving the better outcomes we all want to see for our care leavers.

“If you want a quality service then I guess somebody is going to have to pay for it.”¹⁰⁸

This New Belongings ‘Pilot’ Project has relied considerably for its delivery on the often extraordinary efforts of a few people who happen to be passionately committed to the cause of care leavers, many working additional unpaid hours, pro bono and on the basis of goodwill. However, that is not a sustainable model over the long term, and the delivery of New Belongings will require a certain element of financial incentive and encouragement before it becomes more widely embedded in practice up and down the country. But, in considering how best to take this programme forwards, it is important to reflect upon emerging and compelling evidence, from research,¹⁰⁹ that sustained and consistent improvement in both the care system and leaving care could well represent significant savings on future public spending.

If, as we have seen, New Belongings has been something of a catalyst to inspiring nine different local authorities all to do much better for their care leavers then it would also seem right to see it as representing a sound investment worth persevering with. We already spend significant amounts of public money, around £3.2 billion per year, on bringing children into care and looking after them. That is public money potentially being wasted if outcomes and prospects for looked after children, at the point of them leaving care, are no better than when they arrived. It is also now well-documented that significant additional public spending is all too often required to meet a disproportionate range of social need and problems for care leavers, in later life; many of whom tell us that they were not properly prepared or supported for leaving care.

The potential gains and benefits for care leavers, that could be derived from local authorities engaging in New Belongings, far outweigh any additional financial incentives that need to be used in order to get them there in the first place, and then to support them in taking the effective actions for care leavers once they are.

The issue of New Belongings, whether funded or not, as a proven initiative for driving forward improvement, consistency and value for money, should not be a closed debate; especially as some of the participating authorities have already

¹⁰⁶ New Belongings Project Director

¹⁰⁷ New Belongings Project Director

¹⁰⁸ A member of the Care Leavers Panel

¹⁰⁹ Celia Hannon, Claudia Wood & Louise Bazalgette (2010) *‘In Loco Parentis’*, Demos, London

started to identify some savings from improvements that they have made, in addition to identifying clear benefits to care leavers.

However, this report has indicated a number of areas for improvement, and it is recommended that these are addressed before the programme continues.

Conclusion

This has not been a routine project. There has been something about New Belongings that has the ability to inspire and capture the imagination of people in a way that perhaps has not happened before. Throughout the project, some working in leaving care teams have become genuinely excited about the promise that New Belongings offers. Whether that has been down to New Belongings helping to raise the profile of their work, or a sense that what they are doing is now more widely and better supported than before is not clear. What is clear though is that a good many professionals involved in leaving care will be feeling an awful lot better about themselves, and will have seen their work now receiving more of the recognition that it deserves. That can only be a good thing for care leavers.

New Belongings has provided a unique initiative, bringing local authorities together under the common cause of creating a 'gold standard' service for their care leavers. To their credit, they have used this initiative to very good effect, supported by a framework that probably represents the best opportunity that we have had in a long time to deliver a vision of 'a better deal for care leavers'.



"They get many chances to get leaving care right ... we only get ONE!"¹¹⁰

What New Belongings has shown is that if local authorities are ambitious enough; and they 'release the talents' that they have both within their leaving care teams and amongst their young people, then they can make real progress and achieve things for care leavers ... sometimes even beyond their own best expectations.

¹¹⁰ Morgan R & Lindsay M, (2012) "After Care: Young people's views on leaving care", Children's Rights Director for England, Ofsted

**For more information about the specific activities of
New Belongings Authorities you can download
New Belongings Project – The Companion Appendix at
http://www.thecareleaversfoundation.org/News_Publications**

NEW BELONGINGS







**New Belongings: A Better Deal for Care Leavers,
The Care Leavers' Foundation, October 2014**

An Independent Evaluation of the New Belongings Project
by Dr Mike Lindsay, consultancy support from Prof Mike Stein

The Care Leavers' Foundation
PO Box 202, Bala, LL23 7DD
www.thecareleaversfoundation.org