

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST?

Improving life chances for care leavers

January 2014



THE CENTRE FOR
SOCIAL
JUSTICE

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About the Centre for Social Justice

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) aims to put social justice at the heart of British politics.

Our policy development is rooted in the wisdom of those working to tackle Britain's deepest social problems and the experience of those whose lives have been affected by poverty. Our Working Groups are non-partisan, comprising prominent academics, practitioners and policy makers who have expertise in the relevant fields. We consult nationally and internationally, especially with charities and social enterprises, who are the champions of the welfare society.

In addition to policy development, the CSJ has built an alliance of poverty fighting organisations that reverse social breakdown and transform communities.

We believe that the surest way the Government can reverse social breakdown and poverty is to enable such individuals, communities and voluntary groups to help themselves.

The CSJ was founded by Iain Duncan Smith in 2004, as the fulfilment of a promise made to Janice Dobbie, whose son had recently died from a drug overdose just after he was released from prison.

Director: Christian Guy

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- A wide variety of CSJ Alliance members and other voluntary sector organisations who both enabled us to consult with care leavers and provided their own invaluable insights. Most notably, we would like to thank the Drive Forward Foundation, the Big House, Siblings Together, the National Care Advisory Service (NCAS), the Share Foundation, Amber and the Care Leavers Association for their help with this research.

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Executive summary

Introduction

Every year in England almost 10,000 young people leave care.^{1,2} Having had childhoods punctuated by instability and trauma, they leave home earlier and have less support than their peers. Many go on to face extreme difficulties in adulthood. It is estimated that:

- 20 per cent of young homeless people were previously in care;³
- 24 per cent of the adult prison population have been in care;⁴
- 70 per cent of sex workers have been in care;⁵
- Care leavers are roughly twice as likely not to be in education training or employment at 19 than the rest of the population;⁶ and
- Only six per cent of care leavers are in higher education at 19, compared to roughly 30 per cent of young people nationally.⁷

Recently there has been important progress in improving support for care leavers with the Government's announcement that care leavers will be able to remain in foster care placements until 21 – called for by the Centre for Social Justice in the parliamentary briefing paper '*I Never Left Care, Care Left Me*'.

This report, based on a survey of 100 care leavers and consultation with those who work with them, identifies where progress still needs to be made to improve outcomes. The overwhelming response from our consultation, and the message of this report, is that whilst there *has* been real progress for care leavers in England in recent years, the vast majority of spending and support has been focussed on the better-off care leavers, predominantly

1 Social services and policy relating to children in care and care leavers are devolved in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This report focusses primarily on leaving care in England, however many of the points made apply to other parts of the United Kingdom, especially Wales where leaving care is most similar to England.

2 Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013

3 Centrepoint, *The changing face of youth homelessness*, London: Centrepoint, 2010; see also *Crisis. The hidden truth about homelessness*, London: Crisis, 2011

4 Ministry of Justice, *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds Results from surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners*, London: Ministry of Justice, 2012

5 Home Office, *Paying the Price: A Coordinated Prostitution Strategy*, London: Home Office, 2004; for a more recent case study of voluntary sector organisation with similar findings see: Centre for Social Justice, '*I Never Left Care, Care Left Me*', London: Centre for Social Justice, 2013

6 Department for Education, *NEET Statistics – NEET statistics: quarterly brief – quarter 2, 2012* [accessed via: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/230393/Quarterly_Brief_NEET_Q2_2013_FINAL_pdf.pdf (19/09/13)]; Department for Education, *National Statistics, Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013

7 *Ibid*; UCAS, 2013 *Application Cycle: End of Cycle Report*, London: UCAS, 2013 (N.B. statistic for care leavers gives percentage attending university at 19, whilst UCAS statistic gives percentage of young people applying to university at 18)

those with a stable foster care placement and who are able to remain in education. The care leavers who have not been targets of support – who have had the most unstable time whilst in care and who do not generally remain in education – are slipping through the cracks and experiencing unacceptably poor outcomes. By contrast, the Scottish Government has recently increased support to care leavers universally, allowing all care leavers – including those in residential care and who do not remain in education – to stay in care until 21⁸ and to receive support until 26.⁹

Making the move to independence

'I was kicked out of the children's home, so I had to learn quickly to live on my own. I would have preferred to be in the children's home working and earning. It would have put me in a better position.'

Care leaver in evidence to the CSJ

In many cases, the care leavers we spoke to were not managing to cope living on their own.

- Two-thirds of the care leavers we surveyed did not feel they had enough day-to-day support;
- 57 per cent said managing their money and avoiding debt was difficult when leaving care.

The recent change by the Government to allow children to remain with their former carers until 21 is very significant for those care leavers who have a stable foster placement. However, the 62 per cent whose final placement is not foster care and who are likely to be the most vulnerable,¹⁰ will typically continue to be forced out of care by their 18th birthday.

Having left care, often poorly prepared, the majority of young people are largely moving to live on their own, unsupported.¹¹ Only one-fifth of care leavers are in semi-independent placements or supported lodgings at 19, and provisions vary hugely across local authorities.¹² For example, 61 per cent of all semi-independent placements for care leavers at 19 are provided by just 22 per cent of local authorities.¹³

8 Press Release, Scottish Government, *Greater rights for young people in care*, 6th January 2014 [accessed via: <http://news.scotland.gov.uk/News/Greater-rights-for-young-people-in-care-818.aspx> (14/01/13)]

9 Scottish Government, *A Scotland for Children: A consultation on a Children and Young People Bill*, Scotland: Scottish Government, 2013

10 Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013

11 Ibid

12 Department for Education, *Children looked after in England, including adoption*, Local Authority Tables, London: Department for Education, 2013

13 Ibid

Education and employment

There has been little improvement in education and employment outcomes for care leavers in recent years.

- Whilst the proportion of care leavers achieving five GCSEs at A*–C (including English and maths) has increased by 50 per cent since 2008, the attainment gap between them and their non-looked after peers has actually widened by six percentage points;¹⁴
- The proportion of care leavers entering higher education at 19 remains at the same low rate of six per cent that it was at in 2005;¹⁵
- Unemployment amongst care leavers at the age of 19 has remained very high over the past 10 years at roughly one-third of all care leavers, almost twice the average for their age group.¹⁶

There have been some important improvements in education support for care leavers in recent years. In particular, policies such as generous financial support for care leavers in higher education and support for care leavers returning to education up until 25, have signalled important progress.

- The CSJ have identified over 500 cases of care leavers under 25 returning to education since 2011;¹⁷
- Almost half of the care leavers we surveyed rated their support to remain in education as 'very good'.

However, the CSJ has identified several key barriers to care leavers succeeding in education and employment:

- Statutory planning (pathway plans) are not in place in half of cases, with the result that many young people are not being sufficiently supported to enter further education and employment;¹⁸
- Care leavers are likely to lack soft skills such as demonstrating commitment and communicating effectively, which are extremely important for finding work and succeeding in education;
- There remains a persistent culture that leaving care means a transfer to the benefits system. Whilst 70 per cent of care leavers told us they received help from their local authority with claiming benefits when leaving care, only 36 per cent received help finding a job.

14 Department for Education, *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England*, London: Department for Education, 2013; Department for Education, *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England*, London: Department for Education, 2012

15 Department of Education, *Children looked after in England, including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013; Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31st March 2008*, London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008 [accessed via:

16 Department for Education, *NEET Statistics – NEET statistics: quarterly brief – quarter 2, 2012* [accessed via:

17 Freedom of Information Requests by Centre for Social Justice [sent 4/11/13]: 112 local authorities responded, 101 were able to give correct data, 35 had one or fewer care leavers return.

18 APPG for looked after children and care leavers, *Entitlements Inquiry*, London: Who Cares? Trust, 2013

There is significantly less help for care leavers who enter employment when compared with those in education. Care leavers in employment, even those participating in apprenticeships, have their cases closed by children's services at 21 rather than 25, as is the case for those in education. Many of the care leavers we consulted with, both those in employment and some who were very far from it, felt they were abandoned because they were not in education.

Extreme outcomes

'Getting in trouble was normal for me when I was in care. When I left things didn't change.'

Care leaver in evidence to the CSJ

There is a group of care leavers who are far from achieving in education and employment, with barriers including addiction, severe mental health problems, early pregnancy and offending.

Homelessness

- Our survey showed that over half of care leavers found it difficult to secure somewhere safe and stable to live when they left care;
- It is estimated that 20 per cent of young homeless people were previously in care.¹⁹

Offending

- Almost one-quarter of the adult prison population were previously in care;²⁰
- Offending in early adulthood negatively affects life chances, limiting opportunities to work in certain jobs (where CRB checks are required) and making young people even less likely to be prepared to live independently.

Drugs and alcohol

- It is estimated that 11 per cent of care leavers have problematic alcohol use and 21 per cent have problematic drug use;²¹
- Care leavers are twice as likely to have used illegal drugs than the general population;²²
- In our survey almost one-fifth of care leavers reported drug and alcohol misuse as a problem when leaving care.

¹⁹ Centrepoin, *The changing face of youth homelessness*, London: Centrepoin, 2010; see also *Crisis. The hidden truth about homelessness*, London: Crisis, 2011

²⁰ Ministry of Justice, *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds Results from surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners*, London: Ministry of Justice, 2012

²¹ Centrepoin, *The changing face of youth homelessness: trends in homeless young people's support needs*. London: Centrepoin, 2010; Home Office, *One problem amongst many: drug use amongst care leavers in transition to independent living*. London: Home Office, 2003

²² Ibid

Significant mental health problems

- 37 per cent of care leavers in our survey said coping with mental health problems was 'very difficult' when leaving care, a further 22 per cent said this was 'quite difficult';
- Mental health problems are a thread running through many other difficulties care leavers face such as drug and alcohol misuse, maintaining a tenancy and becoming caught up in the criminal justice system;
- Leaving care teams often lack the expertise and resources to help care leavers with significant mental health problems.

These particularly vulnerable care leavers, who have experienced one or more of the problems discussed above, are unlikely to receive the same level of support many 'better-off' care leavers receive. As they are likely to have ended their care career in residential care or the option to delay leaving their care placement until 21 is unlikely to be open to them to have had unstable foster placements.²³ Moreover, as those who experience poor outcomes are much less likely to remain in education, it is probable that they will not receive further support from their local authority once they turn 21.

Relationships

'The isolation was the worst thing for me as I had no family interested in being in touch. [I] am now realising how much more effort it takes for me to appear "normal" amongst my peers when I have no family support.'

Care leaver in evidence to the CSJ

Having stable and caring relationships with others is without doubt one of the most important protective factors against harm and other negative outcomes for everyone, yet focus on the importance of relationships is often missing from discussions of good outcomes for care leavers. The loneliness, isolation and lack of support felt by care leavers was one of the most frequently recurring themes of our consultation:

- Three-quarters (77 per cent) of the care leavers we surveyed said that feeling lonely or isolated was difficult when leaving care and 43 per cent said it was very difficult;
- 11 per cent of care leavers report there were one or no people they would be able to tell if they were harmed;²⁴
- One of the greatest difficulties care leavers report later in life is forming new relationships.²⁵

23 The recently published care leavers data pack demonstrates the link between both final placements in residential care and placement instability and poor outcomes at 19, see: Department for Education, *Care Leavers in England Data Pack*, London: Department for Education, 2012

24 Office for the Children's Rights Director, *National Overview Report of Children and Young People's Views, Care4Me & AfterCare Surveys, Local Authority Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspections June 2009 – July 2012*, London: Ofsted, 2012

25 The Care Leavers Association in evidence to the CSJ

Young people enter care *because* of broken relationships with their birth parents. Building strong supportive relationships whilst they are in care and ensuring they are maintained upon leaving is key if care leavers are going to gain resilience and avoid poor outcomes.

Yet, there are key points when opportunities are lost to sustain relationships such as separation from siblings, frequent movement and placements far away from home. Whilst leaving, care teams do sometimes provide excellent support to young people leaving care, we also found they were often too busy to build relationships with young people: the average caseload of a personal adviser is 23 young people, going as high as 49 in some local authorities.²⁶ Moreover opportunities to continue supportive relationships with former carers are consistently being missed.

The care leavers who are disproportionately affected by lost relationships are those who receive the least support when leaving care. Young people in residential care are more likely to be separated from their siblings, make frequent placement movements and be placed far from their local authority.²⁷ Yet they are also very unlikely to be able to remain in care past 18, unlike young people in foster care. Similarly young people who have had a disrupted time in care, and have lost relationships as a result of this, may be less likely to succeed in education and so are unlikely to have the support of a personal adviser once they turn 21.

Conclusion

In recent years there has been important progress in the support available to care leavers. However there remain several areas where there is a pressing need for change, which the CSJ's upcoming policy paper will focus on.

- Finding ways to support the 62 per cent of care leavers who are not able to stay in their care placement past 18, making good on the promise of the care leavers charter to 'move [you] into independent living only when you are ready';²⁸
- Ending the presumption that leaving care means entering the benefit system and finding a more flexible and aspirational way for supporting care leavers in their attempts to enter employment;
- Moving away from the idea that ongoing support is best aimed at those in education and targeting intervention at the care leavers who are the most vulnerable and at risk of the worst outcomes. Utilising the ability of the voluntary sector to deliver support, where these young people feel most alienated from their local authority;
- Addressing the extreme loneliness and isolation felt by care leavers, by finding ways to foster enduring and supportive relationships, with birth families, siblings, former carers and children's services, that last long after 21.

26 Freedom of Information Request by Centre for Social Justice [sent 04/11/13], 109 local authorities responded.

27 Ofsted, *Children's Care Monitor 2011*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2012

28 Department for Education, *Care leavers' charter*, 2012 [accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-leavers-charter> (02/01/14)]

At present we are missing huge opportunities to intervene before our most disadvantaged care leavers embark on paths that will, in the long-term, be extremely costly both in financial and human terms. Until concerted action on these additional fronts is taken, too many care leavers will be left in a situation that no parent could want for their child.

Introduction

Every year in England almost 10,000 young people leave care to move into independent living.^{29,30} Whilst many go on to lead happy stable lives, too often in adulthood they face extremely difficult experiences with far-reaching, lasting and damaging effects. Despite care leavers making up less than one per cent of the population:

- It is estimated that 20 per cent of homeless young people were previously in care;³¹
- 24 per cent of the adult prison population has been in care;³²
- 70 per cent of sex workers are estimated to have been in care;³³
- Care leavers are roughly twice as likely not to be in education training or employment at 19 than the rest of the population;³⁴ and
- At 19, only six per cent of care leavers are in higher education, compared to roughly 30 per cent nationally.³⁵

These difficulties are costly both in human and financial terms:

- A care leaver who has a 'negative journey' can cost the state £337,204 over the course of his or her lifetime.³⁶

This report restates the long standing concern of the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) for looked after children and care leavers. Their plight has been highlighted in previous reports on educational outcomes, mental health and youth justice, amongst others.³⁷ They were also the

29 Social services and policy relating to children in care and care leavers are devolved in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This report focuses primarily on leaving care in England, however many of the points made apply to other parts of the United Kingdom, especially Wales where leaving care is most similar to England.

30 Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013

31 Centrepunt, *The changing face of youth homelessness*, London: Centrepunt, 2010; see also *Crisis. The hidden truth about homelessness*, London: Crisis, 2011

32 Ministry of Justice, *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds Results, from surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners*, London: Ministry of Justice, 2012

33 Home Office, *Paying the Price: A Coordinated Prostitution Strategy*, London: Home Office, 2004; for a more recent case study of voluntary sector organisation with similar findings see: Centre for Social Justice, *I Never Left Care, Care Left Me*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2013

34 Department for Education, *NEET Statistics – NEET statistics: quarterly brief – quarter 2, 2012* [accessed via: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/230393/Quarterly_Brief_NEET_Q2_2013_FINAL_pdf.pdf (19/09/13)]; Department for Education, National Statistics, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013

35 Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013; UCAS, 2013 *Application Cycle: End of Cycle Report*, London: UCAS, 2013 (N.B. statistic for care leavers gives percentage attending university at 19, whilst UCAS statistic gives percentage of young people applying to university at 18)

36 National Audit Office, *Against the Odds, Targeted briefing – care leavers*, London: National Audit Office, 2010

37 Centre for Social Justice, *Requires Improvement, The causes of educational failure*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2013; Centre for Social Justice, *Rules of Engagement, Changing the heart of youth justice*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2012; Centre for Social Justice, *Completing the Revolution, Transforming mental health and tackling poverty*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2011

exclusive focus of *Couldn't Care Less* (2008), which exposed inadequacies in the care system and *'I Never Left Care, Care Left Me'* (2013), a parliamentary briefing paper, which called for amendments, later tabled, to the Children and Families Bill 2013, to extend the care leaving age and improve local authority accountability. So far, one amendment called for in the report has been accepted by the Government: on 4th December 2013 the Government announced that children would be able to remain in foster care until 21 instead of 18.³⁸

This is a landmark step, enabling young people in foster care to maximize the advantages of stable, family based support, for which the Government should be commended. However, for those who do not already have the benefit of these supportive relationships there is still a long way to go if the experience of leaving care is going to live up to the explicitly stated aspiration for corporate parenting 'to be no less than each parent would have for their own child'.³⁹ This report, based on consultation with care leavers and those who work with them, seeks to identify the characteristics of the care system and the process of leaving it that tends to contribute to such poor outcomes, particularly for the most vulnerable. Its conclusions lay the foundation for a forthcoming policy paper, which will make recommendations to address the problems identified here.

The overwhelming response from our consultation, and the message of this report, is that there *has* been real progress in leaving care support in recent years. However, the vast majority of spending and support has been focussed on the better-off care leavers, predominantly those with a stable foster care placement and who are able to remain in education. The most vulnerable care leavers, whose lives both before and during care are scarred by instability and trauma, and who are the most likely to become caught up in social problems ranging from addiction to offending, find themselves left with little support.

This lack of attention to the wide variation of care leavers' outcomes is at odds with the Government's social justice strategy. The social justice outcomes framework includes not just 'realising potential in the education system' but also 'stable family relationships', 'stopping young people from falling into patterns of re-offending' and 'tackling entrenched worklessness'.⁴⁰ If we are to give the most vulnerable care leavers the best chance of good outcomes, a broadening of focus is vital to meet the multiple needs of care leavers.

Late adolescent brain development: the argument for intervention

What we know about brain development suggests that the period of leaving care provides a key moment for intervention to improve long-term outcomes. During late adolescence pathways in the brain are 'pruned' so that there are fewer but faster connections. During this process, 'pathways that are reinforced by frequent use will be strengthened and maintained while those that are not will be lost due to pruning'.⁴¹ Scientists now believe that this 'pruning' occurs not just in adolescence but well into the 20s.⁴²

38 Press release, Department for Education, *Children to stay with foster families until 21*, 4th December 2013

39 Department for Education and Skills, *Care Matters: Time for Change*, London: Department for Education and Skills, 2007

40 HM Government, *Social Justice Outcomes Framework*, London: HM Government, 2012

41 Corbin, B, *Unleashing the potential of the teenage brain: ten powerful ideas*, London: Corwin Press, 2008

42 New Scientist, *Brain's synaptic pruning continues into your 20s*, 17th August 2011

If we take brain development seriously when developing policy, late adolescence must be seen as a crucial moment for targeted intervention: for building practical, emotional, academic and vocational skills, which will serve the young person long into life. Failing to intervene during early adulthood may mean that a young person is much more difficult to help later in life.

Research methodology

In order to ensure this report is focussed on the issues that most affect young people leaving care, we asked care leavers to complete a short questionnaire about their experience of leaving care: particularly the challenges they faced and the support they received. There was no age restriction on the care leavers completing the survey, as we were interested to see the experiences of all care leavers and to learn how care affects people's lives long after they have lost touch with their local authority. However the survey was mostly targeted at younger care leavers in order to gain a picture of current levels of support: 80 per cent of respondents had left care in the past five years and 96 per cent since the Children (Leaving Care) Act in 2000, which radically changed statutory support. Where known, quotes are accompanied by the year a young person left care.

The survey was completed by 100 care leavers. Alongside the questionnaires, 15 care leavers participated in in-depth telephone, face-to-face or web-chat interviews. We were assisted by the Care Leavers Association, National Care Advisory Service (NCAS), Drive Forward Foundation, the Share Foundation and the Big House Theatre Project as well as several Children in Care Councils and the CSJ's Alliance of grassroots charities which helped to distribute the survey to a group that is considered difficult to reach.

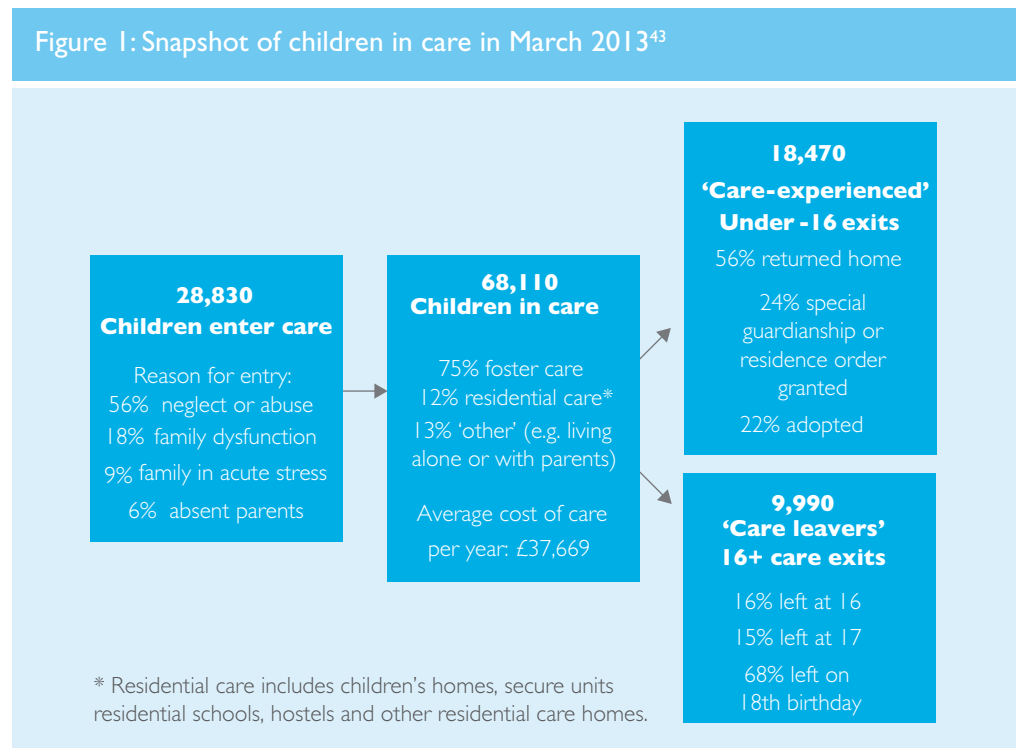
As well as gathering the views of care leavers, the CSJ has consulted with foster carers, leaving care managers, virtual school heads, residential care workers and voluntary sector organisations that work with care leavers. Their comments feature throughout the report and have added invaluable insights into the difficulties facing those trying to support care leavers.

Defining care leavers

Any discussion of leaving care and care leavers' outcomes must make clear exactly who is being referred to. The term 'care leaver' is used in this report to describe those who leave care post-16, rather than someone who has spent a period of time in care but has returned to their family or been adopted (this group can be described as 'care-experienced'). This distinction is important as outcome statistics, for instance the number of care leavers in prison, often encompass both groups.

Whilst both types of care leavers are potentially vulnerable, this report focuses primarily on the experiences of those who moved directly from being in local authority care to independence. These young people, who have not been able to return to their birth family

or find a permanent adoptive parent or guardian, rely on the corporate parent for support when leaving care in a way other 'care-experienced' young people may not.



The process of leaving care⁴⁴

Age 16: At least 3 months before their 16th birthday a young person must be given a 'personal adviser' to take over the role of their social worker and a 'pathway plan', which sets out where they will live and their education or employment plans.

Ages 16–18: At 16 a young person can leave care, although the Government have now announced they must be signed off by the director of children's services in their local authority.⁴⁵ Once they have left, the local authority must provide assistance for accommodation and living costs, as well as a personal adviser.

18–21: On their 18th birthday all young people cease to be 'looked after'. The local authority must still attempt to keep in touch with the young person, provide a personal adviser, pathway plan and assistance towards education and employment costs, but not necessarily housing support unless they are in further education. For those in education, support continues until the age of 25.

It is important to acknowledge the variety of backgrounds and experiences amongst care leavers and the impact this has on outcomes. Differing backgrounds of care leavers – the age

43 Department for Education, *Children looked after in England, including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013; House of Commons Library, *Children in Care in England: Statistics*, London: House of Commons Library, 2012. N.B. 'care experienced' exits breakdown may include some instances of adoption, special guardianship orders or returns home post-16, as figures for reason for ceasing care are not available solely for under-16s, however these are likely to be very small e.g. there were only 10 instances of post-16 adoption in 2013.

44 Department for Education, *The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 3: Planning Transitions to Adulthood for Care Leavers*, London: Department for Education, 2010

45 Press release, Department for Education, *Care leavers receiving more support than ever before*, 22nd May 2013

at which they entered care, the reason for entrance and the number of moves whilst in care – are associated with different outcomes.

- Late entrants into care are associated with a more unstable time in care and worse outcomes.⁴⁶ A 2003 release (the last point at which data is available) showed that the percentage of children in care achieving five GCSEs at A*–C varied between two per cent for those who had entered care in the past six months to 13 per cent for those who had been in care for 9–10 years.⁴⁷
- The reason for entering care affects outcomes. Young people who enter care because of behavioural difficulties tend to do worse in education than those who enter because of abuse and neglect⁴⁸ and are more likely to be NEET at 19.⁴⁹ Unaccompanied asylum seekers, who make up roughly three per cent of looked after children,⁵⁰ are the most likely to succeed in education.⁵¹
- The stability a young person experiences whilst in care has a significant impact on outcomes. Young people with more stable placements are found to have better behavioural outcomes.⁵² Moreover, care leavers in education at 19 are more likely to have had a stable placement whilst in care.⁵³

Background affects not only outcomes but also the amount of support received:

- Despite their educational success, unaccompanied asylum seekers are less likely to access financial support.⁵⁴ This is something that was made clear in our consultation, with unaccompanied asylum seekers subject to particular issues accessing services:

'I really wanted to go to university, but there was not enough money to pay my fees because I do not have leave to remain. No one ever explained to me why.' (left care in 2008)

- Young people who enter the care system after 16, who counted for 13 per cent of new entrants in 2013,⁵⁵ have a different legal status and are not entitled to nearly as much support as other care leavers.⁵⁶ One such young person told the CSJ:

46 Sinclair et al, *The Pursuit of Permanence: A Study of the English Child Care System*, London: JKP, 2007

47 National Statistics, *Statistics of Education: Children looked after by Local Authorities Year Ending 31 March 2003 Volume 1: Commentary and National Tables*, London: National Statistics, 2003 [accessed via: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130107105354/http://education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/VOL/v000454/v03-2004.pdf> (18/12/13)]

48 Sinclair et al, *The Pursuit of Permanence: A Study of the English Child Care System*, London: JKP, 2007

49 Department for Education, *Care Leavers in England Data Pack*, London: Department for Education, 2012

50 Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013. (N.B. The number of unaccompanied asylum seekers in care has more than halved since 2009, this group therefore currently represents a larger population of care leavers than current looked after children.)

51 Sinclair et al, *The Pursuit of Permanence: A Study of the English Child Care System*, London: JKP, 2007

52 Rubin et al, 'The Impact of Placement Stability on Behavioral Well-being for Children in Foster Care', *Pediatrics*, Vol. 119 No. 2 February 1, 2007, pp. 336–344

53 Department for Education, *Care Leavers in England Data Pack*, London: Department for Education, 2012

54 Wade et al, *Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children: The Response of Social Work Services*, York: University of York, 2005; APPG for Looked after children and care leavers, *Entitlements Inquiry*, London: Who Cares? Trust, 2013

55 Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013

56 Unless they were also looked after for more than 14 weeks before they were 16.

'I was made homeless when I was 16, once they'd made sure I had a place in a hostel I didn't get any more help.' (2008)

Despite these vast differences in backgrounds and entitlements for support, care leavers are generally considered as a single homogeneous group, obscuring both much better and worse outcomes within. As far as possible this report tries to bring out the differing backgrounds of care leavers and how these can affect outcomes.

Measuring good outcomes

Until we know what a good outcome for a care leaver looks like, we cannot judge whether the care system is doing a good job of preparing young people for life after care.

At face value this is a simple question, a good outcome is what any parent would want for their child: to be happy, healthy, secure and to achieve. However, how these differing concerns, such as education, employment, housing, mental health and relationships, should be prioritised is an important consideration.

The areas of concern examined in this report have emerged as salient issues in our consultation with care leavers, although they are by no means an exhaustive account of the issues that came up. Each chapter considers one area of concern, how it affects care leavers, the support available and current barriers to overcoming it. They are:

- **The ability to manage independently:** this chapter investigates the practical support and preparation available to care leavers making the move to independence;
- **Education and employment:** this chapter examines recent policies to encourage care leavers to participate in education and employment, barriers to their success and whether support is overly skewed towards education support;
- **The ability to avoid extremely poor outcomes:** this chapter looks at the very worst outcomes, which are usually faced by care leavers with the worst childhood experiences, such as becoming homeless, entering prison, having severe mental health problems or misusing drugs and alcohol;
- **A lack of relationships:** this chapter looks at an outcome that is often ignored in leaving care support, but could, if improved, provide the key to better outcomes in all areas discussed.

Once we know which outcomes we are measuring in care leavers, it is necessary to decide how and when we should measure them. At present the Government collects statistics on the outcomes of care leavers (accommodation and employment status) only until 19. Although this will change in 2014 when the Government will publish data on care leavers up to 21, this is still a very young age.⁵⁷ After all, the impact of being in care will have an effect on a person long after they are 19 or 21 and most parents would not measure the success of their own parenting at such a young age.

⁵⁷ HM Government, *Care Leavers Strategy*, London: HM Government, 2013

Part of the problem is that tracking what happens to adults goes beyond the remit of the Department for Education and local authority children's services. The corporate parenting agenda's status as a cross-departmental responsibility is crucial here. All departments should have responsibility for tracking what happens to 'their' children and young people when they come into contact with them. This is beginning to happen, with the Department for Work and Pensions now introducing a marker for care leavers who come through Job Centres, however there is still a long way to go.⁵⁸

For instance, whilst the Ministry of Defence asks all people joining the army whether they have previously been in care for the purpose of ensuring they receive individual support, this is only entered into individual records. Freedom of Information requests by the CSJ reveal the Ministry of Defence keep no centralised records of this, with the result being that no one knows how many care leavers are entering the army, how long they are staying and if they are leaving early (where the poorest outcomes for military leavers tend to clustered).⁵⁹

If all government departments are genuinely going to take responsibility for care leavers and play a role in helping them to achieve good outcomes, collecting statistics and using them in a meaningful way is crucial. Until we know what happens to care leavers years after, we cannot judge the success of the care system and leaving care support.

58 Ibid

59 Freedom of Information Request by the Centre for Social Justice [sent 12/11/13]

chapter one

Making the move to independence

'I went with my social worker, she helped me with my bags and made sure I was ok. Then she shut the door and it was just me. It was really scary.'
(left care 2009)

Care leaver in evidence to the CSJ

Leaving care means moving from the protective environment of a children's home or foster care placement to living independently. Whilst this report is concerned with the outcomes of care leavers beyond the initial move to independence, an unstable transition provides a backdrop against which a care leaver will struggle to succeed in other areas such as education and employment. In too many cases, the care leavers we spoke to were not managing to cope on their own. 57 per cent of care leavers surveyed said managing their money and getting into debt was difficult when leaving care and 65 per cent did not consider that they got enough day-to-day support. As one care leaver told us:

'I still need support and I am still struggling with things. I live in a semi-independent place and I am worried that I will soon have to live independently.' (2013)

Becoming independent is of course a challenge for all young people: taking on responsibility for themselves, learning how to structure their time and manage without someone making sure they get up in the morning. However, as this chapter reveals, for care leavers these challenges are even more acute. Care leavers are leaving a comparatively supportive environment earlier than other young people, are less prepared to leave and often have little support managing their new lives.

Case study: Hailey⁶⁰

Hailey left care in 2012 at the age of 18. Whilst she was in care she had five placements, including two semi-independent placements and two foster care placements, one of which was abusive.

When she left care she moved into a flat alone with little support and immediately found it difficult to cope. She commented: 'I was very lonely all the time... after I was given my flat I didn't hear from my social worker for six months and that was very, very distressing for me.'

Managing practically continues to be difficult for Hailey, she told us: 'I didn't get any help with moving in on my own. To this day I still don't have all my furniture or any carpet in my flat. I also find it hard having enough money for gas and electric and still sometimes have to sit in the dark with no lights. It's always freezing because I basically haven't got enough money for gas to heat my house and have a bath'.

Issues with managing practically were made worse by problems in other areas of her life, she said: 'I was going through a really hard time with my mental health problems and was having problems with my birth family, which made things even harder.'

1.1 Early exits from care

'I didn't feel safe and would have liked to stay with my carer (foster mother). I was not ready.' (2013)

Care leaver in evidence to the CSJ

It is clear that care leavers are moving to independence too early, in the vast majority of cases leaving by the age of 18 compared to their peers who on average leave home at 24.⁶¹ Non-looked after young people who remain at home, often because of economic difficulties, benefit from a large amount of support, which care leavers do not receive.

There has been important progress in raising the age that children leave care with over twice as many young people now leaving at 18, rather than 16 or 17, than in 1999 (before the Children (Leaving Care) Act was passed).⁶² However in recent years progress in delaying the age of leaving care has slowed: since 2008 most of the increases in late exits from care (i.e. at 18 instead of 16 or 17) have been erased by the rise in the number of young people living independently before 18 whilst retaining the title of being looked after.⁶³ Progress with allowing care leavers to remain in care after 18 has been even slower: the number of young people remaining with their former foster carer at 19 has remained stagnant since

60 Case study based on care leaver evidence to CSJ, name changed to preserve anonymity

61 Office for National Statistics, *Young adults living with parents in the UK (table)*, 2011, 29th May 2012, London: Office for National Statistics, 2012 [accessed via: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/re/family-demography/young-adults-living-with-parents/2011/young-adults-rpt.html> (20/09/13)]; Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013

62 Department of Health, *Children looked after in England: 1999/2000*, London: Department of Health, 2000 [accessed via: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Statistics/StatisticalWorkAreas/Statisticalsocialcare/DH_4015865 (13/12/13)]; Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013

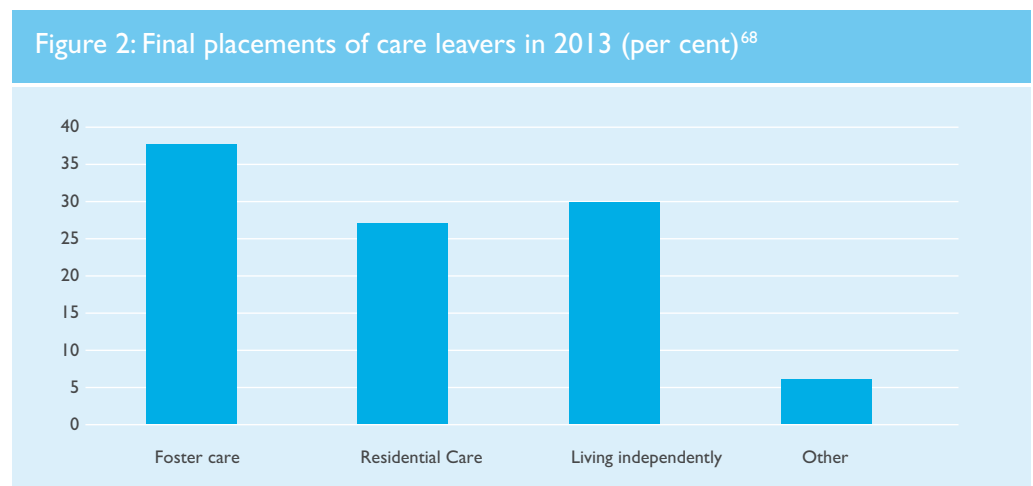
63 Ibid; Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2012

2008 when it was first recorded – despite impressive findings from pilots – and the number remaining in children’s homes is not even recorded.⁶⁴

In many cases care leavers, however ill-advisedly, are choosing to move to independence and cut themselves off from support. Professor Mike Stein, an expert on care leavers, identifies a distinct group with a ‘survivor’ mentality, who leave care early and view themselves as having done things ‘off their own backs’.⁶⁵ However, this does not account for the majority of early exits from care; in a 2012 survey of care leavers only one-third of young people said they definitely wanted to leave care when they did.⁶⁶ Our survey confirmed this finding, with 44 per cent reporting that they thought they left care too early.

There have, however, recently been some huge steps forward in terms of raising the care leaving age beyond 18. In the October 2013 paper ‘I Never Left Care, Care Left Me’, the CSJ called for the entitlement to remain in foster care to be extended until 21 and on 4th December 2013 the Department for Education announced that local authorities would now have a duty to fund such placements, backed by a £40 million commitment to help with funding.⁶⁷ This represents excellent progress, which will give many young people leaving foster care the chance to sustain their most supportive relationships.

Whilst this policy will greatly benefit young people who have good relationships with their foster carers, it will not help those who do not get on well with their existing carers or whose final placement is not in foster care. This means the reform will not be available to 62 per cent (6240) of care leavers, as their final placement is not in foster care. As Figure 2 shows, 27 per cent of children have their final placement in residential care and 30 per cent are already living independently before they leave care (the category ‘other’ encompasses those who live with their parents, in another type of placement or who are missing).



64 Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013; Department for Education, *Evaluation of the Staying Put 18+ Family Placement Programme: Final Report*, London: Department for Education, 2011; Peters C, Dworsky A, Courtney M and Pollack H, *Extending foster care to age 21: Weighing the cost of government against the benefits to youth*, Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall, 2009 [accessed via: http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/BCA%20CH%20report_final_August_11.doc.pdf (09/10/13)]

65 Stein, M, *Research review: young people leaving care*, London: Social Policy Research Unit, 2006

66 Ofsted, *After care: young people's views on leaving care*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2006

67 Press release, Department for Education, *Children to stay with foster families until 21*, 4th December 2013

68 Department for Education, *National Statistics, Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013
N.B. ‘independent living’ is classified in the statistics as ‘placement in the community’, ‘other’ encompasses options such as ‘missing’, ‘custody’ and ‘returned to family’

These young people, who are either living independently or in a children's home, are likely to have had the most disrupted time in care, often with multiple failed foster placements behind them, and be the most vulnerable. Residential care is generally used as 'a placement of last resort', for young people whose behaviour has become too difficult to manage in foster care.⁶⁹ Similarly the young people who are given their own flat or semi-independent accommodation, are likely to be those whose placement has broken down and it is decided it is not worth trying to find them a new foster or residential placement before they leave. As one young person explained:

'I was kicked out of the children's home, so I had to learn quickly to live on my own. I would have preferred to be in the children's home working and earning. It would have put me in a better position.' (2011)

These young people have generally had the most disrupted time in care and are most likely to need support. Yet there are very few options for them to be properly supported past 18. Whilst the CSJ has learned that some children's homes enable young people to stay beyond 18, these are a small minority and there has been no substantial effort to ensure best practice is shared or cost-benefit analyses are run.

Leaving care support in Scotland

Scotland has recently made considerable progress in improving support for care leavers in comparison to England. On 6th January 2014 the Scottish Government announced that all children in foster, kinship and, crucially, residential care will be entitled to remain looked after until they are 21.⁷⁰

The Scottish Government also recently announced plans to increase the age that care leavers receive support from local authorities until 26, rather than 21, based on an assessment of need.⁷¹ By contrast in England young people can only continue to receive support until 25 if they are in education.

The Children's Minister, Edward Timpson, has signaled that the Innovation Programme could be used to test extensions to residential care, although at present the bulk of focus appears to be on improving residential care for children rather than supporting young adults.⁷² There could be great potential, if the focus is correct, to use this project to drive innovation to help the most vulnerable young people.

Current regulations also make it difficult for children's homes that do want to innovate and offer post-18 accommodation. At present children's homes cannot have more than half of their residents over 18 without violating their registration and risking a poor inspection grade

69 Children, Schools and Families Committee, *Third Report – Looked after children*, London: House of Commons, 2009

70 Press Release, Scottish Government, *Greater rights for young people in care*, 6th January 2014 [accessed via: <http://news.scotland.gov.uk/News/Greater-rights-for-young-people-in-care-818.aspx> (14/01/13)]

71 Scottish Government, *A Scotland for Children: A consultation on a Children and Young People Bill*, Scotland: Scottish Government, 2012

72 Hansard, Debates and Oral Answers, 21st January 2014; Speech by Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families; Edward Timpson MP at NCAS Conference [transcript accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/edward-timpson-speaks-at-the-national-children-and-adult-services-ncas-conference> (06/12/13)]

from Ofsted.⁷³ One residential worker from a children's home that provides places for young people until 21 told the CSJ:

'For me there is a gap that needs to be addressed before residential services can provide appropriate long-term care and support up to the age of 21. I thought the point was to be able to continue to care for them until they are 21, but the regulations seem to negate this.'

In the next phase of this project we will be looking at different ways in which care can be extended for the most vulnerable looked after young people.

1.2 Safe, stable and suitable accommodation

For the young people who are not able to remain in a care placement, accessing suitable housing is a real problem: 12 per cent of care leavers are not in suitable accommodation at the age of 19 and in some local authority areas as many as 41 per cent are not.⁷⁴ These figures are likely to be an underestimate as what counts as suitable accommodation is quite vague and, aside from the specification that bed and breakfast accommodation is not permitted, suitability is left to a personal adviser's judgment.⁷⁵ In the 2011 Children's Care Monitor one-fifth of care leavers did not think their accommodation was right for them.⁷⁶ In our survey over half of care leavers (55 per cent) told us they found it difficult having somewhere safe and stable to live.

'[I was] rushed [into] living in an unclean, unsafe council house with damp.' (2005)

Care leavers also struggle to keep stable housing. One survey found that one-quarter of care leavers between 16 and 23 (with an average age of 18) had lived in five or more places since leaving care.⁷⁷ Movement can be due to local authorities providing temporary placements when a young person leaves care (e.g. hostels or supported accommodation) because of failure to manage a permanent tenancy, or because of a need to be closer to school or work. Frequent movement is linked to increased chances of homelessness: one study estimated that 43 per cent of care leavers who experienced homelessness had made four or more previous housing moves.⁷⁸ One care leaver told us:

'[It's] taken two years from when I left to getting a permanent tenancy.' (2011)

73 Department for Education, *Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations – volume 5: children's homes*, London: Department for Education, 2013; Ofsted, *Guidance on inspecting and regulating children's homes that provide care and accommodation for adults (wholly or mainly a children's home)*, Ofsted: Manchester, 2011

74 Department of Education, *National Statistics Children looked after by local authorities in England, including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013

75 Department for Education, *The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 3: Planning Transitions to Adulthood for Care Leavers*, London: Department for Education, 2010

76 Ofsted, *Children's Care Monitor 2011*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2012

77 Ofsted, *After care: young people's views on leaving care*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2006

78 Dixon et al, *Young People Leaving Care: A study of costs of outcomes*, York: University of York, 2006

The CSJ has heard that instability is a particular issue for those local authorities which have a policy of ensuring care leavers progress through graduated levels of supported placements before they can become fully independent. Whilst seemingly helpful in enabling a young person to get used to gradually decreasing levels of support, this practice also means that they experience a lot of instability. One care leaver told us:

'I had six placements across London in semi-independent places and hostels over two years whilst I was doing my A Levels. I just wanted to get a flat where I could settle down and concentrate.' (2008)

Despite sometimes being unstable, semi-independent accommodation can be extremely useful, especially for those who are unable to remain with a former carer. The CSJ previously called for increasing provisions of semi-independent accommodation in *'I Never Left Care, Care Left Me'*. Our consultation for this report also confirmed that supported placements such as semi-independent accommodation and supported lodgings can be very helpful to care leavers in teaching them the skills to live independently. One care leaver told us:

'I think the semi-independence really helped me with the skills for independent living. It's everything really, just being there. I used to get my key worker to come shopping with me.' (2010)

However, supported placements are very limited. At present only one-fifth of care leavers are in semi-independent accommodation or supported lodgings at 19.⁷⁹ Moreover, these figures are skewed by the small proportion of local authorities which use supported accommodation extensively; for example, 61 per cent of all semi-independent placements for care leavers at 19 are provided by just 22 per cent of local authorities.⁸⁰ Where supported accommodation is used it is often a short-term solution and unlikely to continue until a young person is 21, so the downside of increased support tends to be instability.

1.3 Preparation for leaving

'I think that it is ridiculous that I was left without the skills to set up a home and look after myself.' (2005)

Care leaver in evidence to the CSJ

All care leavers must eventually make the transition to independent living and even in those cases where they do have suitable accommodation they still need to be capable of living independently. Being able to manage a tenancy requires a young person to have a variety

⁷⁹ Department for Education, *Children looked after in England, including adoption, Local Authority Tables*, London: Department for Education, 2013

⁸⁰ Ibid

of financial, practical and relational skills, from being able to manage a budget, to being able to cook and clean, to being able to stop other people using their flat to hold parties. It became clear in our consultation that care leavers are often poorly prepared for managing on their own.

The majority of care leavers are receiving some preparation for living independently. A survey by the Children's Rights Director showed that 87 per cent of children in children's homes and three-quarters of young people in foster care said they received help to live independently.⁸¹ Our survey found broadly similar results with 72 per cent of care leavers saying they received practical help to live independently.

However there is a question about whether the right kind of preparation is being offered. For most young people successfully learning to live alone has several important aspects (although this is not to say all parents are good at preparing their children to be independent):

- They can stay at home until they are ready to leave (e.g. they find a stable job or go to university);
- They gain responsibility gradually from an early age, being left in the house alone, being trusted with a key, cooking for themselves and managing their own money. Most young people do not have formal budgeting or cooking lessons from their parents, but they learn through a combination of being guided by their parents and making their own mistakes;
- Once they leave they can return for help and support if things go wrong, whether it is for a loan when their fridge breaks, moving back home in between jobs or phoning home for emotional support when things get difficult.

For care leavers the experience of preparing to leave home is very different. First, as has been made clear in the previous sections, care leavers leave their childhood home much earlier than their peers and when they leave is largely decided according to their age rather than whether they are ready. This means that leaving home can come at a time when they are taking A-Level exams, starting a new job, or still highly uncertain about possibilities for the future.

Second, care leavers do not tend to gain independence in the way other young people do. One reason for this is that the processes and priorities of being in care often work against fostering responsibility. For instance care leavers may have no experience of managing their own money, having a key to a house and even cooking and cleaning in contrast with other young people.

This is, of course, not always the case and the best foster and residential carers do an excellent job of preparing their young people for independence in an informal and gradual way. One foster carer explained how they prepare their young person for independence:

'[I] gave them responsibility of their own finances, purchasing their own everyday needs and how to budget, how to save money. Teaching them to cook and various living skills. Showing them which behaviours are acceptable in society.'

81 Ofsted, *Children's Care Monitor 2011*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2012

The value of this preparation is undeniable, and often makes costly formal processes unnecessary. As another foster carer stated:

'[There were] courses arranged by the Fostering Service, but the young man [I looked after] felt he had received enough from me and didn't attend.'

However, especially in the case of more disruptive and difficult to place young people, limiting early responsibility is understandable. Placement breakdown is a major problem for carers and social workers and maintaining a placement can be highly important for guaranteeing a young person stability. Therefore avoiding leaving a teenager alone in the house makes sense, for example, to stop them from letting friends use the house or otherwise behaving in a way that might jeopardise the placement. The problem with this however, is that when a young person gets their own flat they may have missed valuable opportunities to learn how to look after it.

Local authorities are aware that time in care can preclude the informal learning described above and that looked after children are forced to live independently much earlier than many other young people. Thus, preparation for independence has become a formalised process for care leavers to the extent that before a young person leaves there are several boxes a local authority must be able to tick to say that the young person is ready to live alone. As one foster carer described the process:

'We are waiting for the social worker to inform us what she wants us to start on. I have started the young person on their ironing.'

However, without experience or a real understanding of what life will be like once they leave care, it can be hard to get care leavers to engage with preparation that comes across as a bureaucratic and somewhat irrelevant procedure. As one member of staff at a children's home commented:

'Before a young person leaves we do courses to prepare them for independence, for example how to cook or budget. It's hard to get young people to engage: they tell us things like that they'll learn how to cook by watching YouTube videos. It's only once they leave that they realise what it's like.'

The reality of leaving care and the sudden exodus of professional support can be a shock to young people. As chapter four will discuss in more detail, care leavers are unlikely to be able to return to their former carers for support and unless they are in education will not be able to get help from their social workers once they turn 21. Lacking this support at crisis moments means that small issues can easily spiral and the chances of making a tenancy work are decreased.

The problem of missing support after leaving care is exacerbated by the way looked after children are often shielded from the consequences of their actions at crisis moments whilst they are in care. For example, if a placement breaks down the onus will be on a young person's social worker to find them a new one. Amber, a residential homelessness programme which works with a high proportion of care leavers explained how experiences whilst in care could be a barrier to independence for the care leavers they worked with:

'The young care leavers we work with often have unrealistic expectations, with an attitude that if things go wrong or if they need anything, such as a flat (whether they are ready to live independently or not), they feel a phone call to their social worker will be all that is needed to get what they want. We find that care leavers are the hardest group to get to the point where they can help themselves.'

The combination of unrealistic expectations of the support they will have and a lack of preparation mean that the experience leaving care can come as a real shock.

'I wish someone would have told me what it's like out there. I wish they'd sat me down and said, "it's going to be scary", I had no idea what I was going into.' (2007)

chapter two

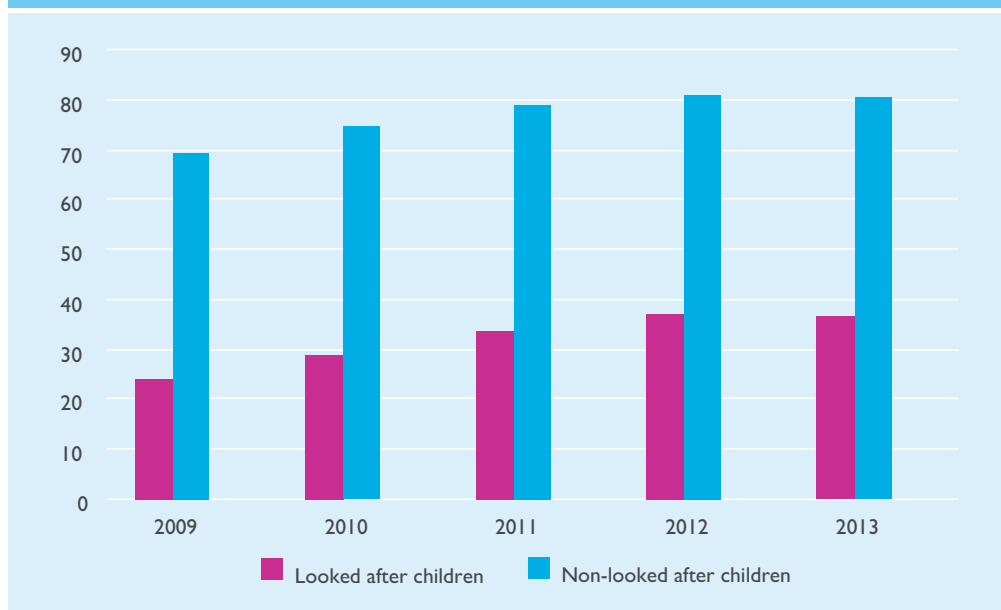
Education and employment

2.1 Education

Education has been a key part of the Government's focus towards looked after children and care leavers. The Department for Education website states:⁸²

'Ensuring that looked after children receive a high quality education is the foundation for improving their lives.'

Figure 3: Percentage of children achieving five GCSEs (A*–C) including English and maths⁸³



82 Department for Education, *Education of looked after children and care leavers* [accessed via: <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/childrenincare/education> (03/12/13)]

83 Department for Education, *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England*, London: Department for Education, 2013

However, at key testing points progress in education has been minimal. For instance the percentage of care leavers achieving five GCSEs at A*–C (including English and maths) has increased by 50 per cent since 2008, but the attainment gap between them and their non-looked after peers has actually widened by six percentage points⁸⁴ – it would be not unreasonable to assume that most of the gains for looked after children are a result of grade inflation rather than genuine improvement.⁸⁵ Similarly, the number of care leavers in higher education at 19 has remained stubbornly stagnant and has not increased since 2005.⁸⁶ Children in care fall behind their peers at key testing points: at Key Stage 1 there is a 20 per cent attainment gap between looked after and non-looked after children, rising to 23 per cent at Key Stage 2 and 43 per cent at Key Stage 4 (neither Key Stage 3 nor 5 are recorded).⁸⁷ By the time care leavers come to enter university the gap between them and their peers is 24 per cent.⁸⁸

These poor results, although shocking, can be at least partially explained by the fact that children in care do not have a normal experience of education. Around one-quarter have a statement of special education needs compared to 2.8 per cent amongst the general population.⁸⁹ Moreover, the majority of looked after children have changed school more than once and almost one-fifth have changed school three or more times because of placement moves.⁹⁰ However, we should not take these figures to mean that looked after children and care leavers do not succeed in education; it may just take them longer to catch up with their peers.

At present, information about the educational achievements of care leavers post-19 is extremely sparse, which means that later achievements are not being recorded.⁹¹ However one study suggested that during the course of their lives around one-third of care leavers achieve a degree level qualification or higher and almost 90 per cent will get at least one qualification.⁹² We also know that the proportion of care leavers in some kind of further education at 19 (including lower level qualifications such as access courses) has increased by 61 per cent since 2004, with over one-third of care leavers now in some kind of education at 19.⁹³

84 Ibid; Department for Education, *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England*, London: Department for Education, 2012

85 Office of Qualifications and Exam Regulations, *GCSE English 2012*, Coventry: Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, 2012

86 Department of Education, *Children looked after in England, including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013; Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31st March 2008*, London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008 [accessed via: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151655/http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00195856/children-looked-after> (20/12/13)]

87 Department for Education, *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England*, London: Department for Education, 2013; N.B. Statistics compare scores in reading at Key Stage 1 and 2, achieving 5 GCSE's A*–C (including English and maths).

88 Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013; UCAS, 2013 *Application Cycle: End of Cycle Report*, London: UCAS, 2013 (N.B. statistic for care leavers gives percentage attending university at 19, whilst UCAS statistic gives percentage of young people applying to university at 18)

89 Department for Education, *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England*, London: Department for Education, 2013; Department for Education, *Special Educational needs in England: January 2012*, London: Department for Education, 2012

90 Ofsted, *Children's care monitor 2011*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2012

91 This will change in line with extension of data in 2013, which will reach as far as 21

92 Duncalf, Z, *Listen up, Adult care leavers speak out, the views of 310 adult care leavers*, Manchester: Care Leavers Association, 2010; for similar results see also: Kerr, M, *Critical Appraisal for Outcomes* (Conference Presentation), [accessed via: http://www.ncctc.co.uk/files/2813/7449/8661/Mark_Kerr_-_Critical_Appraisal_for_Outcomes.pdf (20/12/13)]

93 Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013; Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31st March 2008*, London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008 [accessed via: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151655/http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00195856/children-looked-after> (20/12/13)]

Education policies

There have been numerous policies over the past 13 years specifically aimed at improving care leavers' access to education.

Assistance with costs of education

- Care leavers must be given a personal adviser and a pathway plan setting out their education plan and support to be offered;
- Local authorities must contribute to the expenses of a care leaver to live near a place where they are in education or training until 24;
- Care leavers aged 16–19 in full time education are eligible for a £1200 bursary to help with the costs of their studies;
- Care leavers attending university should be given a £2000 bursary towards their costs;
- Local authorities must provide or pay for vacation accommodation for those in higher education until the age of 24.⁹⁴

Returns to education

- Any care leaver may return to their local authority until the age of 25 to request assistance (financial support and/or a personal adviser) with returning to education;
- Until 21, care leavers can claim income support and housing benefit if returning to full-time education to work towards non-advanced qualifications (such as GCSE's and A Levels) previously missed.⁹⁵

Virtual School Heads

- Virtual school heads will become a statutory role in 2014, providing educational guidance and acting as a 'pushy parent' for children in care;⁹⁶
- Although the role will only be statutory for looked after children, rather than care leavers, in practice many Virtual Schools are offering support for care leavers. A survey of Virtual Schools conducted by the CSJ and completed by over one-third of local authorities identified that half of virtual schools continue to provide some form of support after 18.

Pupil premium plus

- In October 2013 Edward Timpson, the Children's Minister, announced a higher pupil premium of £1900 for children in care (£1000 more than their peers) to help narrow the attainment gap, which causes many care leavers to lag significantly behind their peers in education.⁹⁷

It is too soon to judge the effectiveness of policies such as the pupil premium plus and Virtual School Heads. However our survey showed that many care leavers were benefiting from increased support for continuing in education. Almost half (48 per cent) of the care leavers we surveyed said they had 'very helpful' support from their local authority for completing education.

94 The Who Cares? Trust, *A guide to the support available in higher education*, London: The Who Cares? Trust, 2013; Department for Education, *The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 3: Planning Transitions to Adulthood for Care Leavers*, London: Department for Education, 2010

95 Ibid

96 Children and Families Bill 2013; Press Release, Department for Education, *Help for children in care to receive better school results*, 12th December 2012

97 Press Release, £100 million to support the education of children in care, 1st October 2013

Care leavers who had entered university were particularly positive about the support they had received.

The policy encouraging care leavers to return to education until 25 appears to have been particularly valuable, offering care leavers a second chance at education. Freedom of Information requests on behalf of the CSJ asking how many care leavers have returned to education under this policy, show there has been a relatively high take up. Since implementation in 2011, the CSJ has identified over 500 cases of care leavers returning to receive education assistance who would otherwise have had their cases closed. However, this varied widely between authorities with one-third of respondent authorities having had one or fewer returns, whilst three authorities had over 30 returns.⁹⁸ In some cases depleted resources can mean local authorities are not choosing to spend money in this area, with almost half of leaving care managers identifying returns to education as an area that will be affected by budget cuts.⁹⁹

Case study: Ryan¹⁰⁰

Ryan is a story of educational success. He spent two years in care from the age of six, then, on his request, returned to care at 14. Ryan no longer has any contact with his birth family.

Ryan had a stable foster placement and attended a grammar school. Speaking about his time at school he explained: 'it was always pushed on you at school that you should be aiming for university, they were really good'.

Ryan is now 18 and studying at university. He was extremely positive about the support he was receiving: 'my council have been brilliant with the support I've received. They gave me a £1000 bursary to help me before my loan came in and I'll get another £1000 in February. They're also helping me with £2000 of my tuition fees'.

During university holidays Ryan is able to return to his foster carers. He explained: 'they're my family. If I had a problem I'd definitely ring my foster carer first'. With this support behind him, university is going well, he told us: 'I am really enjoying it, especially the social life and independence'.

2.2 Employment

Employment, by contrast, has seen less intervention and even less improvement in recent years. Levels of unemployment at 19 have remained very high over the past 10 years at roughly 30 per cent of all care leavers, twice the average for their age group (which is

98 Freedom of Information Requests by Centre for Social Justice [sent 4/11/13]. 112 local authorities responded, 101 were able to give correct data, 35 had one or fewer care leavers return

99 National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, *Funding Leaving Care, Making the cut: One year on*, London: National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, 2012

100 Case study based on interview with care leaver; name changed for purpose of confidentiality

already high).¹⁰¹ As with education, however, there is a lack of robust data beyond 19, so it is hard to track the extent to which unemployment affects care leavers in later life. However, this has changed as of 2013 when the Department for Work and Pensions began to track whether claimants through Job Centres were previously in care – providing robust data about unemployment amongst care leavers for the first time. Before this data becomes available rates of unemployment amongst older care leavers can only be estimated: the British Cohort study in 1999 showed that young men who were unemployed in their late teens were four times more likely to be unemployed later in life.¹⁰²

2.2.1 Employment policies

Financial support for employment

- Under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 local authorities must help care leavers until the age of 21 with the costs associated with sustaining employment.

From Care2work employment programme

- From Care2work is a national employment programme for care leavers managed by the Catch-22 National Care Advisory Service (NCAS) and funded by the Department for Education, aiming to improve employment opportunities for care leavers;
- Running since 2009, From Care2Work offers local authorities a six-month intervention to help them improve the employment support they offer care leavers. From Care2Work help local authorities set up links with local businesses and improve the support they offer;
- At the end of the six-month intervention local authorities can apply for the From Care2Work quality mark, which is also offered to employers. Over four years From Care2Work has engaged with 150 local authorities and one-fifth have been awarded the quality mark;
- From Care2Work also engages with national employers, for example in 2013 Marriot Hotels provided 250 employability opportunities (such as interviews), 58 work experience placements and 11 permanent jobs to care leavers.¹⁰³

Government work experience

- The Government's Care Leaver Strategy states: 'DfE and other government departments have been providing apprenticeships and short-term work experience directly to care experienced young people'.¹⁰⁴

2.2.2 Work programme

- Care leavers now have access to the Work Programme from their third month of claiming benefits.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Department for Education, *NEET Statistics – NEET statistics: quarterly brief – quarter 2, 2012* [accessed via: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/230393/Quarterly_Brief_NEET_Q2_2013_FINAL_pdf.pdf (19/09/13)]; Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013; Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31st March 2008*, London: DCSF, 2008 [accessed via: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151655/http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00195856/children-looked-after> (20/12/13)]

¹⁰² Audit Commission, *Against the Odds: Targeted briefing – care leavers*, London: Audit Commission, 2010

¹⁰³ Information provided directly by NCAS

¹⁰⁴ HM Government, *Care Leavers Strategy*, London: HM Government, 2013

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

There are some promising initiatives in employment policy at present. For instance, the From Care2Work scheme works to improve a leaving care team's own provisions rather than duplicating them. It is estimated that 15,000 employability opportunities (e.g. interviews, work placements and permanent jobs) have been created within the local authorities in which From Care2Work has intervened.¹⁰⁶ Attempts at central government level to create work experience appear to have been less successful. The CSJ sent Freedom of Information Requests to all central government departments asking whether they had provided work experience or apprenticeships to 'care experienced young people'. Only one government department, the Attorney General's Office, could tell us that these placements had taken place – they have provided five one-day work placements since 2011 – suggesting that if such apprenticeships and work placements are taking place, they are not being documented as might be expected.¹⁰⁷

In the case of the Work Programme, the fast track for care leavers is a positive move, however there is a question as to whether requiring care leavers to spend three months on benefits before targeted support is offered is the best approach. Whilst it makes sense for young people who have not previously been in care to have time without support to try and find work, this three-month gap may be an unnecessary wait given the extremely high levels of unemployment amongst care leavers, their vulnerability to benefit dependency (discussed below) and the fact they are likely to lack informal (e.g. parental) support to help them find work whilst they are first unemployed.

Most fundamentally, however, support for getting care leavers into employment is severely lacking when compared with support for education. Those in full-time education have their cases kept open and have access to support and advice, both financial and practical, until the age of 25. By contrast care leavers in employment, including those who are on apprenticeships, have their cases closed at 21. Even before 21, support to sustain employment appears to be less generous than remaining in education: around half of care leavers (48 per cent) in our survey said they received no support for finding employment, compared to 23 per cent who said they had no support to remain in education.

2.3 Barriers to education and employment

2.3.1 Planning, advice and support

A lack of planning, advice and support for education and employment provides a severe barrier for care leavers. Planning is crucial for all young people, to ensure they have thought about what education or employment course might be right for them and that they have ambitions that are both high and realistic. Looked after children often lack consistent people in their lives to encourage them to succeed and offer support and guidance to do so.

¹⁰⁶ Information provided directly by NCAS

¹⁰⁷ Freedom of Information Request by the Centre for Social Justice [sent 05/11/13], 24 ministerial departments contacted, 21 responded, 19 held no data, two responded with data

Moreover, for care leavers education and career planning takes on an extra dimension in ensuring they get the support they need to fulfil their ambitions. The exact support a local authority gives to a young person to help them succeed in education and employment is determined by what is agreed in their 'pathway plan'. This is a document which is drawn up by a local authority and a young person before he or she leaves care. A pathway plan has a crucial role in ensuring everyone knows what support will be provided. Personal advisers will not generally have the authority to make large financial decisions, so without a pathway plan in place before a young person leaves care, he or she may not be able to access the support he or she may otherwise have been entitled to.¹⁰⁸

Given the importance of pathway planning, it is worrying that it is consistently failing to happen despite it being a basic statutory duty for local authorities. The 2011 Children's Care Monitor found that only 60 per cent of care leavers knew they had a pathway plan in place,¹⁰⁹ whilst the recent APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers found that only half of care leavers had a pathway plan.¹¹⁰

Where pathway planning is happening there is a question of its value as a genuine way for young people to think about their futures and have their views taken into account rather than simply a bureaucratic procedure carried out by a local authority: one-quarter of care leavers say they do not agree with what is in their pathway plan.¹¹¹

Some councils' restructuring to accommodate financial cuts has impacted on the expertise available for employment support: 82 per cent of leaving care managers reported a reduction or closure of the Connexions service within their council.¹¹² Whilst these closures may be unavoidable, it is crucial that a gap is not left in education and employment advice for care leavers. Most frequently personal advisers and leaving care teams take up the role; however they are likely to lack the time and expertise to deliver this adequately. There are promising initiatives to replace cuts in local authority expertise such as From Care2Work, which offers training and advice to leaving care teams and foster carers to enable them to better help with career planning. Similarly many Virtual Schools provide support and advice for education.

There is also an important role for the voluntary sector to fill the gap left by Connexions services, particularly for helping the most vulnerable care leavers with the most complex needs. For these young people the advice and support of even well-trained leaving care staff will not offer the type of intensive help they are likely to need to succeed in employment. The voluntary sector is in a unique position to build relationships with these young people and offer intensive support, particularly in focussing on the underlying problems that may be a barrier to work. Moreover where a young person has a difficult relationship with their social worker, support offered by a third party can be beneficial. One care leaver commented about her experience with the voluntary sector:

108 Family Law Week, *The importance of pathway plans and local authorities duties to care leavers*, 2010, [accessed via: <http://www.familylawweek.co.uk/site.aspx?i=ed68903> (04/12/13)]

109 Ofsted, *Children's Care Monitor 2011*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2012

110 APPG for looked after children and care leavers, *Entitlements Inquiry*, London: Who Cares? Trust, 2013

111 Ofsted, *Children's Care Monitor 2011*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2012

112 National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, *Funding Leaving Care, Making the cut: One year on*, London: National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, 2012

'I have found so much more support in all these other places than I've ever received from social services or leaving care.' (2010)

The box below gives the example of an excellent voluntary sector organisation, which offers support and advice to some of the most difficult to help young people. Examining how the voluntary sector can be better utilised to help care leavers will be a focus of the CSJ's upcoming policy paper:

Case study: Drive Forward Foundation¹¹³

The Drive Forward Foundation is a London-based charity which works with disadvantaged young people and care leavers. They help care leavers acquire skills and find new routes to employment, working with government and business partners to provide support, mentoring and employment opportunities. 70 per cent of Drive Forward Participants go into full-time employment, apprenticeships or further education.

George

Before George joined Drive Forward he felt confused and unmotivated, often arguing with his social worker. Having joined Drive Forward, George decided he wanted to pursue film production. Drive Forward organised a graphic design internship, where he learned about working with films and videos. With their support and guidance, George has recently completed the first year of a Film and Editing BTEC. George said: 'Drive Forward knew exactly how I felt... [I] am really excited about what the future might bring.'

2.3.2 Soft skills and motivation

Another barrier to pursuing education and training for care leavers is having the right skills. The ability of care leavers to master hard skills has already been discussed in the education section, however a lack of soft skills also creates a barrier to education and employment.

Examples of soft skills

- Self-management: readiness to accept responsibility and improve one's own importance, flexibility and competence in time management.
- 'Team working' abilities: respecting others, co-operating, negotiating/persuading and contributing to discussions.
- Communicating: being able to articulate opinions and ideas, to make eye contact and to listen and respond to fellow workers.
- Showing commitment: turning up every day and on time, seeing a project through and being enthusiastic about work.

Soft skills play a particularly crucial role in finding and keeping a job: a CSJ employer survey found that 82 per cent of employers rated work ethic and attitude as important to progression

¹¹³ Case study based on Drive Forward evidence to CSJ and Drive Forward Foundation, *Success Stories*: [accessed: <http://www.driveforwardfoundation.com/about/success-stories/> (16/01/14)]

versus 38 per cent for literacy and numeracy.¹¹⁴ Similarly, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has suggested that many British employers view recruitment as weighted 80 per cent towards 'soft skills', 20 per cent towards 'hard skills'.¹¹⁵

Care leavers often struggle with the soft skills necessary for employment and education as the roots of their lack are in issues that are common in care leavers – from poor mental health to behavioural problems. An expectation born of experience that things tend to go wrong in life leads many care leavers towards conscious or unconscious 'self-sabotage', becoming their own worst enemy by turning up late, reacting poorly to authority or giving up when things get difficult.

The Drive Forward Foundation, an employment charity for care leavers, told us:

'Without a doubt soft skills pose a greater challenge to the care leavers we work with than hard skills owing to the unusual circumstances they have grown up in. Self-sabotage and underlying mental health problems are a huge barrier we have to address.'

This point was mirrored in our consultation with care leavers:

'Living was difficult at times especially ... motivating myself to get up and go to college or university. At times living alone independently can feel stressful.' (2007)

Improving soft skills cannot be solved simply by extra financial support or work experience placements, but rather by providing help for underlying drivers such as mental health treatment and emotional support. As the rest of this report makes clear, these areas receive far less attention and funding than formal education and employment support.

Case study: Andy¹¹⁶

Andy entered care when he was 12, after physical abuse from his mother's boyfriend. Andy had several foster placements whilst in care. He told the CSJ: 'some were ok, but I never really liked it'. When Andy turned 17 he left care: 'I thought it would be great having my own flat. I was a bit worried about leaving ... but really I thought it would be fun, freedom and that.'

When Andy left care he was attending a college course, but after a while things started to go wrong: 'I didn't get on with some of the people there and I was skipping it lots too. I'd wake up in the morning and think it's probably not worth me going in today'. Andy also commented: 'some of [my friends] were a problem for me. We'd hang around at my flat and drink.'

Andy dropped out of college and spent time unemployed. He is now back in college and hopes to go to university one day. Talking about the future, he told the CSJ: 'I have difficulty seeing things through to the end, like with courses and staying in jobs. It's just hard to keep everything together sometimes.'

¹¹⁴ Centre for Social Justice, *Creating Opportunity, Rewarding Ambition*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2011

¹¹⁵ CBI, *Shaping Up for the Future: The Business Vision for Education and Skills*, London: CBI, 2007

¹¹⁶ Case study based on an interview with a care leaver, name changed for purpose of confidentiality

2.3.3 Benefit dependency

Unfortunately many care leavers make the judgement that entering employment or continuing in education is not worthwhile for them. There remains a persistent culture within the care system that leaving care means a transfer to the benefits system. For instance whilst 70 per cent of care leavers told us they received help with claiming benefits from their local authority when leaving care, only 36 per cent received help finding a job. One care leaver told the CSJ:

'[I got] loads of help with benefits but very little help with interview technique or applications for college.' (2005)

The extent to which a move into the benefit system is ingrained in expectations towards care leavers is shown in one of the key parts of the Government's Care Leavers Strategy which, rather than discussing how to avoid care leavers entering the benefits system, promotes them entering it earlier:

*'Allow care leavers to make a claim to benefit in advance of leaving care to prevent unnecessary delays.'*¹¹⁷

In many ways the Government's aim to avoid delays for care leavers in claiming benefits is understandable. Current labour market conditions, such as unreliable hours due to zero hour contracts and low pay for entry level jobs, mean that most 18–25 year olds rely financially, at least to some extent, on either their parents or the benefit system for support. As care leavers are unlikely to have substantial family support, they are much more likely to rely on the benefit system and as such signing-on early is an attractive policy.

However, providing benefits in the place of parental support can make it difficult for care leavers to move into work. The risks of unstable employment are far more acute for care leavers; working fewer hours one week can mean not being able to afford rent or bills, which can in turn lead to homelessness. The Drive Forward Foundation, a London employment charity for care leavers, explained how a lack of support can lead to benefit dependency:

'Often the mentality of the care leavers we work with is that signing on to benefits becomes a habit. Young people will approach us because they want help finding work but they only want 16 hours a week so they can continue receiving benefits, because so frequently entry level jobs and zero hour contracts do not give them secured income and they have no one else to turn to.'

The Government allowing this culture of benefit dependency betrays an extremely poor ambition for any parent to have for their child. By pushing young people leaving care into the anonymous benefit system for support, care leavers lose many opportunities to succeed in employment, opting for stability over risk and progression. Even the recent policy to allow care leavers priority for the Work Programme still requires them to spend three months unemployed before having access.

¹¹⁷ HM Government, *Care leaver strategy*, October 2013, London: HM Government, 2013

2.4 Should education and employment have equal priority?

As this chapter makes clear, education support far outpaces employment support. Whilst care leavers are making progress in education, they still lag far behind their peers. This chapter has identified that many of the barriers to entering education come from deeper more underlying problems, such as missing soft skills, which are not likely to be best tackled by dedicated education or employment support, but by addressing the root causes. Without addressing these, education and careers support will not provide value for money.

Moreover, the flip side of an approach that is targeted on education is that those who are not in education receive very little support and those who are neither in education nor employment receive even less. For example, those who do not remain in education generally do not benefit from a personal adviser or financial assistance post-21 and those who are not in employment are unlikely to receive any financial assistance post-18.

Case study: Tara¹¹⁸

Tara had a very unstable time whilst in care, including living in over 10 different placements. Since leaving care, Tara has tried to get her life together but, like many of the care leavers we spoke to, struggled from the outset with managing her money, plunging her into debt that she is finding very hard to escape from. She told the CSJ: 'I am severely in debt and trying to keep on top of things but it's really hard. I have rent, gas, electric, food, car, MOT and tax. I volunteer full time and have part time work as a bar maid, but it isn't enough to support myself.'

Because Tara is over 21 and not in full time education she does not receive help from her local authority. In an attempt to rid herself of debt she asked her local authority if she could return to education. She told us: 'I saw that I could have the chance to get £1000 and that money would go a long way.' However, Tara was denied the opportunity to return – likely because her local authority saw she primarily wanted financial help. Commenting on this she told us: 'I do think social services should help out, just once.'

One care leaver, who had experienced problems with addiction, crime and poor mental health and was clearly in need of support and guidance told us:

'I can't get an adult social worker because I'm not in full-time education. I go back and I ask for one, but until I can get into education I can't have one.' (2008)

By channelling support and advice to the most stable care leavers who are in the position to continue with education, we also risk leaving the most vulnerable young people, who cannot manage education, without support and even more disillusioned with social services. Another care leaver told us:

¹¹⁸ Case study based on an interview with a care leaver, name changed for purpose of confidentiality

'[When you leave care] you go through situations where you do start to doubt yourself. If I went to a parent and I said my head's not feeling right or I'm really not happy, ... they would try their best to get it sorted out. With social services they say "oh so you're dropping out of school" ... Then they say "we're going to close your file." ' (2013)

As the rest of this report will show, if we want care leavers to be able to succeed in education or employment, there are many other factors that need to be addressed early – from fostering supportive relationships, to dealing with offending and drug and alcohol problems.

At any rate, succeeding in education, or indeed employment, should not be the only outcome we should be looking at for care leavers. A good parent supports their child not just when they succeed but also when they struggle. At present the corporate parent is rarely doing this effectively. As one care leaver explained:

'It's almost like they're setting you up to fail. I step back and look at it, it's survival of the fittest.' (2013)

chapter three

Care leavers and extreme outcomes

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is a group of care leavers who are quite far from achieving in education and employment, and who are not benefiting from much of the support available. This group of young people, whose experiences both before and whilst in care are usually characterised by trauma and instability, struggle with issues such as homelessness, severe mental illness and addiction.

As they are likely to have been in residential care or have had unstable foster placements they are unlikely to benefit from new initiatives such as Staying Put, and because their lives are chaotic they are unlikely to benefit from funding to return to education. Stopping these extremely vulnerable young people slipping through the cracks, ending up in prison or having their own children taken into care, must become a priority for local and national government.

3.1 Homelessness

Our survey revealed that half of care leavers found maintaining somewhere safe and stable to live difficult after leaving care. It is estimated that around 20 per cent of young people accessing homelessness services were previously in care.¹¹⁹ Unstable and inappropriate housing, issues such as poor mental health or addiction and a lack of experience of independence, can all lead a care leaver to lose their tenancy. The manager of a supported housing service aimed at care leavers told the CSJ:

'Young people, especially from residential care, often don't understand the requirements of living independently. They have a party or play their music too loudly and then they lose their tenancy because of anti-social behaviour and are kicked out of their accommodation.'

If a care leaver loses their tenancy they may end up 'sofa-surfing' or living on the streets. One care leaver told us:

¹¹⁹ Centrepoin, *The changing face of youth homelessness*, London: Centrepoin, 2010; see also Crisis, *The hidden truth about homelessness*, London: Crisis, 2011

'Now? I'm living here, there and everywhere, wherever I can put my head down' (2008)

There is legislation which aims to stop care leavers becoming homeless. The Homelessness Act 2002 states that local authorities have a duty to house homeless 18–21 year olds who were previously in care and also under 25s who have been 'made vulnerable' by being in care. It is perhaps surprising then that as many as one-third of care leavers experience homelessness at some point after leaving care.¹²⁰

The CSJ has heard of y'some instances of homeless care leavers' under 21 not being placed by local authorities, or placements taking too long to achieve. However in practice it is older care leavers over 21 who are most affected. Although local authorities have a duty to find housing for those 'made vulnerable' by their time in care, after the age of 21 most care leavers lose priority for social housing. It is only now that the Department for Communities and Local Government guidance for housing is encouraging local authorities to use disadvantage as a criterion for deciding housing priority. However, this still remains a voluntary measure at local authority level and care leavers may still find themselves far down housing waiting lists with nowhere else to go.

3.2 Prison

'Getting in trouble was normal for me when I was in care. When I left things didn't change.' (2003)

Care leaver in evidence to the CSJ

A shameful number of care leavers' destination is prison. Almost one-quarter of the adult prison population were previously in care.¹²¹

Criminal behaviour starts early: children in care are four times more likely than non-looked after children to be convicted or subject to final reprimand.¹²² Looked after children supervised by Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) are 'amongst the most damaged and difficult to place'.¹²³ An HM joint inspection report identified several typical experiences amongst this group:

- Considerable family difficulties;
- The subject of abuse (sexual, physical and emotional) and/or neglect;
- A witness or victim of domestic violence; and
- A high number of emotional or mental health problems.

¹²⁰ Dixon, J et al, *Young People Leaving Care: A Study of Costs and Outcomes*, York: University of York, 2006

¹²¹ Ministry of Justice, *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds Results from surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners*, London: Ministry of Justice, 2012

¹²² Department for Education, *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England*, London: Department for Education, 2013

¹²³ HMI Probation, Ofsted, Estyn, *Looked after children: An inspection of the work of Youth Offending Teams with children and young people who are looked after and placed away from home*, London: HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2012

As a result of their past these young people are difficult to place and tend to undergo a lot of instability, moving frequently between placements and being shunted between local authorities that are often a significant distance apart:

- Nearly one-third have had more than three placements outside their home area and almost one-fifth had had more than five (that were recorded);
- Only 13 per cent were living less than 50 miles from home and one-quarter were placed more than 100 miles away.¹²⁴

These movements can be extremely damaging to already vulnerable young people. As the CSJ noted in its 2008 report *Couldn't Care Less*, local authorities are often incentivised to allow these expensive and difficult young people to enter YOIs, given that Youth Offending Teams then take financial responsibility for the young person.¹²⁵ This has changed since 2012, as local authorities must now cover the costs for all young people, including care leavers, on remand,¹²⁶ but still do not pay for the costs of accommodation during sentences.

Case study: Sarah

Sarah entered care at the age of six months, as her mother was a heroin addict. When Sarah was ten her mother had another child, who she was also unable to cope with but who was not taken into care. Sarah explained: 'I had to go over to [my sister] every day and raise her. Because I couldn't steal enough food for the both of us I ended up severely malnourished.'

Because Sarah repeatedly ran away from her placements and began to get in trouble with the police. She explained: 'The police constantly came to arrest me and I fought back. It got to the stage where they had to put me in a secure unit because I was unsafe to myself and others.'

Sarah spent six months in a secure unit and after she left she was moved 80 miles from home. During her time in care Sarah had 25 placements and no longer sees her sister. Talking about her time in care she told the CSJ: 'it had an extremely bad effect on me as a child, I felt as if I could never settle down'.

Young offending negatively impacts on care leavers long into adulthood:

- **Adult offending:** youth offenders are more likely to offend in adulthood. This is likely to be particularly acute for care leavers who have less of a support network to stop them from reoffending.
- **Preparation for independence:** a young person who has experienced both care and the youth justice system is likely to be unprepared for being independent. Even where they do not reoffend, they may struggle to manage independently as they are likely to have little experience of life outside of care homes and prisons. As the HM Joint Inspections report stated:

¹²⁴ Ibid

¹²⁵ Centre for Social Justice, *Couldn't Care Less*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2008

¹²⁶ Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012

*'We found little evidence that YOT staff had been involved in the planning for transition to more independent living and we judged that joint planning and work with children's social care services was insufficient in nearly three-quarters of the cases.'*¹²⁷

There recently has, however, been some improvement on this point with the National Offender Management Service publishing guidance on identifying and helping care leavers transition from prison or YOIs to independent living.¹²⁸

- **Impact on employment:** those who have offended whilst in care, even where convictions do not end in a prison sentence, can be disadvantaged by their history long into their life. Although convictions may be wiped from basic Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks, they will show on an enhanced DBS check, routinely required for working with children or the elderly. One care leaver told us:

'Getting in trouble with the police whilst I was in care has followed me throughout my life. I got my life together and went to performing arts college. However, for a long time I was held back from teaching music to children because I knew I would fail a CRB check.' (1991)

3.3 Early pregnancy

Many would recognise that rates of teenage pregnancy amongst looked after young people and care leavers are high. Recent data about care leavers in particular is difficult to source, however it is estimated that 17 per cent of young women leaving care are pregnant or already mothers.¹²⁹

Early pregnancy is not always an 'extreme outcome' in the sense that it will not always be negative. For many care leavers, early pregnancy can have distinctly positive effects.

'Having my daughter, it gave me something to focus on. It turned my life around.' (1990)

Having children early can also create substantial difficulties for those young people who cannot cope with such a significant set of additional responsibilities in a period of their life that is already chaotic. Young parents are more likely to be unemployed and especially where they struggle with mental health problem, or addiction, they are at a much greater risk of having their children taken into care.¹³⁰ Where this happens, as the case study at the end of this chapter demonstrates, it can cause great pain and perpetuate a vicious cycle established in earlier generations.

Care leavers, even those who do not have other problems such as drug and alcohol misuse or mental health problems are likely to require a lot of support to successfully parent their children. As one care leaver told us:

¹²⁷ HMI Probation, Ofsted, Estyn, *Looked after children: An inspection of the work of Youth Offending Teams with children and young people who are looked after and placed away from home*, London: HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2012

¹²⁸ National Offender Management Service, *Practice Guidance: Working with Care Leavers (18–25) in custody and the community to reduce reoffending and promote effective transition to adulthood*, London: National Offender Management Service, 2013

¹²⁹ Department of Health, *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services*, London: Department of Health, 2004

¹³⁰ National Audit Office, *Against the Odds: Targeted briefing – teenage parents*, London: National Audit Office, 2010

'People forget that care leavers don't usually have a good parenting model to follow – so can they expect to succeed?' (2008)

There is evidence of mixed support for care leavers who become young parents.¹³¹ Without adequate help and guidance, care leavers can find themselves failing to cope and, in some cases, go through the trauma of having their own children taken into care.

3.4 Drug and alcohol misuse

It is estimated that 11 per cent of care leavers have problematic alcohol use, whilst some studies put problematic drug use as high as 21 per cent.¹³² Care leavers are roughly twice as likely to have used illegal drugs than the general population.¹³³ Misuse of drugs and alcohol was also an issue for the care leavers we surveyed, with around one-fifth reporting drug and alcohol misuse as a problem when leaving care. There are several characteristics of particularly vulnerable care leavers which are linked to drug and alcohol problems:

- **Coming from a children's home:** one study found that over half of young people in children's homes had a substance misuse problem.¹³⁴
- **Early exits from care:** early exits from care are linked to an increased likelihood of drug and alcohol misuse.¹³⁵ One reason for this is a lack of supervision from adults and a higher likelihood to 'fall in with the wrong people'.
- **Mental health conditions:** rates of alcohol and drug misuse are higher amongst those with mental health conditions.¹³⁶ The high prevalence of mental health conditions amongst care leavers, discussed further in the section below, leads to increased risk of drug and alcohol misuse, especially in the chaotic situation of leaving care. One care leaver told us:

'My medication (Ritalin) was stopped without warning. I could not cope and started drinking. I am now in rehab.' (2005)

- **Childhood abuse:** childhood abuse and neglect are linked to both drug and alcohol addiction.^{137,138} In 2013, 62 per cent of children entered care due to neglect or abuse.¹³⁹

¹³¹ Voice, Press Release, *Care Leavers who are expectant parents feel they are discriminated against*, 23rd October 2009 [accessed via: http://centrallobby.politicshome.com/fileadmin/epolitix/stakeholders/Positive_about_young_parents.pdf (23/12/13)]

¹³² Centrepoint, *The changing face of youth homelessness: trends in homeless young people's support needs*. London: Centrepoint, 2010; Home Office, *One problem amongst many: drug use amongst care leavers in transition to independent living*, London: Home Office, 2003

¹³³ Home Office, *One problem amongst many: drug use amongst care leavers in transition to independent living*, London: Home Office, 2003

¹³⁴ Department for Education, *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England*, London: Department for Education, 2012; Berridge D, *Living in Children's Residential Homes*, London: Department for Education, 2012

¹³⁵ Dixon, J et al, *Young people leaving care, study of outcomes and costs*, York: University of York, 2004

¹³⁶ Graham, H.L, et al, 'Drug and alcohol problems amongst individuals with severe mental health problems in an inner city area of the UK: *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 36, 2001, pp448–455; Haddock, G et al, 'Psychiatric illness among drug court probationers' *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, 29, 2003, p775

¹³⁷ Hammersley, R, *Trauma and recovery amongst people who have injected drugs within the past five years*, Hull: Scottish Drugs Forum, 2013

¹³⁸ Schwandt et al, 'Childhood Trauma Exposure and Alcohol Dependence Severity in Adulthood: Mediation by Emotional Abuse Severity and Neuroticism, *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*', 2013 Jun, pp 984–92

¹³⁹ Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013

These characteristics very often overlap: 56 per cent of children in residential care move into independent living early before 18¹⁴⁰ and 62 per cent of young people in children's homes have 'clinically significant' mental health difficulties.¹⁴¹

This very vulnerable, often highly marginalized group, can be very difficult to help. As a Home Office report on drug use amongst care leavers noted, the negative experiences care leavers often have of formal services mean they may feel they are better off without support.¹⁴² Even where care leavers do want to access support, once they are over 21 and their case closes with children's services they may find this difficult. One leaving care worker told us:

'I had one young person who I still think about. She had a borderline personality disorder, was addicted to drugs and engaged in sex work (although she wouldn't admit it). She turned 21 and her case was closed. We couldn't transfer her to adult services to get help with her mental health problems whilst she was addicted to drugs. I really wish I'd had longer to try and help her.'

3.5 Significant mental health problems

As the previous section makes clear, poor mental health is a significant problem amongst care leavers. This was also a finding of our consultation: 37 per cent of survey respondents said coping with mental health problems was 'very difficult' when leaving care, a further 22 per cent said this was 'quite difficult'. Mental health problems amongst care leavers have a root in childhood: almost half of looked after children's 'emotional and behavioural health' (rated according to a questionnaire) was 'borderline' or 'cause for concern'.¹⁴³ However, the stress and isolation of leaving care can also have a negative effect on mental health.

As the CSJ has previously argued mental health problems are 'a consistent thread' running through the problems in our most disadvantaged communities.¹⁴⁴ Mental health problems are both a root cause and effect of other issues such as drug and alcohol misuse, crime and early pregnancy. For instance, people who had severe conduct problems during childhood are more likely to have no educational qualifications, to be unemployed and to be arrested.¹⁴⁵

Given the prevalence of mental health problems and the adverse effects they have, mental health support should be amongst the top priorities for local authorities to address. Yet too often this is not the case. One care leaver told us:

'I find myself pretending to be happy while inside [I] am always really angry. Before [I left care] I didn't have to pretend.' (2010)

140 Department for Education, *Children's Homes in England Data Pack*, London: HM Government, March 2012

141 Department for Education, *Children's Homes in England Data Pack*, London: HM Government, September 2013

142 Home Office, *One problem amongst many: drug use amongst care leavers in transition to independent living*, London: Home Office, 2003

143 Department for Education, *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England*, London: Department for Education, 2013

144 Centre for Social Justice, *Mental health: Poverty, Ethnicity and Family Breakdown, Interim Policy Briefing*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2011, p4

145 Richards, M. et al., *Childhood mental health and life chances in post-war Britain*, London: Sainsbury Centre, 2009

[accessed via: http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/pdfs/life_chances_report.pdf (20/12/13)]

Getting youth mental health support right is a problem that goes beyond the care system. A recent report by the Children & Young People Mental Health Coalition showed that children and young people's mental health is not being prioritised in NHS commissioning and transitions from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to adult mental health services are not sufficiently smooth.¹⁴⁶ Funding is also a problem, with CAMHS services being a consistent target of funding reductions at local authority level.¹⁴⁷ These failures in mental health services disproportionately affect care leavers, who have a high proportion of mental health problems, less day-to-day emotional support and often stressful and chaotic lifestyles.

There are also issues with mental health services which are specific to care leavers, including a lack of suitable accommodation for care leavers with mental health difficulties and a lack of knowledge on the part of leaving care teams, both of mental health issues themselves and of services they could refer young people to.¹⁴⁸ Also, seeking help from mental health services is often stigmatised. One leaving care manager told the CSJ:

'It's our dream to have a psychologist or a counsellor here. We can talk to the young people, but we're not professionals. I go home at night and wonder if I've given them the right advice. We're always trying to get them to go to mental health places, but it's hard.'

The effect of poor mental health services for care leavers can be seen in all of the outcomes discussed so far in this report, from failing to manage independently, to succeeding in education and employment to addiction and offending. However, in the extreme the impact can be self-harm and even suicide. Care leavers are over four times more likely to commit suicide than the general population.¹⁴⁹ As the case study below makes clear, the loneliness and isolation of leaving care can exacerbate underlying mental health problems, leading, in extreme cases, to tragic consequences.

Case study: Andrea Adams

Andrea had been in care since the age of two, staying in two separate foster placements. When she turned 18 she wanted to stay with her foster mother; however the council did not allow this and she had to leave. Social services declared that Andrea was 'overly attached' to her former foster mother and asked her foster mother to stop all contact.

Andrea lived alone in a council flat and began abusing drugs and alcohol and self-harming. She attempted suicide several times, and finally jumped from the tower block where she lived alone in Stockport. Her suicide note read: 'To anyone who even cares, bye'.

An inquest into Andrea's death found 23 separate failings from individuals, organisations and authorities to intervene at critical stages prior to her death.

¹⁴⁶ Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, *Overlooked and Forgotten*, London: Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 2013

¹⁴⁷ Young Minds, *Local authorities and CAMHS budgets 2012/2013*, London: Young Minds, 2012 [accessed via: http://www.youngminds.org.uk/about/our_campaigns/cuts_to_camhs_services (10/01/13)]

¹⁴⁸ Local Government Association, *Provision of mental health services for care leavers: transition to adult services*, London: NFER, 2009

¹⁴⁹ HM Government, *Preventing suicide in England, a cross government outcomes strategy to save lives*, London: Department of Health, 2012

An inquest into Andrea's death found 23 separate failings from individuals, organisations and authorities to intervene at critical stages prior to her death.¹⁵⁰

The CSJ's upcoming policy paper will examine how national and local government can act to stop such high numbers of care leavers experiencing extreme outcomes, including how young people who are vulnerable to these outcomes can be better identified and targeted during the leaving care process. We will also investigate how the voluntary sector can be better utilised to offer targeted support to these extremely vulnerable and difficult to help young people.

As with employment support, there is a clear role for the voluntary sector in working with young people who experience the extreme outcomes discussed in this chapter.

Case study: The Big House¹⁵¹

The Big House is a Hackney-based charity working with young care leavers at high risk of social exclusion. They provide a safe, structured and creative environment to give care leavers the tools to overcome deeply entrenched behavioural and emotional problems. Participants undertake a combination of drama therapy, life and employment skills, literacy, rehearsal and performance of a play. The play is based on participants own stories and is open to the public. After the production care leavers undergo an intensive two-week period where they make plans for returning to education, training and employment and are teamed up with a personal mentor to help guide them over the next twelve months.

Jessica

Jessica is an example of an extremely vulnerable care leaver. She was taken into care when her mother could not cope with her and her disabled siblings. She underwent an extremely difficult time in care including physical and sexual abuse and frequently ran away from her children's home. After leaving care Jessica moved in with an older boyfriend who was using drugs. The relationship was violent and for a period she was addicted to heroin. Jessica also struggled with mental health problems and was sectioned three times.

Since leaving care Jessica has had two children. She received no contact from social workers during her pregnancies and in both cases her children were taken in care immediately after birth. She told the CSJ about when her first child was taken into care: 'My son was three days old. I dropped to my knees and begged them not to take him. I haven't done nothing. I've given you no reason to come and take my child. She [social worker] sat on the corner of a chair and said to me, you're an unfit mum, then she got up and walked out.'

¹⁵⁰ Heaven, K, *Suicide of care leaver Andrea Adams* in *Inquest Law Magazine*, London: ILG, 2010 [accessed via: <http://www.gardencourtchambers.co.uk/imageUpload/File/Inquest%20article.pdf> (03/12/13)]; The Guardian, *What lead Andrea Adams to kill herself at 18?*, 8th July 2010, [accessed via: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/jul/08/andrea-adams-care-leaver-death-inquest> (10/12/13)]

¹⁵¹ Case study based on information provided by The Big House and an interview undertaken by the CSJ

Jessica did acknowledge that there might have been good reason for this, but she also found it hard to understand the lack of support she was receiving. She commented: 'I know right now I'm probably not in the best position to be looking after my kids ... But if you were to help me, I would be able to look after my kids and I would be able to look after myself ... I don't want my children to go through what I did growing up.'

Jessica is under 25, but because she is not in full-time education she is not eligible for support from her local authority. However, she was fortunate to join the Big House soon after her second child had been taken into care. They gave Jessica intensive pastoral support, to stop her falling back into self-destructive behavior. She said: 'I wake up for The Big House now. It means everything to me. When they took my kids off me I couldn't get out of bed. [The Big House] are my world and [they] make me feel that life is worth living.'

Because of her involvement at the Big House and the progress Jessica has made, the judge has halted the adoption process for her second child. The Big House has also helped Jessica gain full-time employment, working in peer outreach for at-risk young people.

chapter four

Relationships

'I don't think people understand how lonely it is to leave care.' (2009)

Care leaver in evidence to the CSJ

Having stable and caring relationships with others is without doubt one of the most important protective factors against harm and other negative outcomes for everyone. Despite this, the importance of long-term and positive relationships is often missing from discussions of what a 'good outcome' for a care leaver looks like. The loneliness, isolation and lack of support felt by care leavers were some of the most recurring themes of our consultation.

If we are to offer young people leaving care the best chance of good outcomes in the widest sense, much more must be done to ensure that they are not facing the world alone. Ensuring that young people are able to maintain supportive relationships both in care and out of care is paramount. At present, however, our policy towards care and care leavers lacks focus on the importance of relationships.

4.1 Loneliness and isolation amongst care leavers

The loneliness and social isolation felt by those who had left care stood out most starkly from our consultation. From the busy atmosphere of a children's home or foster family, care leavers often find themselves suddenly living alone in a flat or hostel. In our survey three-quarters of care leavers (77 per cent) said that feeling lonely or isolated was difficult when leaving care (43 per cent said they found it very difficult). Other studies have found similar results, a Children's Rights Director survey of 308 care leavers found many felt little had been done to prepare them for how lonely they would be upon leaving care.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Ofsted, *After care: young people's views of leaving care*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2006

One care leaver told the CSJ:

'Leaving care was the loneliest time of my life. It was just so hard to come home and have no one I could talk to.' (2007)

Care leavers are more likely to struggle to keep a network of people they are close to. Our survey showed how hard it can be for care leavers to maintain relationships: 55 per cent of young people said they found staying in touch with former carers and their birth family either very difficult or quite difficult. In another survey of over 1000 care leavers 11 per cent of respondents said there were one or fewer people they would be able to tell if they were harmed.¹⁵³ One care leaver explained how she struggled to have someone to talk to:

'Seeing people from the past doesn't help especially if you love them. You don't [want] to hurt them anymore [by] getting them involved with your problems as it's not their problem.' (2010)

This is not just a problem for care leavers immediately after they leave care. Our consultation showed that care leavers continue to feel lonely and isolated much later in life, long after their case has been closed by social services. One care leaver, who left care in 1985, told the CSJ:

'The isolation was the worst thing for me as I had no family interested in being in touch. [I] am now realising how much more effort it takes for me to appear 'normal' amongst my peers when I have no family support.' (1985)

Missing relationships from childhood can be compounded by the fact care leavers may have difficulty forming new relationships and maintaining trust, particularly following poor relationships with birth families.¹⁵⁴ The Care Leavers Association, the largest user-led organisation for care leavers, told the CSJ that one of the biggest difficulties care leavers face in later life is in forming new relationships. One care leaver interviewed for this project explained this:

'Practice makes perfect: every relationship that was destroyed in care taught me to destroy them in later life. I find I can turn off an emotional attachment like the flick of a switch.' (unknown)

4.2 The effects of relationships

Feeling lonely and isolated and lacking supportive relationships is a significant disadvantage in itself, however it will also have an effect on other outcomes. When a young person leaves care without strong relationships they are more likely to struggle in other areas of their life.

¹⁵³ Office for the Children's Rights Director, *National Overview Report of Children and Young People's Views, Care4Me & AfterCare Surveys, Local Authority Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspections June 2009 – July 2012*, London: Ofsted, 2012

¹⁵⁴ Biehal N, et al., *Moving On: Young People and Leaving Care Schemes*, London: HMSO, 1995

The CSJ has previously argued that relationships are an important resource that is often overlooked in social policy.¹⁵⁵ Supportive relationships are an important factor in developing resilience: the ability to overcome the odds and cope with adversity.¹⁵⁶ For care leavers, resilience is key: they must learn to live independently, succeed in education and employment and avoid issues such as addiction and homelessness. Enabling the development of positive, stable relationships with a variety of people has a crucial role in developing resilience.¹⁵⁷ An international review of resilience factors showed that professional and personal support received after leaving care made a substantial difference to outcomes.¹⁵⁸ One study found that care leavers who made a successful transition to independence tended to have developed strong attachment relationships with foster carers or family members.¹⁵⁹

Our consultation mirrored this, finding that, where they existed, supportive relationships were extremely valuable for care leavers. Although the type of support given and the person giving it varied, the value was consistent.

Supportive relationships described by care leavers

'My carer (foster mother). She was the one who has been my support.' (2011)

'I was so lucky to have my best friend to support me.' (2012)

'I have met loads more people and have made some of the best mates I ever had... I now stand a fighting chance in life.' (2012)

'The support worker ... at the place I live has been very helpful. He takes the time to listen and to help me and to calm me down and he never brings my age into it when something happens.' (2011)

'My gran (sic) is good to me. I can go to her house when I need to eat something or talk to someone.' (2012)

At the other end of the spectrum, lost and inconsistent relationships, both whilst in care and when leaving care, can have a disastrous effect on the outcomes of care leavers. A study by Centrepont found that a major reported problem for care leavers was loneliness, with many finding it hard to adapt to coming home from college or work and having no one there. It was found that loneliness could become depression, which had a negative effect on education and work.¹⁶⁰

Without consistent relationships it can also become harder for a young person to be helped. Aaron Antonovsky, an American sociologist, explains that unless a young person experiences things around them in a coherent way, a key part of which is having at least some stable relationships, they will interpret the world around them as 'noise' rather than

155 Centre for Social Justice, *Strengthening relationships to prevent isolation and loneliness in old age*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2013; Centre for Social Justice, *The Rules of Engagement, Changing the heart of youth justice*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2012

156 Stein, M, *Resilience and young people leaving care, Overcoming the odds*, London: JRF, 2005

157 Gilligan's key resilience Gilligan, R, *Promoting Resilience, A resource guide on working with children in the care system*, London: BAAF, 2001

158 Newman, T. and Blackburn, S, 'Transitions in the Lives of Children and Young People: Resilience Factors' *Interchange*, 78, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive, 2002

159 Stein, M & Morris, M, *Increasing the number of care leavers in 'settled, safe accommodation': Vulnerable children knowledge review*, Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services London: C4EO, 2010

160 Centrepont, *A Place To Call Home: Care leavers' experience of finding suitable accommodation*, London: Centrepont, 2006

information.¹⁶¹ When information becomes noise, money spent on other forms of support, be it for education, employment or independent living, becomes wasted. A recent All Party Parliamentary Group report found that good relationships with professionals were key to young people accessing the support they are entitled to.¹⁶²

Lacking supportive relationships and someone to talk to means small problems (practical, financial or emotional) can easily escalate to the point of crisis, becoming expensive and difficult to resolve. As one care leaver told us:

'I kept getting all these bills. I didn't really understand that it was me who had to pay them and there was no one there to ask... I ended up in really bad debt.' (2006)

Where crisis point is reached, missing relationships mean that care leavers struggle to have the informal support necessary to get back on their feet. One25, a CSJ Alliance charity who work with sex workers (of whom they estimate 70 per cent were formerly in care), told the CSJ that it can be more difficult for women who have been in care to leave sex work as they often lack supportive family relationships.¹⁶³

Getting relationships right for care leavers, therefore, must be our first priority. Yet, as the next section will show, countless opportunities are being missed, both while young people are in care and when they are leaving, to stop hard-won relationships being destroyed.

4.3 Why young people lose relationships

It is clear that maintaining a wide range of supportive relationships is always going to be difficult for young people in and leaving care, as they enter care *because* of problems with their family. The effect of separation from their parents should not be under-estimated, especially for young people who enter care at a later age. One study of the English care system found that children who entered the care system after the age of 11 were more likely to 'strongly reject' being in care, making it difficult for them to form relationships with their new carers.¹⁶⁴

Yet the small networks many care leavers experience is by no means inevitable. There are opportunities to create and keep relationships, which could provide a young person with ongoing support both in and after care, that are consistently being missed.

4.3.1 In care

Broken relationships whilst in care negatively affect the chances of care leavers having good relationship outcomes in later life in two ways. First, it narrows the pool of possible support figures available to a young person once they leave care. Second, frequently changing relationships may damage a young person's ability to attach to others and form new relationships in later life.

¹⁶¹ Burns, H *Kilbrandon's Vision Healthier Lives: Better Futures*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government, 2012

¹⁶² APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, *The Entitlements Inquiry*, London: Who Cares? Trust, 2012

¹⁶³ Centre for Social Justice, *I Never Left Care, Care Left Me*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2013

¹⁶⁴ Sinclair et al, *The Pursuit of Permanence: A Study of the English Child Care System*, London: JKP, 2007

Arguably every relationship broken through a moved placement or a separation from siblings erodes a young person's chances of succeeding in life when they come to leave.

i. Lost contact with siblings

'I found not seeing [my] younger brothers quite difficult. I think about them every day.' (2012)

Care leaver in evidence to the CSJ

Too often we are missing the opportunity to allow children who enter care to keep a relationship with their siblings. Older siblings can be especially valuable when leaving care, as one study commented: 'where siblings were living independently or had their own families, they sometimes adopted a quasi-parental role, providing advice, guidance and practical support'.¹⁶⁵ Siblings contact has also been linked to better outcomes: one US study found that children who had greater access to their siblings and stronger relationships in childhood had higher levels of social support, self-esteem, and income, as well as stronger adult sibling relationships than those who did not.¹⁶⁶

Yet opportunities to allow siblings to live together are too often missed, despite the fact that section 22C of the Children Act 1989 specifically states that local authority placements must ensure siblings are placed together. Three-quarters of children in care report being separated from their siblings. Young people in children's homes are most affected, with 96 per cent separated from a sibling.¹⁶⁷ Where siblings are placed apart there is no legal onus on a local authority to promote contact, unlike in the case of the birth parents. Once separated it is extremely difficult for children to keep in touch with their siblings without the help of the local authority, as they may be placed far away and are likely to have different social workers. Even where contact does happen it is often not of sufficient quality to build supportive relationships. Siblings Together, a charity promoting siblings contact, told the CSJ:

'Where contact does happen between siblings it is often in a formal setting, akin to contact visits in prison. Opportunities for sibling contact often only happen during parental contact visits, meaning siblings will fight for parental attention rather than being able to foster their own relationship. As a result of this sibling relationships are being lost.'

¹⁶⁵ Wade J, 'The Ties that Bind: Support from Birth Families and Substitute Families for Young People Leaving Care' in *British Journal of Social Work*, 2008, p.45

¹⁶⁶ McCormick, A., The role of the sibling relationship in foster care: A comparison of adults with a history of childhood out-of-home placement., Arlington, TX: University of Texas, 2009 [accessed via: http://dspace.uta.edu/bitstream/handle/10106/11703/McCormick_uta_2502D_10262.pdf?sequence=1 (11/01/13)]

¹⁶⁷ Ofsted, *Children's Care Monitor*, Manchester: Ofsted, 2012

Case Study: Separated Siblings¹⁶⁸

The Jennings Siblings

The Jennings siblings were a group of seven children born to a single parent with undiagnosed mental health problems. On entering care the seven siblings were placed in different towns across England and Wales and each given different social workers. No effort to ensure contact was made whilst the siblings were in care, with the result that although the older children were aware of their siblings when they left care none felt able to make contact. Contact between the siblings is still non-existent and they have no photos of each other to allow them to understand their history as a family.

Jack and David

Jack entered care at five years of age after his mother, who was a drug user, was found to be physically abusing him. After years in foster care Jack was informed that he had a young brother called David who now lived with his mother. Following continued abuse from his mother, David also entered care.

The boys were placed separately and neither had any contact arrangements stipulated in their care plans. As a result they did not maintain contact. When Jack reached the age of 12 he found the confidence to explain that he wanted to see his brother who he barely knew, however still no contact was made. Jack stopped engaging in school and became drawn into gangs, explaining that they made him feel like he 'belonged to something'.

Fortunately through the recommendation of a therapist renewed efforts were made to allow Jack and David spend time together. The results of the reunification for both siblings were significant, with Jack feeling he should act as a 'positive role model' for his younger brother David.

Jack is now in the process of leaving care, with a more mature attitude toward life. One day the two brothers hope to share a flat together and say they will keep a close eye out for one another for many years to come.

ii. Frequent placement moves

Too often children in care are denied the opportunity to stay in the same place and build consistent relationship. Half of care leavers have had four or more placements during their time in care and 17 per cent have had ten or more.¹⁶⁹

This movement has a negative impact on young people's ability to build relationships whilst in care as moves are likely to mean losing carers, teachers and friends, forcing a young person to start from scratch. By contrast, staying in the same place can be extremely valuable, keeping crucial stability in a young person's life. One younger care leaver commented to us:

'I moved to live ... where all my mates are. I still go to the same school and I am really enjoying it here.' (2013).

¹⁶⁸ Case study provided by Siblings Together, a charity that runs activity camps to reunite siblings separated in care

¹⁶⁹ Department for Education, *Children looked after in local authorities including adoption*, London: Department for Education, 2013

iii. Out of area placements

Out of area placements remain a pervasive aspect of the care system: at present one-third of young people are placed outside of their local authority and 16 per cent are more than 20 miles from home.¹⁷⁰ Placements out of area whilst in care can also be very damaging for care leavers, as connections with friends and family held before entering care are lost. Whilst moving far away from home can seem like a good idea to give a young person a 'fresh start', it can also mean they will struggle more when they return to their local authority when leaving care, as they will know few people. One care leaver told us:

'They moved me over 300 miles away from all my friend and family so when I left care all the friends I had [previously] had moved away. Where they sent me to live they kept me so isolated that I have lost all my confidence to talk to new people and go out on my own.' (2011)

Having missed the opportunity to build positive relationships, when a young person returns home after an out of area placement they are likely to rely on the negative family members and friends that first lead them to enter care. One care leaver explained:

'Going back into my old area was not good, a bad influence. Mum's influence in my life was negative and also the crowd I was hanging with.' (2011)

A residential care manager explained how distance could damage relationships. He said:

'Young people can often understand why they are in care, but can't understand why they cannot be with their families, for them, it's not the same thing. One of the difficulties for young people placed a long way from home, is that they can't easily explore these feelings with the people that can best help them understand – their parents. If they don't get chance to explore them they often fill the gaps by imagining something much worse, or much better than the reality.'

The Government has recently taken an important step towards decreasing the number of out of area placements, announcing that all out of area moves must now be signed off by senior council members.¹⁷¹ However, this is unlikely to offer a complete solution given how deeply ingrained out of area placements are in many local authorities. For instance, the extremely uneven distribution of children's homes means that many local authorities simply do not have the capacity to keep young people in their home area.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

¹⁷¹ Press release, Department for Education, *Councils told to stop housing vulnerable children miles away from home*, 3rd January 2014

¹⁷² Department for Education, *Children's Homes Data Packs*, London: Department for Education, 2013

4.3.2 Leaving care

When a young person leaves care they need strong supportive relationships more than ever to help them negotiate the difficulties of adulthood. Yet opportunities to build strong relationships with former carers and leaving care professionals are often being missed.

i. Former Carers

'My foster carers have still supported me. They are my real family.' (2010)

Care leaver in evidence to the CSJ

In many cases a foster carer or residential carer will be the person that knows the most about a young person, as they have day-to-day contact with them and will have known them for a sustained period of time. In the best situations, the relationship with a foster carer can mirror a parental relationship and provide vital support with a young person who is leaving care. Relationships with carers are particularly important to young people who do not have contact with their birth family.¹⁷³ Our survey showed the extent to which former carers already do provide support, just under half of care leavers (53 per cent) identified their former carers as 'very helpful' when they left care.

Yet, on leaving care, relationships with former carers are often lost. In one study, about one-third of young people in residential care and just over two-fifths of young people in foster care were in monthly contact with their former carer two or three months after leaving care, dwindling to 14 per cent for foster carers roughly nine months later.¹⁷⁴

One reason for this is that keeping in touch with former carers is not considered as part of leaving care planning: almost 49 per cent of the young people we spoke to said they either did not receive any support or the support they received to keep in touch with their carer was unhelpful. Only around 30 per cent of young people identified this as something they did not need help with.

If former residential and foster carers are going to continue to have a relationship with a young person once they leave care, in a way that more closely mirrors the support other young people receive, we must consider ways to formalise the relationships between young people and their carers post 18 or 21. As Professor John Wade states in a study of after-care support:

*'Formal recognition of the work done by care-givers and the provision of modest funding to support it are therefore likely to enhance the continuity provided to young people through transition.'*¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Wade J, 'The Ties that Bind: Support from Birth Families and Substitute Families for Young People Leaving Care' in *British Journal of Social Work*, 2008

¹⁷⁴ Ibid

¹⁷⁵ Ibid

At present there is little evidence that any such practice is occurring. There are some examples of local authorities paying a small retainer to foster carers whilst a young person is at university so that they may return during holidays. However, there appears to be little evidence of similar provisions for continuing relationships for young people not in education. This is regrettable as the support former carers could continue to provide is a greatly undervalued resource. This is something we will be looking at further in our upcoming policy recommendations paper.

ii. Leaving care professionals

Having turned 16 a looked after young person will usually transfer from children's services to a leaving care team, where they will be given a personal adviser to replace their social worker. Personal advisers can potentially provide important and valuable relationships for a young person leaving care, particularly in offering them a guaranteed person they can contact if they are in trouble. Personal advisers should attempt to keep in contact with a young person and 'provide advice and support'.¹⁷⁶ Whilst leaving care teams are unlikely to ever be a life-long relationship for a young person, they are a crucial point of support, especially for the most vulnerable care leavers who do not have a good relationship with their birth family or former carers.

Despite the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 stating that all young people leaving care should be given a personal adviser, implementation appears to be patchy. In one survey, 50 per cent of care leavers said they either did not know what a personal adviser was or did not have one.¹⁷⁷ One care leaver told us:

'My social worker abandoned me for six months before I decided to go to [my leaving care centre] to see what was going on ... even then she wasn't any help and just told me they were looking for someone to be my P.A. [personal adviser] and that she was very busy with other care leavers.' (2012)

Where young people do get a personal adviser our consultation gave a mixed picture in terms of how helpful they had been: 39 per cent of respondents to our survey said their personal adviser or social worker was unhelpful when they were leaving care.

One reason that came across in our consultation is the high turnover of personal advisers:

'I've had so many in the past year, I can't even count.' (2009)

'I've started calling them all Sally, I've had so many. Sally was the only one I liked.' (2010)

'Having so many leaving care workers stops you from building up a relationship with them.' (2013)

¹⁷⁶ Department for Education, *The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume Three*, London: Department for Education, 2010

¹⁷⁷ Ofsted, *After Care: Young people's views on leaving care* Manchester: Ofsted, 2006

Caseloads are also often so high that it is can often be very difficult for young people to build relationships with their personal advisers.

- Freedom of Information requests by the CSJ showed that the average caseload of a personal adviser is 23 young people, going as high as 49 in some local authorities.¹⁷⁸
- In one survey of over 1000 care leavers, 32 per cent said they had trouble contacting their social worker or personal adviser.¹⁷⁹

Evidence of the effect of busy personal advisers was present in our consultation:

'What do I care about what you [personal adviser] think of me if I see you every six weeks for an hour and [you] just tick boxes.' (2010)

'I don't have a relationship with mine [personal adviser] which is hard as I only have contact with her when I need financial help.' (unknown)

In some cases there appeared to be a genuine lack of trust between care leavers and their local authority, whether this was because of the latter's role in separating a young person from their family or bad experiences from their time in care. This makes building a relationship with leaving care professionals even more difficult.

'If I ever have any kids I will be teaching them that social services are your enemy and that you cannot trust them if you have any problems.' (2011)

'I learned that no one really cares about anything but the money. I feel I would be better off now if I hadn't had aftercare "supporting" me throughout my education.' (2000)

However the CSJ also uncovered excellent practice. 35 per cent of young people identified their personal adviser or social worker as 'very helpful'. These instances appeared to be where a genuine relationship was fostered that went beyond 'checking up' on the young person or filling out paperwork with them.

'[I] had great social workers, they changed my life and with their help I am who I am and where I am. Without them I would have been lost.' (2013)

'My social worker was amazing. When I was pregnant she stayed with me throughout my labour even though it was really late in the evening. There was always someone at the leaving care team to talk to, I think I will keep in touch with them forever.' (2010)

The CSJ's final report on improving outcomes for care leavers will make suggestions about how leaving care professionals can provide better emotional support, particularly those who are most vulnerable. For these young people, ensuring support from personal advisers and

¹⁷⁸ Freedom of Information Request by Centre for Social Justice [sent 04/11/13], 109 local authorities responded

¹⁷⁹ Office for the Children's Rights Director, *National Overview Report of Children and Young People's Views 2009–2012*, London: Ofsted, 2012

leaving care teams is crucial. In many cases the effect of multiple placements and broken relationships with family is that their local authority is the only constant in their lives.

'Been in care since [I was] a baby. No one has ever cared.' (2013)

Finally, for most care leavers, unless they are in education, the support of a personal adviser ends when they turn 21. This means for many, who may not have built up a strong support system in the three years since they left care, there will be no one they can turn to in an emergency. Missing this support can mean that extreme outcomes such as those discussed in chapter three can easily become a reality.

'They told me that if I left education I would lose my personal adviser. I would have been lost if that had happened.' (2010)

chapter five

Conclusion

The frequently stated test of good corporate parenting is to be 'no less than each parent would expect for their child'. In recent years there has been important progress in meeting this test, from improved education support to the recent highly welcome move to extend foster care placements to 21.

However, this report has also found several areas where there is a pressing need for change:

- Finding a way to support the 62 per cent of care leavers who are not able to stay in their care placement past 18, making good on the promise of the care leavers charter to 'move [you] into independent living only when you are ready';¹⁸⁰
- Ending the presumption that leaving care means entering the benefit system and finding a more flexible and aspirational way for supporting care leavers in their attempts to enter employment;
- Moving away from the idea that ongoing support is best aimed at those in education and distributing help and ongoing support to all care leavers;
- Identifying 'early warning signs' of care leavers who are most likely to have extreme outcomes and targeting support to help them through the process of leaving care;
- Utilising the ability of the voluntary sector to deliver support, especially where young people feel most alienated from their local authority and have the most complex needs;
- Addressing the extreme loneliness and isolation felt by care leavers, by finding ways to foster enduring and supportive relationships, with birth families, siblings, former carers and children's services, that last long after 21.

At present we are missing crucial opportunities to intervene before many of these care leavers embark on paths that will, in the long term, be extremely costly both in financial and human terms. Our next report will investigate these opportunities, making suggestions for how local authorities, national government, the voluntary sector and former carers can improve outcomes for looked after children. Until concerted action on these additional fronts is taken, too many care leavers will be left in a situation that no parent could want for their child.

¹⁸⁰ Department for Education, *Care leavers' charter*, 2012 [accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-leavers-charter> (02/01/14)]

Appendix I: Survey Questions

1. What year did you leave care? (Be as accurate as possible)

2. How old were you when you finally left care?

Younger than 16 16 17 18 Older than 18

3. Do you think you left care at the right age?

No, too early Yes, the right time No, too late

4. How many different places did you live whilst in care (excluding emergency placements)?
What type of placements (e.g. foster care, children's homes etc.) were they?

5a. How would you rate the help you received from your local authority when leaving care?

	I didn't get any help with this	Unhelpful	Ok	Helpful	I didn't need help with this
Help with where to live					
Help finding a job					
Help with education					
Practical help with living independently					
Help claiming benefits					
Help keeping in touch with birth family					
Help keeping in touch with former carers					

5b. Did you get help with any other things? (Please specify what they were and how you would rate the help you got.)

6a. How helpful were the following people when you were leaving care?

	Unhelpful	Quite helpful	Very helpful	Not applicable to me
Former foster carer/ residential worker				
Personal adviser/social worker				
Parents				
Brothers and sisters				
Extended family				
Friends/partner who had been in care				

Friends/partner who had not been in care				
Teacher (or someone else at school)				
Someone from a charity or voluntary organisation				

6b. Were there any other people who helped you whilst you were leaving care? How helpful were they?

7a. What did you find difficult about leaving care?

	Not difficult at all	Quite difficult	Very difficult
Having somewhere safe and stable to live			
Feeling lonely or isolated			
Having enough day-to-day support			
Keeping touch with family members and former carers			
Coping with mental health problems			
Finding a job			
Completing education			
Drug or alcohol problems			
Managing money and getting into debt			
Being judged/labelled for being in care			
Problems from my past returning			

7b. Were there any other problems you experienced?

8. Do you have any other comments about your experiences leaving care? (For example did you face any particular challenges or have any successes you would like to share?)

9a. Can I contact you for a short interview about your experiences leaving care?

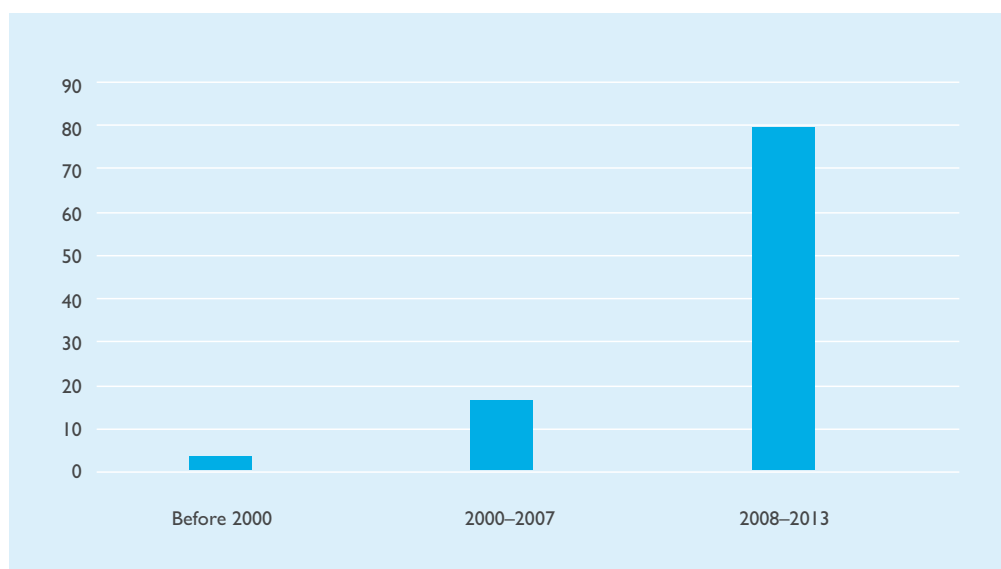
Yes

No

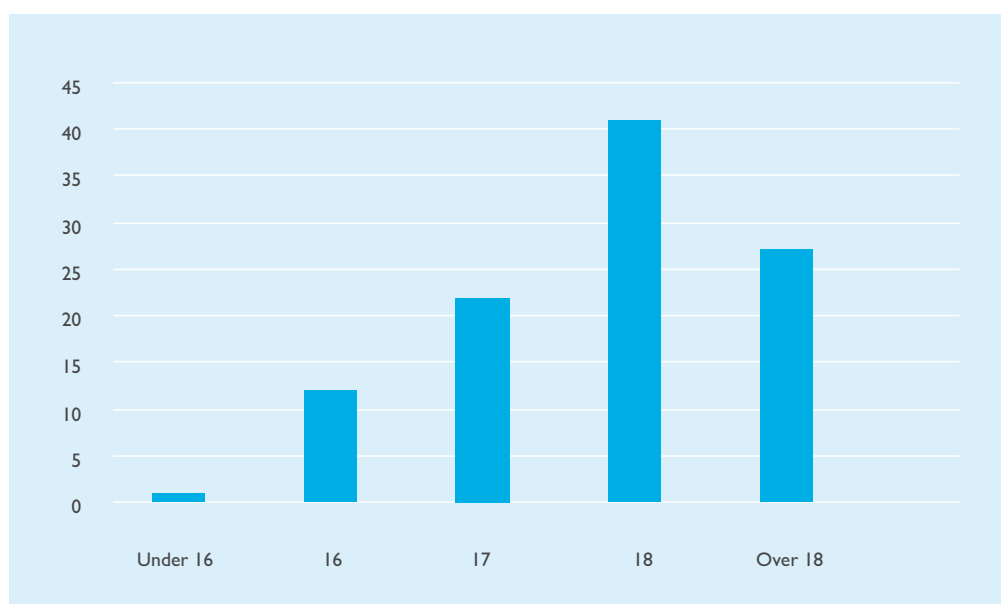
9b. If yes, please provide contact details (name, email address and/or phone number) below.

Appendix II: Survey data¹⁸¹

1. What year did you leave care?



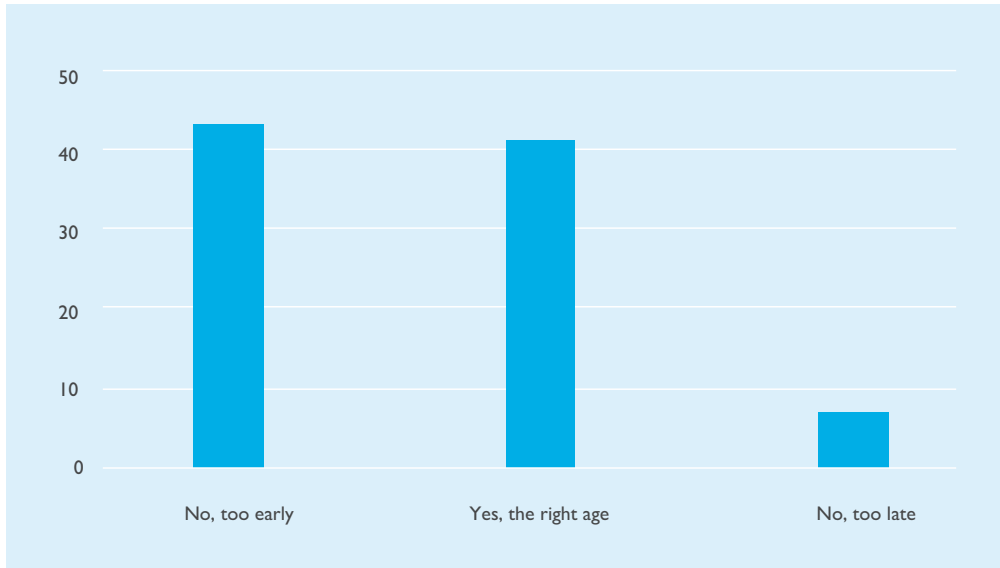
2. How old were you when you left care?¹⁸²



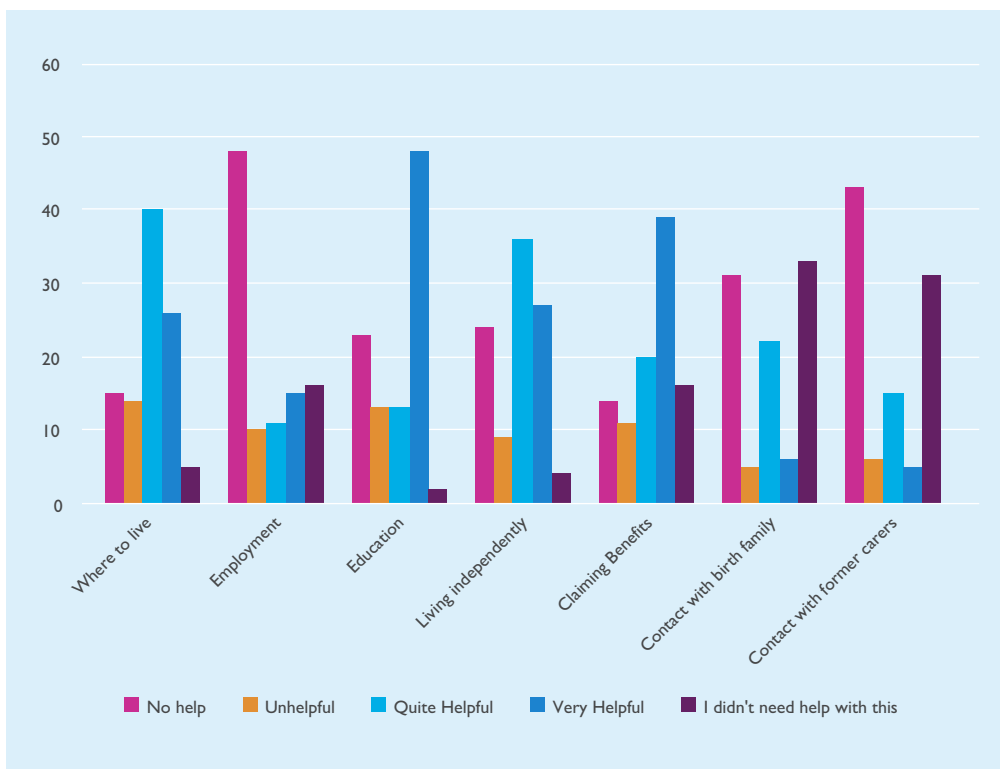
¹⁸¹ N.B. only results from multiple choice questions included, all figures given as percentage rounded to nearest whole number.

¹⁸² The term 'left care' appeared to be interpreted by some care leavers as the age they ceased to receive local authority support rather than when they officially ceased to be 'looked after', hence the relatively high numbers reporting leaving care post 18 when compared with official statistics.

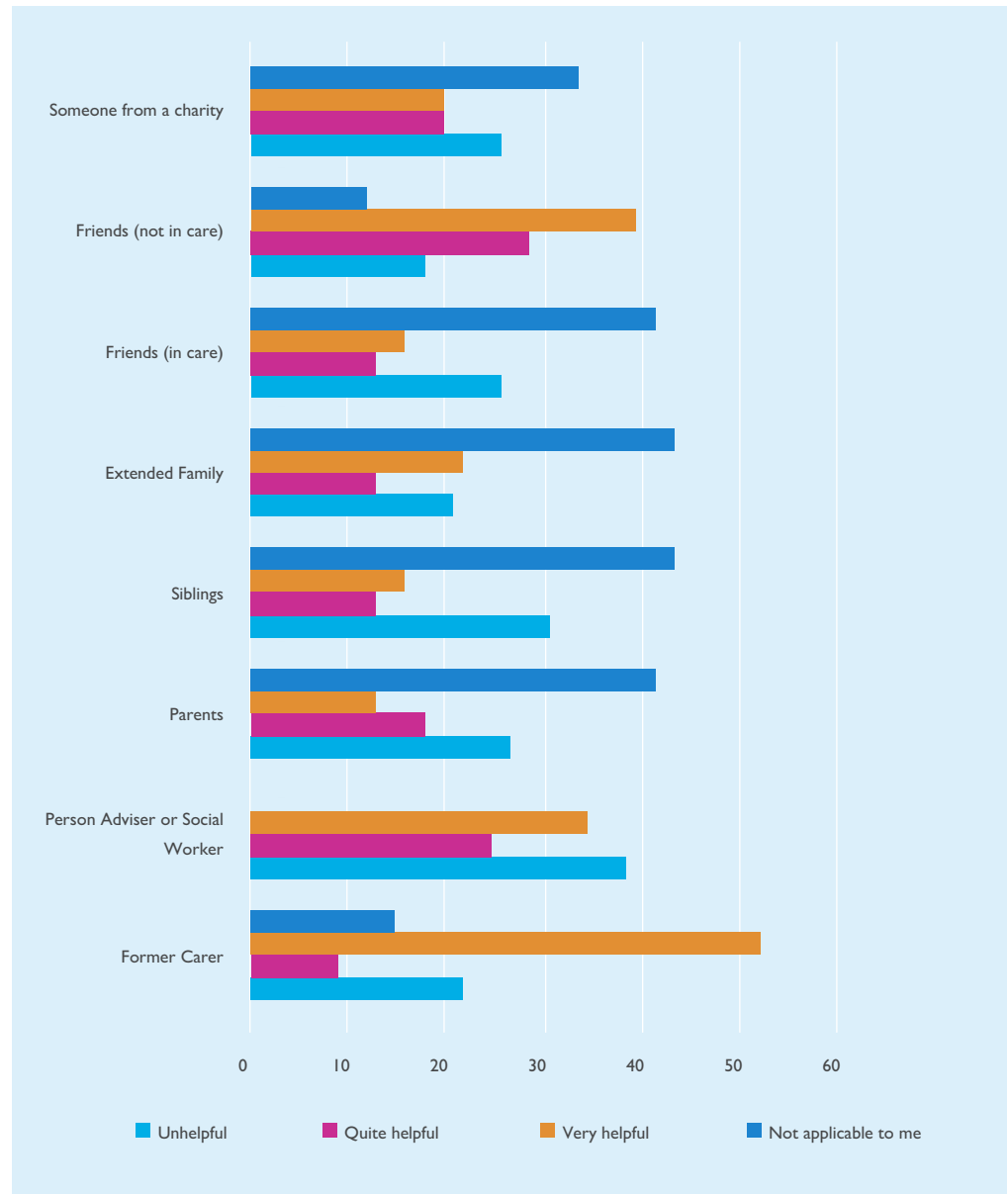
3. Do you think you left care at the right age?



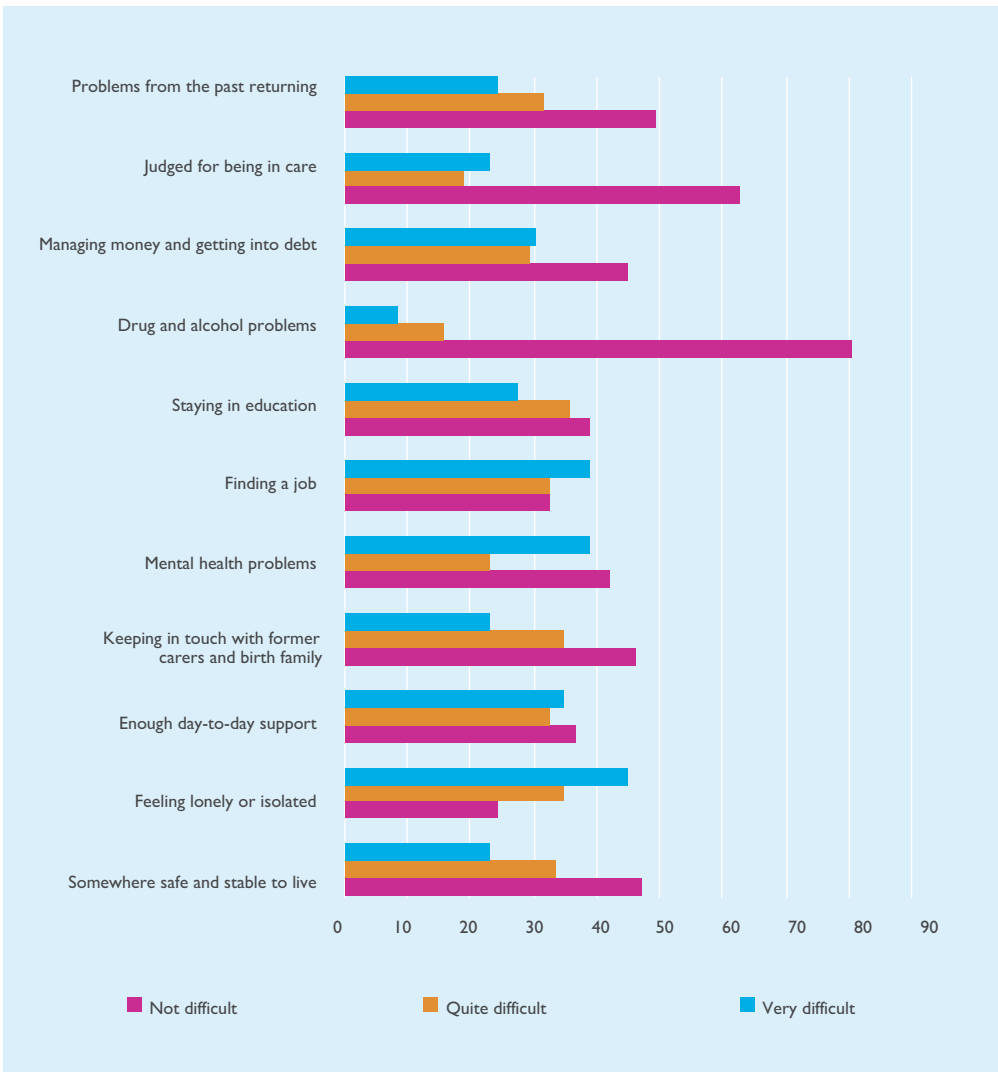
4. How would you rate the help you received from your local authority when leaving care



5. How helpful were the following people when you were leaving care?



6. What did you find difficult about leaving care?



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