

Support for care leavers

This report illustrates how effective strategies and services help improve the quality of life for care leavers and assist them to make successful transitions into adulthood and independence. It is a small-scale survey based on visits to six local authorities and four secure provisions; it also draws on evidence from social care inspection and takes account of care leavers' views and experiences. The report identifies how barriers to positive outcomes for care leavers have been overcome.

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Executive summary

This report builds on evidence about the quality of services for those leaving care services, provided from the Children's Rights Director's report findings of 2006¹, recent joint area reviews of local children's services and annual performance assessments of council services for children and young people.²

Between August and December 2008, Ofsted undertook survey visits to six local authorities and four secure estate provisions (three secure children's homes and one secure training centre) located in different areas of the country. It is therefore a small-scale survey and, though the findings may not be representative, they do offer insights in a number of key issues. Of the six councils surveyed, two were metropolitan boroughs, one was a London borough, one was a unitary council and two were county councils. Inspectors looked at how local services and settings in these areas were working together to improve the quality of life for care leavers. Additional evidence from questionnaire responses of young people, arising out of social care inspections undertaken at the same time as the survey period, provided specific examples of how practice improved outcomes for individual care leavers. A total of 103 care leavers contributed their views about the help they received to support them leaving care.

Inspectors assessed the effectiveness of: strategies; commissioning; partnership arrangements; corporate parenting; planning; the provision and delivery of key services for individuals and different groups of care leavers; and the impact of the inclusion of care leavers' views and experiences on the development of quality services that affected them.

The survey identified that a key feature of effective 'leaving care support' was the understanding that leaving care was not a single event, but a period of transition for each young person. Care leavers needed flexible and individualised support to help them successfully make their unique transitions into adulthood and independence.

Young people involved in any stage of the leaving care process are defined within this report as 'care leavers'. This term encompasses both those young people who are preparing to leave care settings and young people who have left the care system and are supported to live more independently by leaving care services. The age range of young people responding to the survey was 14 to 24 years.

¹ *Young people's views on leaving care: a Children's Rights Director report*, CSCI, 2006; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/Young-people-s-views-on-leaving-care/\(language\)/eng-GB](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/Young-people-s-views-on-leaving-care/(language)/eng-GB). (The children's social care responsibilities of the CSCI were handed over to Ofsted in April 2007.)

² The Education and Inspections Act 2006 required Ofsted to provide an annual performance rating for each council's children's services; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090018.

The overall quality of services provided to care leavers was good in four of the six local authorities visited, outstanding in another and satisfactory in the sixth. These authorities were generally making good progress in implementing the Care Matters agenda³ to improve the experiences and outcomes for care leavers. Key factors contributing to helping care leavers achieve and develop into successful young adults included: high aspirations for care leavers, supported by good corporate parenting strategies and coordinated partnerships; the provision of effective services for individuals and different groups of care leavers, delivered by a committed workforce; and the inclusion of care leavers in the planning and development of services that affected them.

Over three quarters of care leavers in the survey said they received good levels of practical help and guidance to prepare them for more independent living. Effective support took account of young people's individual abilities and needs. However, in the secure settings visited, the tension between the tasks of managing challenging behaviour and risk and helping care leavers gain independence skills had an impact on the number of opportunities for preparatory work made available to individual care leavers.

The local authorities visited had made variable progress in improving outcomes for care leavers in relation to the key recommendations of the Children's Rights Director's report of 2006 (see [Annex B](#)). All authorities visited had systems to monitor services and outcomes; however, where there was a limited evaluation of outcome evidence, this impacted on the authority's capacity to assess the quality of strategies and services provided to care leavers. The survey identified shortfalls in: access for care leavers aged over 16 years to lower tier mental health services (that is, primary care); the benefit system; accommodation and employment options; pathway planning; and preparation for the discharge of care leavers from secure provisions. There were also shortfalls in staff training opportunities.

The key findings highlight considerations for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and local authorities when reviewing the quality of services to improve support for care leavers.

³ White Paper, *Care Matters: time for change*, DCSF, 2006; <http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=Cm%25207137>.

Key findings

The local authorities, secure settings and children's services and services visited that were successful in achieving good outcomes for care leavers had these features:

- High aspirations for care leavers, supported by good corporate parenting strategies, coordinated partnerships and the delivery of effective, coordinated services. A strong commitment to support 'looked after children' into adulthood, underpinned by effective policies and practice, enabled care leavers to retain their looked after status to 18 years of age and beyond if needed.
- 'Leaving care' was not seen as a single event, but as a process of transition into adulthood. Progress was not expected to be a linear process; care leavers were given second chances when they made mistakes.
- Effective services recognised the importance of providing positive 'looked after' experiences for care leavers, supporting young people to plan, prepare and successfully move towards adulthood. Tailor-made, flexible support packages and services were needs led, rather than defined by age or category of care leaver.
- Care leavers were involved in planning, development, commissioning, recruitment and training processes. Care leavers' views and contributions were valued and listened to, helping to bring about improvements in the quality of services which affected them.
- Leaving care workers formed positive relationships with care leavers. The strength and robustness of the relationship was vital in ensuring care leavers received effective support and access to information and other services.
- The strong commitment of leaving care workers to meet care leavers' needs effectively, both in and out of office hours, reduced the adverse impact of staff vacancies, limited training opportunities and office hours working arrangements.

The following areas of weakness were also identified:

- Although all six of the local authorities visited were developing a range of accommodation options to meet the varying housing and support needs of care leavers, there was still a shortage of some types of suitable accommodation in three of them.
- Limited access to lower tier mental health services and employment opportunities, and the structure of the benefits system, disadvantaged some care leavers.
- Robust planning and support were not always in place for care leavers prior to discharge from secure accommodation.
- Insufficient evaluation of outcome evidence had an impact on authorities' abilities to rigorously assess the effectiveness of strategies and services for care leavers and inform future planning.

Recommendations

The DCSF should:

- work in partnership with the Department of Health to ascertain the quality and availability of lower tier mental health services for those care leavers aged between 17 and 25 years who may need access to these services
- work in partnership with the Benefits Agency to review issues within the benefits system that have an adverse impact on foster carers and care leavers moving into independence
- work in partnership with the Children's Workforce Development Council to develop staff skills in preparing and supporting care leavers into adulthood and independence
- use the findings of this survey to inform the review of the national minimum standards to improve outcomes for care leavers.

Local authorities should:

- utilise the full range of opportunities and resources within the authority, and partnership arrangements with other agencies, to support care leavers to make successful transitions into adulthood and independence
- collate and analyse outcome evidence about outcomes for children and young people to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of corporate parenting strategies and services for care leavers
- ensure planning and support packages are flexible, tailor-made and seamless to meet effectively the needs of each individual care leaver
- increase housing options, including the provision of more suitable emergency accommodation for care leavers
- reinforce and enhance good joint working arrangements by underpinning effective service provision for care leavers with clear, written policies and protocols
- provide suitable training for staff and carers to develop their skills in providing effective support to young people leaving care
- ensure pathway plans and services are in place for care leavers prior to discharge from secure accommodation
- review arrangements for out of office hours services and support for care leavers who are living independently, ensuring that this service is both suitable and sustainable.

Ofsted will continue to review the experiences of care leavers in regulatory inspections, for example, through inspections of children's homes, secure units and case tracking in fostering and adoption inspections.

Corporate parenting, commissioning and partnerships

1. In the authorities visited, strong leadership and management teams recognised how essential it is that services supporting and looking after children in care are effective, and that children's care experiences influenced how successfully they moved on in later life. Authorities did not regard leaving care as a single event; it was understood to be a transition into independence over a period of time, with care leavers needing good support and guidance to help them successfully become young adults.
2. Of the six local authorities visited, five were strongly investing in developing corporate parenting strategies to achieve the best possible outcomes for care leavers. Councils provided good training opportunities and information to elected members and senior officers to help them understand leaving care issues. The example of the delivery of the Total Respect⁴ training package in one authority visited ensured that care leavers were heard and listened to. The discussions between care leavers and council staff helped raise awareness of looked after children and leaving care issues. The care leavers delivering Total Respect training were able to put this experience towards gaining an Open College Network accreditation. An example from one authority follows:

A consultant was employed to work with councillors to develop their understanding of their role as a 'corporate parent'. Councillors were given clear information on government proposals, legislation and accountabilities for care leavers, informing them about leaving care issues and helping them to improve outcomes.

3. Corporate parenting panels were at different stages of development and their impact on outcomes for care leavers was variable. In three authorities, panels were well embedded and decisions led to improvements in leaving care services. Inviting young people who had experience of being in care to join the panel and taking note of their views enriched the decision-making process and empowered care leavers, as in the following example:

Following representations made by care leavers to the corporate parenting panel, the council set up a 'Care Leavers Fund'. This arrangement enables a group of care leavers to make decisions about allocating money to other care leavers. The fund is intended to supplement the leaving care budget and finance requests for items or activities that would not usually be funded from that budget. The project aims to give care leavers a real say in how money is spent.

4. In five of the authorities visited, the Children and Young People Plan had synergy with other local strategic plans. Desired outcomes for care leavers were

⁴ Total Respect training pack, CROA (Children's Rights Officers and Advocates); www.croa.org.uk.

clearly set out in plans. Examples included the council and its partners demonstrating their strong commitment to care leavers by their high aspirations for them, underpinned by decision-making processes that were shaped and directed to achieve focused outcomes. These authorities celebrated their care leavers' achievements by holding award ceremonies. Councillors and partnerships demonstrated good communication at a strategic level, ownership of strategies and an understanding of their corporate responsibility to support care leavers. They also gave priority status to care leavers within services. One illustration of this is as follows:

The allocation of resources within one authority demonstrated their commitment to 'narrowing the gap'⁵ for care leavers. The housing department has allocated seven council accommodation provisions each year for care leavers. Furthermore, the council is creating 32 new apprenticeships and allocated 10% of vacancies to vulnerable groups; care leavers will be prioritised.

5. Well-developed and integrated working arrangements across universal, targeted and specialist services underpinned the work of the four good and the one outstanding authority visited. Integrated policies clarified agencies' roles and responsibilities in meeting the needs of care leavers, providing effective and seamless 'wraparound' services for each care leaver. However, some joint working was on an informal basis in three of the authorities visited; such arrangements did not secure continued high levels of resources that were supporting care leavers effectively.
6. The four single-tier councils identified the advantages of being small: they were able to localise services; maximise good working relationships; and primary care trusts were co-terminus (they covered the same geographical areas as the local authorities). Social care and health being in the same directorate within one authority assisted effective partnership working. In county councils, the inclusion of both county and district councillors in strategic developments was identified as a key factor in forming and sustaining strong partnerships. This is illustrated by the following example from one council:

Six district/borough councils have signed up to the MAX card scheme, which will give children in care and care leavers free access to sports, leisure and cultural facilities across the county.

7. All the authorities undertook regular evaluation of leaving care-related services, monitoring the quality of service provision and outcomes for care leavers. Focused evaluation led to targeted improvements in services. However, in two of the authorities, inadequate evaluation of outcome evidence limited their

⁵ *Narrowing the gap: the inspection of children's services*, 070041, Ofsted 2007; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070041.

capacity to ascertain the quality of strategies and services to inform future planning of services for care leavers effectively. Three authorities visited were reviewing commissioning processes, giving opportunities to unify funding streams to provide a coordinated approach to service provision for care leavers. Pooled budgets and partnership arrangements helped councils reduce the fragmentation of services and enabled more targeted services to be commissioned to meet the needs of different groups of care leavers. For example, in one council:

Pooled budgets led to the development of a specialist service for young people with complex disabilities, providing a one-stop shop and person-centred services which integrated smoothly into adult services. Young people and families say this has helped to provide clarity and continuity in planning processes for young people leaving care.

Preparation for leaving care

8. The survey identified that effective leaving care support was integrated, flexible and tailored to meet the assessed needs of each young person. Rigid working practices based on age and defined categories of care leavers did not support individual care leavers effectively:

'Eligible, legible, relevant, former relevant; it's all irrelevant!' (22-year-old)

9. Two authorities demonstrated their strong commitment to care leavers through policies to retain their looked after status to 18 years of age. Strengthening 'permanency planning' increased placement stability and gave care leavers more support as they moved into adulthood. All six authorities identified that effective and integrated residential care, fostering placements, leaving care services and multi-agency support were pivotal to care leavers' success in later life. The continuity of workers and carers was a key element in providing the stability and security care leavers required to successfully deal with the challenges of growing into young adults. The following example from one local authority illustrates this point:

The recently established Pathways team provides services for both children in care and care leavers. The expectation is that the continuity provided by just one team will both improve placement stability and help smooth transitions for young people. Care leavers will benefit from fewer changes of key workers; they will continue to be helped and supported by staff they know and trust as they move into adulthood.

10. The survey found that care leavers identified foster carers and residential workers as good at helping them develop independent living skills. Practical help and advice and being shown how to manage new tasks helped care leavers increase their competency. Care leavers with disabilities generally

received very good support to prepare for independence, appropriate to their needs and abilities, as the following example illustrates:

A care leaver with moderate learning disabilities was supported by the foster carer to telephone the doctor for test results. The carer rehearsed what needed to be said and was on hand for support and reassurance if the young person got stuck. The carer praised the young person for making the call and getting all the information needed.

11. Questionnaire responses from young people in children's homes, collected from social care inspections between August and December 2008, identified some aspects of good provision. This included focused daily routines and the provision of sufficient resources to underpin the effective delivery of structured independent living programmes to improve care leavers' skills. Information packs and individual work booklets enabled care leavers to absorb information at their own pace. Giving deserved praise encouraged them to successfully manage new tasks that they had initially found daunting. Private sector placements often included driving lessons for 17-year-old care leavers. One young person described the help available:

'I get £47.50 a week from staff [this was to help young people learn to manage on a realistic income] to buy food, my clothes and activities, to help me learn how to budget. I am managing. Staff give me a lot of support with things like using public transport, cooking, ironing and washing. If I get stuck, staff help me.' (17-year-old)

12. In two of the authorities visited, carers and workers received no formal training to support care leavers and there was no means to assess young people's progress. The other four councils provided relevant training opportunities, involving care leavers in delivering training to help staff understand care leavers' perspectives and how best to support their needs. Evidence from inspections of children's homes undertaken between August and December 2008 identified very few opportunities for staff working in the private sector to receive training in preparing care leavers for independent living. An example of a council providing focused training and support is as follows:

One authority was recruiting and training foster carers to provide 'teenage' placements that would continue to look after young people until they were ready to move into independence. Carers received focused training on how to best support and prepare young people for independent living.

13. Routines in the secure settings visited (for example, set times for young people to be locked in their rooms) offered restricted opportunities for care leavers to learn how to make daily choices or regularly practise their independent living skills. The tension between the tasks of managing challenging behaviour and risk and helping care leavers gain independence skills had an impact on the number of opportunities for preparation work made available to individual care

leavers. For care leavers with a history of mental health issues and secure placements within children's services and mental health establishments, professionals do not prioritise preparation and planning for leaving care work for those young people who are unlikely to be discharged into the community in the near future.

14. Four secure settings were surveyed; three secure children's homes and one secure training centre. Three establishments provided good levels of preparation for independent living support to accommodated care leavers within the restricted secure environment; the other provided a satisfactory service. In one establishment, care leavers worked to gain certificated awards within the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN)⁶, promoting their personal and social development and helping to increase their confidence and self-esteem. The settings visited identified fairness and diversity issues: differences in religion, race and gender were well managed. There were effective strategies to manage so called 'gang culture'. The positive use of ASDAN awards is illustrated by the following example:

One care leaver had gained bronze and silver ASDAN awards and was working towards the gold award. The submitted silver award held a completed feedback sheet from the assessing consortium: 'A really interesting folder, good use of photos. Well done!'

15. In the secure settings visited, enthusiastic senior workers, vocational officers and resettlement officers worked with care leavers and staff, motivating the development of care leavers' independent living skills. Lead workers developed their skills mainly through in-house training and liaison with other colleagues within the secure estate. They gained knowledge from the Secure Accommodation Network and carried out their own research to develop well-structured programmes to meet individual care leavers' needs within a secure environment.⁷
16. Supported by good risk assessment systems, vocational instructors worked with care leavers to help them develop technical skills in preparation for employment. In one setting the instructor was helping care leavers build a mock bedsit, which the resettlement worker could use to train young people to complete realistic, practical household tasks. Activities included building, plastering, bricklaying, plumbing, tiling, painting and decorating, and laying drains. In two settings, teaching and care staff worked closely together to help care leavers maintain links with the community and prepare for independence. For example, care leavers grew garden produce for use in meals that they cooked; they entered national art competitions; and learned how to care for a baby and be a good parent. Resettlement workers undertook intensive work

⁶ ASDAN is a charity promoting young people's development: www.ASDAN.org.uk.

⁷ www.secureaccommodation.org.uk.

with individual care leavers to prepare them for their return to the community. This was vital for those care leavers who had been in secure accommodation for a long period. One young person taken out 'on mobility' into the local area found steps and stairs particularly challenging, as secure accommodation was only on one level. Another young person commented as follows:

'I go out on mobility every other day to do things to get me ready to leave. I do banking, shopping and just walking about to get used to being outside. I am scared to come out; the noise and traffic freak me out.'

17. The survey found that young people in care settings did not feel confident about leaving care and being 'ready to go'. A total of 34 care leavers, aged from 15 to 18 years of age, were spoken with on scheduled social care inspections and completed survey questionnaires, to find out how prepared they felt to move into more independent living situations.⁸ They were asked to indicate their readiness by using a grading level: 10 being 'totally prepared' and one indicating 'not at all ready to go'. Seven care leavers declined to answer this question. Out of the 30 who took part, only five felt 'totally prepared'. Eighteen indicated they were at level five or under; of these, eight indicated they were 'not at all ready to go'. One young person stated:

'I've still got questions, such as where am I going to live. I'll find it strange sleeping in a place alone.' (17-year-old)

18. Two of the main concerns care leavers identified related to worries about where they might live and being given few opportunities to spend time on their own before they left care. Care leavers feared being lonely or it being too quiet after group living. Effective care practice recognised the importance of listening to young people's anxieties about leaving care and the need to make robust and gradual arrangements, moving at the young person's pace to support them into adulthood. Imaginative ways of helping young people through these processes included the following examples:

A regular drama group is set up for young people living in care. They use this opportunity creatively to express their feelings and views about leaving care.

An 18-year-old care leaver with moderate learning disabilities moved from a long-term foster placement into a supported living adult service provision. Children's services are paying for planned respite periods with the foster carer to lessen the impact of the change process.

⁸ Three young people with learning difficulties did not complete the questionnaire. Their views were fed back into the survey by the inspectors who completed the questionnaire on their behalf.

Pathway planning and leaving care support services

19. The survey identified that a few care leavers could talk through their plans for the future with workers of their choice. Effective pathway planning was a collaborative and gradual process with care leavers; 'doing with' rather than 'doing to' or 'doing for'. Good planning took account of care leavers' particular needs and views, with young people being fully involved in deciding the content and implementation of pathway plans. Talking through plans several times with workers helped assure care leavers they would be well supported, improving the stability of placements and reducing young people's anxieties:

'At the time, I didn't know if it would work, but now I can see that the decisions and plans were good.' (22-year-old)

20. Every care leaver in five of the authorities visited had a pathway plan; staff vacancies had an impact on the remaining authority's capacity to complete plans. However, social care inspections between August and December 2008 identified that about a third of the 34 care leavers responding to a questionnaire did not have a copy of a completed or up to date pathway plan. The quality and implementation of pathway plans was variable. The best plans were responsive to care leavers' developmental needs and were regularly updated to reflect changes in circumstances; robust and realistic contingency planning was included. The risks of not getting this right are illustrated by the following example:

Everything appeared to be going well until the young person was sacked from his apprenticeship. The reason given was that he was unable to keep up with the academic work. If this had been picked up sooner, then efforts could have been made to help the young person improve his understanding of things and maintain his apprenticeship. There was no Plan 'B'.

21. Files examined in visits to secure establishments did not contain pathway plans from young people's home area local authority. Over three quarters of care leavers spoken with were uncertain of their plans, or said they did not have one; key workers spoken with did not know about the plans either. One setting visited was developing its own pathway plans for individuals. The frequency of social workers' visits to care leavers in the four secure settings visited was variable; however, regular review meetings took place where young people could contribute to their future planning. The impact of poor planning can be illustrated by these comments from two young people:

'I don't think I have a social worker any more as I haven't seen him for about three months. I don't think I have a pathway plan.'

'My social worker says they will do one when I leave here. I need everything to be ready before I leave.'

22. In contrast, the six local authorities visited provided good support to care leavers while they were in secure accommodation, working closely with youth offending teams (YOTs) and relevant services to provide integrated and comprehensive support to care leavers on their return to their area. Two authorities had protocols in place to clarify the roles and responsibilities of services supporting care leavers returning from secure accommodation; this helped provide targeted individual support. Clear planning and exit strategies ensured sufficient and appropriate resources were in place prior to release from custody, helping improve care leavers' stability and emotional well-being. One authority maintained care leavers' accommodation while they were in short-term custody; another ensured services were coordinated:

Both housing and training providers accompanied the YOT and leaving care team worker to the prison to discuss the pathway plan and intervention plan. This ensured a well-coordinated service on release.

23. In all six authorities, independent reviewing officers (IROs) chaired reviews of plans for care leavers aged up to 18, providing safeguarding oversight and monitoring the quality of assessment, planning and implementation. In five of the authorities, senior officers reviewed pathway plans for care leavers aged 18 and over, monitoring effective implementation through supervision processes or small, informal meetings with care leavers. Care leavers were generally satisfied with these arrangements. In one authority, a named officer continued to review pathway plans until care leavers reached at least 21 years, or longer if they were in education. Care leavers did not always have a choice over who reviewed their plans and attended meetings:

'I said I didn't want her [IRO] again, but they still keep sending her.'

24. Comprehensive leaving care policies with clear accountability for services to care leavers were found in the most effective authorities. Good integration of services reduced gaps in provision and improved accessibility to wider services and support networks, benefiting care leavers, as the following example illustrates:

On Friday afternoons, care leavers have free use of the facilities at The Quays, a leisure complex located in the city centre. A multi-agency team of practitioners works at the centre during this period, providing care leavers with easy access to a range of health, counselling, advocacy and youth services on a drop-in basis.

25. Strong inter-agency working relationships across teams were integral to helping care leavers make transitions effectively. Basing link workers from key agencies such as the Connexions service within leaving care teams for part of the week helped workers access specialist advice, enabled timely joint decision-making

and aided communication, improving the quality of support for care leavers. Locating relevant services on the same site improved communication and ad hoc joint working arrangements. The importance of professionals understanding each other's role was evidenced in one council:

A shadowing opportunity was provided to the supported lodgings worker within the leaving care team and the dedicated housing department worker. Shadowing increased each team's understanding of the different areas of work and accountabilities and highlighted how best the two teams could work together to meet the needs of care leavers. Strong working relationships have been established, benefiting care leavers accessing housing services.

26. The importance of getting on well with a leaving care worker or personal adviser was emphasised by care leavers taking part in the survey. All the care leavers interviewed wanted workers they could relate to and trust, who did what they said they would do and treated young people with respect. The survey identified the high commitment of leaving care teams and the appreciation of their efforts by care leavers. Many workers went that extra mile to support individuals, for example working late into the evening and giving out mobile telephone numbers for out of hours advice, ensuring care leavers in crisis received support from workers they knew, rather than from the authority's emergency duty team. A 'can do' problem-solving approach taken by several councils visited helped many care leavers make successful transitions. Good planning and the effective implementation of plans reduced the frequency of care leavers' problems. Five of the leaving care teams surveyed operated an office hours duty system, enabling care leavers to get a prompt response to any issues they might have. The advantages of providing accessible services and support are described by one young person:

'I feel that I am treated as an individual and so are other young people; I am listened to and the leaving care team are very supportive. They realise you don't need your hand held, but they are there if you want them. They have never given up on me.'

27. The leaving care teams visited young people in their homes, and encouraged care leavers to take part in development opportunities, community leisure activities and volunteering, to help their integration into the community and to establish new social networks outside the care system. Two authorities made good use of extended schools funding to pay for gym membership, music and driving lessons. Effective leaving care services did not just make contact with care leavers aged over 18 years; they provided the levels of support and assistance individual care leavers required to make their transitions successfully. Workers helped limit care leavers' feelings of loss and loneliness after support ended by arranging social events or mail-shots. However, as one young person reports, this was not consistent:

'Two weeks after I finished my degree, I got a four-line letter from my social worker. It told me that support had now stopped and wished me well. I am now on my own and haven't found a job to start my career.'

28. In five of the authorities, care leavers received fixed leaving care grants of varying amounts, plus special payments for agreed items. The care leavers met raised concerns about the inadequacy of the grants, particularly in relation to the impact on choice and incurring subsequent setting-up costs after the initial move from care. Two contrasting approaches between local authorities are illustrated as follows:

'I have had to choose what I need from a catalogue, but I couldn't have what I wanted. They just chose cheap plastic toasters and kettles. I feel insulted.' (Young person)

One authority did not give a leaving care grant. Workers assessed care leavers' individual support needs and funding was provided accordingly. Budgets were managed by taking a common sense approach to the financial support provided to care leavers. This worked well; the care leavers spoken with raised no concerns and were very satisfied with the support given.

29. Local authority workers in the leaving care teams visited had access to a wide range of council training, helping them to improve their skills to support care leavers well. Attendance at national leaving care conferences and events, having access to research dissemination networks and taking part in the National Care Advisory Service benchmarking forums provided focused learning opportunities.⁹ The impact of effective training is demonstrated in the following example:

The leaving care team has received specialist training on attachment issues. This offers a much more subtle and insightful approach to understanding care leavers' experiences. Staff act as attachment figures for time-limited periods, enabling care leavers to be more confident, with higher self-esteem, and better able to cope with situations and peers.

The effectiveness of strategies and services on outcomes for care leavers

Health

30. The provision of innovative health promotion and healthcare services encouraged care leavers within the survey to access health services. Most

⁹ www.nlcas.org.

looked after children's nurses had a flexible and informal approach to working with care leavers, increasing the take-up of health assessments; nurses met care leavers in their homes, in outreach clinics and in leisure centres. Having nurses based part-time in leaving care teams was advantageous; support workers could seek health advice on behalf of care leavers, enlist the nurse's support to register individuals with doctors and dentists and make referrals to specialist health services. Nurses had limited capacity to work with young people aged 18 or over; older care leavers were signposted to relevant health services. Free leisure passes, paid gym membership and planned participation opportunities in sports helped promote care leavers' physical well-being. Young people in one local authority had benefited from discussions held with local dentists:

Health and dental checks are consistently good, arising from work with local dentists about their responsibilities as providers to local children.

31. Care leavers' health needs in the secure settings visited were generally well met. Young people received good support from experienced nursing staff. Nurses were skilful in gaining individual young people's trust and cooperation and encouraging them to accept needed treatment and medication.
32. Leaving care workers in three of the authorities received training in sexual health matters and the distribution of condoms. This was particularly helpful in supporting care leavers who may have missed personal, social and health education lessons through disrupted school attendance. The third sector¹⁰ provided a range of counselling and advice services care leavers could use:

A vibrant voluntary sector within the borough works well in partnership with the authority. Staff are committed and enthusiastic, ensuring care leavers are the focus of their interventions and receive coordinated guidance and support.

33. Care leavers in all the settings visited generally received very good healthcare; health needs were clearly stated in placement plans and monitored at regular statutory reviews. Good links with most specialist health teams were found in all the authorities visited, providing integrated health services for care leavers. Three authorities had excellent access to substance use teams, drug and alcohol and sexual health services. Looked after children's emotional well-being was supported by arrangements within three authorities for priority access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). However, only one authority offered effective access arrangements to mental health services for care leavers aged 17 and over with lower level mental health needs and/or presenting behavioural issues.

¹⁰ By the third sector, we mean voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, co-operatives and faith groups.

The Behaviour Resource Service (BRS) is a CAMHS Tier 3 service. BRS workers attend regular meetings with the leaving care team and provide consultancy to support care leavers on an individual basis. BRS also provides training to staff working with care leavers, for example, negotiating and managing emotions and making transitions.

Accommodation

34. Effective housing partnerships and strategies identified in the survey prioritised care leavers and provided a good range of housing options, giving a choice of and access to safe and suitable accommodation. Regular multi-agency housing panels and strategy groups helped identify and provide local support networks to maintain care leavers' tenancies and find solutions to the risk of homelessness. In one authority, all six district councils were signed up to the young people's housing strategy, which identified care leavers as a priority group. Effective housing strategies recognised that care leavers did not always make the expected progress in managing independent living arrangements and they were able to return to a more supported environment until ready to move on again. The following is an example of effective arrangements in one authority:

Care leavers are supported through staged, tailored programmes of accommodation where mistakes can be made, and progress to council-allocated permanent tenancies, which are thus successfully sustained. A good range of staffed, shared and individual accommodation, floating support, training flats and supported lodgings are offered through private and social landlords.

35. In order to provide suitable accommodation for care leavers, all the authorities visited had developed corporate housing strategies and protocols and were working in partnership with the third sector to develop further housing options. However, three of the authorities visited did not have access to a sufficient stock of suitable, long-term independent accommodation to meet the needs of all care leavers and were dependent upon private sector provision, particularly in rural areas. Bed and breakfast accommodation was recognised by all the local authorities to be the last resort for care leavers. There were occasions when it was used as a short-term measure by authorities to accommodate unaccompanied, asylum-seeking young people, or care leavers who were described as 'chaotic'. Authorities indicated a shortage of suitable emergency accommodation for care leavers. Involving care leavers in housing development work contributed to improving housing outcomes. An example of the impact of work with care leavers is as follows:

The employment of a care leaver on a work experience placement within the housing department has provided valuable insight to inform future housing considerations and developments for care leavers.

36. Extending foster placements into supported lodgings placements provided care leavers with stability; many care leavers had formed good attachments with their carers and favoured this option. Such arrangements, however, had an impact on the available pool of foster carers; the change in the status of the placement adversely affected those foster carers in receipt of benefits. The advantages of such arrangements are, however, illustrated by the comments of one young person:

'I didn't like it when my worker talked about me leaving care; it has been agreed that I can stay on at my foster carer's with my sister. It's now "supported lodgings" and not "foster care" but it isn't really different and I am just glad I am staying where I am. I am staying as long as I like and going when I feel ready, probably about 22 or 23.' (19-year-old)

37. One authority was taking part in the 'Staying Put' pilot and had set up a robust supported lodgings scheme for care leavers.¹¹ Detailed planning and high support levels encouraged providers to register for this scheme:

A supported lodgings scheme for care leavers is funded by the Supporting People programme. All care leavers in the scheme have a support plan and a licence agreement which sets out their rights and responsibilities. Landlords are paid according to the needs of care leavers and the amount of support they can provide. The scheme is underpinned by research which shows that supported lodgings produce better outcomes for young people than other forms of supported accommodation.

Education

38. Detailed assessments of looked after children's educational needs and clear planning enabled agencies to work effectively together to provide care leavers with good personal support. On survey visits, most young people spoken with who were preparing to leave said they had personal education plans in place which provided clear targets and accountabilities to help care leavers learn and achieve. Most authorities ensured that care leavers in education had access to a computer in foster placements or had their own laptop if living independently. Authorities helped care leavers with costs for equipment and travel in different ways:

Rural areas face significant challenges, with limited public transport which can pose major hurdles for care leavers who want to access post-16 education and employment. The council overcame this for one care leaver by purchasing a moped to enable him to attend the college of his choice.

¹¹ www.spkweb.org.uk.

In one council, workers can make individual requests for financial support for money, equipment or training. One care leaver was supported to gain a forklift truck licence.

39. The Aimhigher programme helped raise aspirations and encouraged care leavers to think about following further or higher education courses.¹² Two authorities had negotiated protocols with colleges and universities to help care leavers continue their education. In one authority, care leavers had fast track interviews at college; in another, two universities agreed a reduced point admissions protocol for care leavers. One authority identified that some care leavers dropped out in the period between leaving school and starting further education. In response, the Connexions worker based in the leaving care team provided targeted support during the summer break to ensure their retention in education. Connexion service workers in all the authorities visited worked closely with leaving care teams, giving care leavers good advice and information and making young people aware of learning and employment opportunities:

'If it wasn't for the Connexions worker, I would never have got to university. I didn't think I could do it, but he thought I could and he and my foster carer encouraged me a lot and helped me to apply. Now I am there and I love it!'

40. A variable number of care leavers were in higher education, supported by the six authorities visited. Good corporate parenting maintained care leavers in education. For example, one authority paid the hire costs of a large car to enable foster carers to take and collect the young person and their numerous belongings, at the start and end of each term. Authorities paid for vacation accommodation; one authority also paid accommodation retainers in university towns. The good authorities visited recognised that progress was not a linear process; care leavers making transitions, like other young people, changed their minds and made mistakes. In one authority, flexible support was given to each care leaver to support their choices of training and career development, as the following example illustrates:

A care leaver completed the first year of a degree course, but decided not to continue. Following reconsideration a year later, the young person applied for a different course at another university and is now being supported with a bursary from the council. They will not be disadvantaged in any way by this decision and will be supported through to the completion of this course.

¹² www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/DG_073697.

Employment

41. All the authorities visited used their strategic position as a large employer to help care leavers into employment opportunities within the council and with independent employers. In one area with high social deprivation, the council had achieved consistently high levels of education, training and employment for care leavers. However, overall, the number of council apprenticeships offered within the authorities surveyed was low.
42. Specialist employment workers were based in three leaving care teams visited; this assisted them in understanding individual care leavers' needs and abilities, improving the quality of tailored support packages. Officers' specialist knowledge increased the range of employment options for care leavers by helping them identify vacancies, develop their interview skills and supporting their attendance at interviews. Authorities also helped care leavers into employment through a range of education into employment schemes, as shown in the following examples:

One employment scheme provides temporary job opportunities for the most vulnerable care leavers. Two other schemes use trained council employees as mentors to support care leavers. These provide useful stepping stones for care leavers to move into permanent employment and a mechanism to reduce the not in education, employment or training figures.

43. The availability of employment was limited in the authorities visited and this was disheartening to care leavers who had completed training for employment of their choice. The survey identified a significant shortage of local construction jobs. Following the completion of a basic construction skills course, care leavers could not find employment and were having to retake the course as there was no other option. Some care leavers fell into the benefits trap; they were financially worse off in employment or there were problems taking up short-term working opportunities and then returning to benefits. Authorities were providing imaginative support to maintain care leavers in employment:

A care leaver qualified to become a flight attendant and was offered employment which involved out of hours travel, when public transport was not available. To support them in their chosen career, the council agreed to support the provision of a car and the care leaver is repaying the cost over a manageable period.

Inclusion of different groups of care leavers

44. In line with the Children Act 1989 transition planning for care leavers with disabilities in all authorities visited began around the age of 14 years. Good assessment was essential in providing detailed tailor-made plans, showing how services would prepare and support individuals to the level of independent living that it was possible for them to realistically achieve. Effective

arrangements for the coordination of joint working arrangements were fundamental to implementing support services to help care leavers with disabilities move smoothly into adulthood.

45. In one authority, a high level of expertise within the multi-agency Transitional Operations Group forum contributed to identifying how best to meet the complex needs of young people with disabilities, providing a high level of expertise in decision-making. In another, the transitions team provided opportunities for care leavers to lead planning meetings, ensuring that their voices were heard rather than the plan being driven by family members or professionals. Care leavers with lower level disabilities who did not meet adult disability services thresholds required leaving care services to be innovative in arranging support packages to meet individual needs:

A leaving care worker coordinated a multi-agency approach to assess and meet a care leaver's needs, to ensure appropriate services would be in place when support from the leaving care service ended. This facilitated a smooth transition to adult services and maintained placement stability. The care leaver remained with her supported lodgings provider, funded by adult services.

46. The authorities surveyed supported care leavers from minority ethnic cultures to build close links with their local community groups and relevant organisations to receive emotional and social support. Workers ensured that care leavers had opportunities to follow their chosen religion and maintain links with people from the same cultural background. Authorities sought interpreters, if necessary, who not only spoke the care leaver's language but also the particular dialect, to ensure care leavers understood what was happening and to make sure important information was correct, for example at health assessments. Carers and supported lodgings providers received training to increase their knowledge and skills in looking after young people from different cultures. All six authorities made efforts to recruit workers and carers to reflect ethnic groups within the local population.
47. Leaving care services in five of the authorities visited were supporting unaccompanied, asylum-seeking young people. In one authority, almost half of all care leavers were, or had been, seeking asylum. Workers recognised that respect was a key issue for some groups of young men; differing cultural expectations were identified and workers were able to provide support in ways that were acceptable to individuals. The authorities ensured that leaving care workers received additional specialist training to help them support these young people leaving care. Furthermore, specialist teams or workers were employed to provide targeted support and a good range of interventions to meet the assessed additional needs of unaccompanied asylum-seekers, for example to provide therapeutic help to deal with past trauma. One authority ensured that 'triple planning' was undertaken, encompassing a plan to return to their country of origin, to make sure all possibilities were planned for.

48. In three of the authorities visited, care leavers with children could access specific residential provision for young parents and babies which offered 24-hour support, helping them to develop their independent living and parenting skills. In two authorities, the survey identified the good levels of financial support given to care leavers who were young parents, to facilitate their return to education and employment. Young parents leaving care were supported to take up universal childcare services, for example, attending Sure Start initiatives and children's centres, to help integrate them into communities and be like any other young parent. A further example from one local authority follows:

The housing department and Pathways team jointly funded a work experience placement for a care leaver in the housing department and paid their childcare costs during the placement to support the care leaver's attendance. The care leaver now sits on the supported lodgings panel.

Advocacy and participation

49. A wide range of effective initiatives across the authorities visited provided opportunities for care leavers to influence the development, practice and policy of services that affected them. Where there was good practice, care leavers sat on children with disabilities panels, supported lodgings and fostering panels, corporate parenting panels and various strategy groups, ensuring that their views were included in decision making. Four of the authorities visited operated a youth parliament or children in care council, involving care leavers in strategic decision making. Care leavers gained self-confidence and developed their skills by working with staff to deliver training and recruiting staff within the authority. Care leavers used their experiences and insight to provide councillors, workers, foster carers and senior officers with a good understanding of the issues that had an impact on successful outcomes for young people leaving care, enabling councils to target development effectively and undertake effective recruitment and selection procedures, improving services to support care leavers.
50. Two of the authorities surveyed had negotiated well-paid work placement opportunities within service level agreements providing participation services to young people leaving care. The paid care leavers used their expertise to work with other young people in or leaving care and encourage their participation in consultation exercises to deliver key messages to the council, thereby influencing the development of new services that affected them. They also acted as peer mentors and role models for younger children and young people leaving care. Their input was valued; young people found the support provided by older care leavers who had been through similar experiences to themselves very helpful. The paid care leaver enjoyed their participation work and said they had personally benefited from being involved. They commented:

'I really enjoy doing this and I wanted to give something back. I'm not just a single parent or someone who has been in care any more.'

'I find it easy to relate as a care leaver to other young people who are in care or getting ready to leave care. I go to the Youth Parliament and it has led to other work experience opportunities.'

51. Care leavers' participation in two authorities led to improvements in providing continuity of social workers, reviews of accommodation for young people and access to leisure facilities. A further example was as follows:

Care leavers participated in making a DVD to express their views about being in care and leaving care issues. It is used as a training tool for new staff and carers.

52. Third sector organisations provided advocacy services in all the authorities visited, encouraging impartial representation for young people leaving care. However, not all service level agreements included provision for care leavers aged over 18. The work of advocacy services was monitored by councils: good councils had mechanisms in place to address care leavers' representations and complaints, leading to changes to improve care and support services. Providing advocacy services for care leavers with complex communication needs was challenging to most services. Where there was good practice, secure settings made sure care leavers had good access to advocates. Representatives of Voice, a national advocacy group, regularly visited some settings.¹³ Direct dial links to Voice and Childline¹⁴ were available on accessible phones within secure children's homes visited. In some circumstances, staff sought the support of the Howard League to represent care leavers' concerns and challenge decisions made.¹⁵

← Formatted: Bullets and Numbering

¹³ www.voiceyp.org.

¹⁴ www.childline.org.uk.

¹⁵ www.howardleague.org.

Notes

Between August and December 2008 Ofsted undertook survey visits to four secure estate provisions and six local authorities. The authorities were selected from evidence drawn from joint area reviews and annual performance assessments of services for children and young people and were a small but diverse sample of areas, with different types of local authorities. Additional relevant evidence was drawn from survey questionnaires completed by young people during Ofsted inspections of children's homes, fostering services and residential special schools which took place between August and December 2008. Inspectors met officers and representatives from the local authority, local strategic partnerships and trusts, elected members, Connexions, health services, youth support services, housing departments, relevant disabilities and adult intervention services and third sector organisations.

The number of care leavers who contributed to the survey was 103. User views were sought through speaking with 69 care leavers, either individually or in groups. Fourteen were spoken with in secure settings and 55 met inspectors during local authority visits. A further 34 young people completed survey questionnaires during Ofsted inspections of children's homes, fostering services and residential special schools.

Annex A: Local authorities visited for the survey

Bolton
Dorset
Knowsley
The London Borough of Richmond
Southampton
Suffolk

Annex B: Young people's views on leaving care, Children's Rights Director Report 2006

Key findings

1. There was little middle ground in the quality of support and preparation that young people leaving care receive. In most cases it was either excellent or poor, and in some cases, non-existent.
2. A number of young people felt they had been forced to leave care too early. They wanted to be given more say in both how and when they left.
3. Young people perceived that their leaving care worker often had no more power than they did.
4. Highest praise was reserved for those workers young people saw as going that extra distance to make good things happen for them.
5. Many young people had a clear sense that they could be discriminated against for being in care when they applied for work.
6. Personal safety and welfare could be compromised when young people were placed in locations and with people where it was previously considered 'not in their best interests'.
7. Many young people did not know their entitlements to leaving care and aftercare support.

Key recommendations

Young people said that they need to leave care:

- with everything in place
- more gradually
- when they are ready
- while being able to go back
- with enough time to prepare
- with easier methods of dealing with housing benefits

- with recognition that they needed more money
- with help in getting travel cards and driving lessons
- being able to contact key people
- benefiting from money that councils have put aside for them
- with help in bringing up any children of their own
- secure in knowing that where they live is safe
- with social workers understanding how difficult it is for them
- with accommodation guaranteed.