Young Persons' Guide to the New Belongings Independent Evaluation Report





















YOUNG PERSONS' GUIDE TO

NEW BELONGINGS

What is this Guide about?

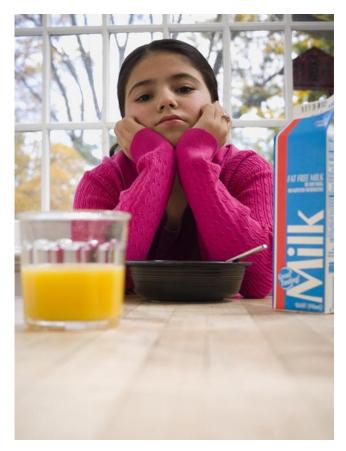
This Guide written to tell you about 'New Belongings', an exciting new Project that has been set up to help local authorities improve their services to care leavers. It is based on an independent report called "A better deal for care leavers".

Why should I be interested?

This Guide will help explain what the report says about what people are doing to make things better for care leavers.

Who's involved in it?

The Department for Education funded a voluntary organisation called the Care Leavers Foundation to work with nine 'pilot' local authorities (Cheshire East, Herefordshire, Portsmouth, Sheffield, Staffordshire, Stockport, Trafford, Walsall and Wirral). They have been working together for a year now, alongside a national group of 15 care leavers and six other experts with a lot of knowledge on how local government works and about leaving care issues.





What have they been doing?

They have been looking again at leaving care services; meeting with and listening to local and national care leavers; and, working closely with the national group to try to make their services better.

About New Belongings

Ministerial Quarterlies are regular meetings that the Children's Minister, Edward Timpson MP, holds with a group of care leavers. A care leaver working on the New Belongings Project explained what happened at one of these meetings.

"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 Quarterly, saying that there needed to be more 'care-proofing' and wrap-around care."

New Belongings is a national project to help local authorities use the Charter for Care Leavers; 'Access All Areas' (that means all different departments, agencies and services working better together for care leavers); and, working with local communities, to create what the Children's Minister called 'Gold Standard' leaving care services.

About the Charter for Care Leavers

The Charter for Care Leavers (see below) was put together by a group of care leavers working with the Care Leavers 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.

- To respect and honour care leaver's 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

['Charter for Care Leavers', Department for Education/Care Leavers Foundation, 2012]

About 'Access All Areas'



'Access All Areas' is a report by a group of voluntary organisations to Government (see below). It tries to show government how it can work better together to help care leavers achieve better things in their lives.

['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]

At the local level, it means that leaving care should no longer be the responsibility of just one, often small team, as it used to be, but something that all services need to be concerned with. The 'Access All Areas report suggests six common areas for action:

- 1. Policies recognise vulnerable of care leavers are.
- 2. A clear understanding of what care leavers are entitled to.
- 3. Where local authorities are able to choose whether to give help and support they will use this in favour of improving things for care leavers.
- 4. There will be good sharing of information between different departments, agencies and services.



- 5. There are agreements between different departments, agencies and local services and leaving care services to work together for care leavers.
- 6. Care leavers get services that respond quickly and personally to their needs.

Working better with local communities

New Belongings has encouraged local authorities to work more closely with their local communities to help develop new opportunities for care leavers.

One of the benefits of doing this is that it provides an opportunity for others to see what care leavers are really like, instead of all the negative stereotypes that some people still have about people from care.

Many participating authorities have used the local press well, in reporting their involvement in New



Belongings, meaning better publicity for care leavers within their own local communities. This, in turn, has led to a greater awareness and interest in helping care leavers (particularly amongst local councillors, local business and community groups, local housing groups, local colleges and universities, local leisure services and local providers of employment, training and apprenticeship schemes).



Towards a 'Gold Standard'

The nine 'pilot' authorities have been trying to create a 'Gold Standard' in services for care leavers that could also be used by other local authorities.

They have been doing this by:

- working closely with communities to respond to challenges faced by care leavers;
- joining up their different services (like children's social care, education, employment, financial support, the benefits system, housing, health, adult social care, leisure, the justice system and through on-going support) to ensure a more complete approach to helping and supporting care leavers; and
- listening to care leavers to ensure that services are better meeting their needs

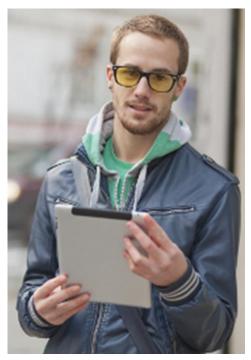
Starting points

Not all of the nine local authorities that had signed up to the New Belongings 'Pilots' were starting from the same point.

Some had a lot of experience in preparing and supporting young people in leaving care. Others were quite new to the task and having to learn, sometimes as a new team, what they should be doing for their care leavers.

All of the 'pilot' authorities shared having to overcome social problems in their local areas, such as a lack of safe and affordable housing, high rates of unemployment (particularly amongst young people), low income families, poor achievement in education, poor health outcomes and high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour. This placed enormous strains on leaving care services to help their care leavers find suitable accommodation; education, employment and training opportunities; and pathways to a better, more promising future.





Care Leaver Surveys

The New Belongings Project started out with a very simple request to each of the 'pilot' 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?*

All of the 'pilot' authorities carried out these surveys, some better than others, but those that did not get a particularly good response rate know that they can do much better.

What was excellent about the surveys was how they were used to make a real difference in what the 'pilot' authorities put in their plans for New Belongings. They even led to some immediate changes to benefit care leavers.



Immediate "quick wins" for care leavers

There are some actions taken by authorities, participating in these New Belongings 'pilots', that are having immediate or early benefits for care leavers.

These include:

- implementing the Charter for Care Leavers in a way that expresses it in terms of a 'local contract' or a 'local pledge'. Portsmouth have used the Charter to look at how well local systems and practices were doing against it.
- ✓ 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 of dedicated websites to **inform and advise care leavers** about their entitlements.
- widespread increases in the 'Setting Up Home Allowance' to at least £2,000 (sometimes referred to as the 'Leaving Care Grant'). Cheshire East and Stockport is now as high as £3,000.
- reviews of financial policies and entitlements, resulting in better financial support and accessibility for care leavers. Trafford provide their care leavers with a bank card so that they can withdraw money from their own leaving care grants, or emergency payments.
- establishing more 'Staying Put' options, with many 'pilot' authorities reporting more young people choosing to stay on in their foster placements.
- creating many more places and opportunities on apprenticeship schemes, with 'pilot' authorities announcing that more will be available just for care leavers.
- ✓ 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, with 'pilot' authorities announcing that these are



- either open or are about to.
- creating or extending 'passes' giving care leavers access to a range of local learning, leisure and community facilities.

Other progress under New Belongings

We have seen evidence of some excellent plans in place that should all improve services to care leavers, and eventually start providing:



- ✓ better accommodation choices and options;
- ✓ **improved documentation** to support pathway planning (with much of this re-written with the help of care leavers);
- ✓ better provision of advice and information, including improved information about care leavers' entitlements (with better access to this through young people's guides, 'drop-in' services/shops/cafes, and websites);
- even more opportunities through employment and apprenticeship schemes;
- ✓ more care leavers supported to stay on in their education;
- ✓ far better engagement with young people when it comes to improving services; and,
- ✓ more care leavers getting what they are entitled to



What is better for care leavers?



All nine participating authorities will have seen significant improvements in the development and delivery of their services to care leavers. 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."

Better resources

During New Belongings some 'pilot' authorities have been putting some additional resources into leaving care. Much of the planning for this will have pre-dated involvements in New Belongings, but the evidence suggests that New Belongings might have speeded things up.

Better challenge and support

The 'light touch' approach of promoting and encouraging a drive towards good practice has been widely welcomed by the 'pilot' authorities, and helped them to accept being challenged on the need to make improvements. As a Leaving Care Manager told the evaluation:

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

New Belongings has succeeded in encouraging significant change and improvement for care leavers where legislation and guidance alone has not always been able do 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 these 'pilot' authorities both the time and the permission to do just that.

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

"The rate of progress over the year since the launch of New Belongings has been amazing ..."



New Belongings has helped the 'pilot' authorities to see how it helps everyone across council departments, and partner organisations, to do leaving care better.

Better awareness

New Belongings has brought new learning and understanding to leaving care issues; and care leavers themselves have been making big contributions to widening awareness and knowledge amongst professionals, elected members and within the wider community.

Better accountability

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

- their own internal monitoring and review process
- scheduled progress meetings, including with other 'pilot' authorities they have been working alongside
- 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 settled teams that were seen to be making most progress.

We also found that new thinking and drive were particularly strong in those teams whose expertise also included some professionals who were themselves coming from a care background. As one ex-care Leaving Care Manager told us:

"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."



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 has added 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 up-to-date and up-to-speed. The DfE care leaver employee is a civil servant, and now very much part of the Care Team in the Department. She told us:

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

Putting care leavers 'at the heart' of New Belongings is also reflected in the Central Team that was brought together, by the Care Leavers Foundation, to support 'pilot' 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 working together on the Project has provided a unique perspective that can sometimes be missed when the focus is only on young people who are at the point of leaving care or who have left in the recent past.

We have seen clear evidence, from each 'pilot' authority, as to how they have put in place measures 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 plans for improving how they engage with their care leavers in future.



Better structures

A few of the 'pilot' authorities have, during or just before New Belongings, been looking at their structures, and changing how their leaving care teams work. Mostly, these have strengthened teams, adding new resources and finding ways of professionals working better together. However, we have also seen how this can lead to the loss or absence of 'key' people that care leavers have come to trust and rely on for support.

New Belongings has shown that it can sometimes be very slow and difficult for local authorities to get things done in local authorities. Sometimes, working in partnership with a good third sector organisation, like Pure Insights in Stockport, can 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, are ambitious for them; and take an interest in their achievements. A number of the 'pilot' authorities are known to recognise care leavers' achievements through annual award ceremonies. Trafford have 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's views being recognised; and being used to make a real difference to how services are delivered.

What helped make the difference - CHECKLIST

- ✓ Being given the time, space and a dedicated team to do it
- ✓ Having strong strategic commitment and senior level support
- ✓ Raising the profile of leaving care to being a 'high' priority
- ✓ Being guided by care leavers' own views and experiences
- ✓ Strengthened understanding about and wish to become better



- 'corporate parents' to care leavers
- ✓ A wider base of support through partnership working
- ✓ Making the good things you have done under New Belongings part of the day-to-day work
- ✓ Having identified named leads to see through tasks

Things still needed to make progress towards the 'Gold Standard'

- Listening to a wider representation of care leavers
- Reaching out to those care leavers who are not fully benefitting from all of the improvements you have been making
- Meeting the corporate parenting test: 'Is this good enough for our child?'
- ★ Tackling delays arising from the absence or loss of 'key' professionals or management that can become a barrier to progress
- Improving consistency in capturing and sharing the good practice



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'. As one care leaver once put it:

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

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.











New Belongings for Care Leavers

The Care Leavers' Foundation 2014

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