



Throughcare Policy Briefing

Introduction – What is ‘Throughcare’?

Growing up doesn't happen overnight. For some young people it can be a relatively quick and smooth transition. For others, it can be more challenging and can take many years. For young people who are leaving care, the process is not, and certainly shouldn't be, an abrupt event. Rather it is a process that should begin at the moment a young person is taken into care and that should take into account the different aspects of the transition to adulthood.

A parent's support for their child doesn't follow formal structures. It reacts appropriately to a child's mental, physical and emotional development. A parent will support their child emotionally through any bad experiences. Practical skills like cleaning and budgeting won't be taught at a specific time but as a child develops. Support and advice on education and employment don't start when a child turns fifteen. Help with the first move away from the family home won't normally be a one-off event; the family home can remain a bolt hole for many years afterwards. For a corporate parent, however, this support is provided by a myriad of different services, which tend to be formally structured and bureaucratic.

Legislation now makes it clear that corporate parents have a duty to advise, assist and befriend all looked after children in their care and to promote their welfare for when they have ceased to look after them. They must ensure that they plan and prepare a young person for adult life.

‘Throughcare’ is an approach that recognises that, rather than an event, leaving care is a process with no abrupt beginning or end. To be successful and give young people the best start to adult life, throughcare requires local authorities to fully embrace their responsibilities (and legal duties) as corporate parents and focus their services around the needs of young people leaving care.

A key element of throughcare is ensuring that a young person has as much continuity of care and support as possible. Unfortunately, too many young people experience care placements with little continuity and stability. This impacts on, the chance of the placement being a success, their education, and preparations for leaving care. When it comes to leaving care, local authorities should be trying to provide the stability which may have been lacking in the past. Yet, all too often the

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processes involved in leaving care break continuity and perpetuate instability. The growth of 16+ teams has added another transition at a crucial time in young people's development. Many young people experiences moves from foster care or residential care to supported housing then independent housing, all of which intrinsically break continuity.

The leaving-care process should seek to promote continuity and stability, and, where this is not possible, ensure that the processes used do not undermine previous care and support

The purpose of this briefing is not to provide in-depth analysis of all the problems and challenges facing care leavers and those providing services to them. The starting point of this briefing is to try to convince service providers that a failure to grasp the concept of throughcare is one of the reasons young people leaving care still face such an uphill struggle in their transition to adult life. The briefing will give an overview of what we mean by throughcare and will demonstrate how, by embracing a proper throughcare approach, we can better support young people in the transition to adult life. The briefing will also look at some practical ways in which service providers could improve their services in order to ensure that more young people leaving care achieve more positive outcomes.

Context

Around 6,000 young people aged 16 or over cease to be looked after in England every year. In 2003, in the Every Child Matters Green Paper, the Government set out five criteria it believed every child was entitled to whatever their background or their circumstances: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic wellbeing.

We know that for young people who spend time during their childhood in care these aspirations are a long way off. Their health needs are all too often neglected. They're more likely to experience homelessness or to be in prison. They're less likely to have qualifications and be in employment. Young people from care continue to be disproportionately represented in every vulnerable group. The needs of every care leaver still don't 'matter' enough.

Of course, it isn't a uniform picture. In some parts of the country, the needs of young people in and leaving care are at the centre of planning and service provision. However, statistics referred to above and throughout this briefing, show that this is far from being the norm.

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 was intended to improve the life chances of young people living in and leaving care by delaying young people's discharge from care until they are prepared and ready to leave: by improving the assessment, preparation and planning for leaving care; providing better personal support for young people after leaving care; and improving the financial arrangements for care leavers¹. It is the piece of legislation with most central importance to care leavers and sets out their entitlements to help and support from their local authority. The Children (Leaving Care) Act amends and strengthens the provisions of the Children Act 1989, with respect to care leavers, and, in particular, made significant changes to financial-support arrangements for many 16- and 17-year-olds that leave care on or

¹ Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, Regulations and Guidance.

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after their 16th birthday. The Act, and its associated guidance and regulations for England, came into force on 1st October 2001. Under previous legislation, most notably the 1989 Children Act, local authorities had the power to help young people leaving care, but few legal duties to do so.

Formal Throughcare Planning

The National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Fostering Network want to see good throughcare planning that prepares, supports and provides stability for a young person in their transition to adult life. This should start from the day a young person becomes looked after. Each local authority should have a comprehensive throughcare policy for looked-after children and care leavers that reflects its responsibilities and meets its duties as a corporate parent.

As outlined in the introduction, throughcare is a process with legal duties attached. It is through these legal duties (formalised pathway planning and access to a named personal advisor) that many improvements can be made. However, what would really help practitioners to guide and support young people more successfully through their transition to adult life would be more of a focus on the spirit of the legislation, "would this be good enough for my child²."

Role of Pathway Plans

Pathway plans are the key legal document in which young people can set out their hopes, aspirations and goals for the future. Young people's needs and views should be at the centre of the plan, as well as how the local authority intends to support them. Plans should stretch at least as far as a young person's 21st birthday, and beyond for young people still in education or training. The local authority's role is to identify how best each young person can be supported to help them to attain their goals.

Pathway planning should build on the preparation and planning work undertaken during the period young people are being looked after (including care plans and personal education plans) rather than being started entirely from scratch. All care leavers should have a needs assessment and pathway plan, including details of: personal support; accommodation needs; education, training and employment; family and social relationships (and how these can be supported); practical & other skills; health needs and financial support that can be given. Contingency planning is a key part of the pathway plan too and should ensure that changes in circumstances or potential crises are averted wherever possible, or at least dealt with in a planned way.

Young people should have a written copy of their pathway plan if they want one. Plans are expected to be reviewed at least every six months, but should be changed whenever there is a change in a young person's circumstances. Young people can also request that their plan be reviewed. Personal advisors can also arrange a review if they feel it is necessary.

However, the reality of pathway planning for young people and their carers still seems to fall well short of the quality throughcare envisaged in law.

² Frank Dobson MP then Secretary of State for Health 1999.

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The National Leaving Care Advisory Service's own research reveals that many local authorities are not meeting their legal obligations regarding pathway planning. In some areas well over 40% of young people have not had a needs assessment or do not have a pathway plan³.

Many enquiries received by the National Leaving Care Advisory Service relate to pathway plans. Many young people and their carers are unaware of the existence of their pathway plans, and how to review plans when their circumstances change. Even more worryingly, many enquiries reveal that young people wanting to pursue their education frequently receive inadequate support. The low expectations of local authorities in some areas seem to indicate that they clearly feel their job is done if they get a young person through their GCSEs – not the approach that would be taken by any other supportive parent.

Role of Personal Advisors

It is the responsibility of local authorities to ensure that looked-after young people get the support and advice they need to make a successful transition to adult life. One of the main requirements of the Children (Leaving Care) Act is to ensure that local authorities appoint a personal advisor for each young person leaving care for whom they have responsibility. This person should not be the budget holder and young people should know the name of their personal advisor.

The National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Fostering Network believe that all those involved in supporting young people's transition, (whether service providers or carers) should be trained and supported to undertake their responsibilities.

Personal advisors, as the people with the key responsibilities towards young people as they move throughcare and out of care, have a particular role in ensuring a local authority meets its responsibilities as a corporate parent. For example, they must ensure they keep in touch with young people (at least once every six months or more often if the young person's needs require it or if the young person requests it). They should ensure that care leavers have access to clear information about the range of services and the support available to them, including information about their rights and responsibilities both as care leavers and as citizens. This information should include how they can access those services and the support available.

The National Leaving Care Advisory Service's own research indicates that local authorities may be better in their appointment of personal advisors than they are at pathway planning. Nevertheless, in some areas there is evidence that at least 15% of young people are without a named advisor⁴. Enquiries to the National Leaving Care Advisory Service also reveal a considerable lack of training and support for personal advisors that would enable them to fulfil their role more effectively.

³ NLCAS internal research

⁴ NLCAS internal research.

Role of Foster Carers

The majority (68%) of young people within the care system are in foster care⁵. However, for those leaving care the proportion in foster care is thought to be considerably less at around 40%. Their foster carers have a key role in supporting and preparing them for the challenges of adult life. Evidence shows that young people in long-term foster placements, especially where those relationships are close, are more likely to have successful educational outcomes. Where carers see promoting a young person's education as an important part of their role, young people are also more likely to be successful in education and employment.

Ways in which foster carers can have a particular impact on a young person's experience in and leaving care are:

- Providing continuity and stability when many other changes are going on in young people's lives.
- Being committed to a young person as an individual, supporting them in their interests and fighting their corner.
- Giving young people a more 'normal' home environment, and dealing appropriately with things that may have made placements go wrong in the past and can often lead to the breakdown of placements.
- Foster carers can deal with behaviour that threatens the placement or will impact badly on their future life without rejecting the child (liking them as individuals).
- Focusing on education in a general sense, not just how young people do in exams but by paying attention to how they enjoy themselves at school and fit in and how young people are encouraged to use their education as they leave care.
- Providing support for young people to deal with issues around their birth families and acting as an intermediary.
- Providing young people with as much support and encouragement as and after they leave care as possible.

Appropriate throughcare provision for young people in foster care should take into account the needs and best interests of the young person concerned. Just as parents want the best for their child, foster carers often provide commitment to the young people in their care well beyond normal expectations. There is increasing acknowledgement of the role and difference that foster carers can make to the life chances of young people as they move through and leave the care system.

Many foster carers undertake significant additional support to young people, particularly after they have left care and there is increasing pressure for the benefits of this to be properly recognised and appropriately rewarded. In addition, the National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Fostering Network would like to see an end to the assumption that young people in foster placements, especially those who have been in placements for a long time, should automatically have to leave their placements at 18. Although increasing numbers of foster placements are becoming supported-lodgings placements for young people, enabling them to remain with their foster carers after the age of 18, financial implications for carers need to be addressed.

⁵ 68% of young people in care are in foster care placements, 11% are in residential children's homes, 9% were placed with their parents, and 5% adopted (DFES Leaving Care Statistics Nov 2005)

Role of Residential Workers

It is usually more difficult for residential establishments to create a normal home environment than it is for foster carers. Consequently, young people from residential care tend to make the transition to independence earlier than their peers in foster care. Nevertheless, residential workers can make a difference by providing as much continuity and stability as possible and supporting young people in their transition to adult life. Like with any transition, moving from residential care should be as planned and gradual as possible and young people should be involved in the decisions being made. Many young people form significant relationships with residential workers. Maintaining those relationships can help them feel less isolated when living independently.

Preparation for leaving care can also be more of a challenge in residential care where institutional barriers can get in the way of learning practical skills and where it can be more difficult for young people to practice self reliance. However, these challenges can be overcome and should be reflected in care plans and pathway plans.

NLCAS and the Fostering Network would like to see more opportunities for young people to remain in residential care until they are at least 18 and more recognition of the role that residential units can make in assisting the throughcare process.

Transitions from Care to Aftercare

Parents don't stop being parents. Yet for corporate parents there are legal obligations that are time specific. Formalised strategies for the transition from care to aftercare in local authorities are currently rare although in some areas structures are being developed to mark the ending of a successful transition to adulthood. They are not the end of the role of a corporate parent. Neither are they a farewell and an excuse for a final cut-off of support. However, such strategies can be an opportunity for local authorities to ensure that there has been adequate preparation and planning for young people. They are a way to ensure procedures are in place so that young people have contact details of appropriate people/agencies for the future. They are also a valuable opportunity for young people to give their views on the services they have received in order to evaluate and develop the service in future.

Practical Throughcare Preparation

The top priorities of young people when preparing for leaving care tend to be practical ones – in particular around their housing needs and achieving good educational outcomes with a view to future employment⁶.

Accommodation throughcare

The vast majority of young people leave care to live independently before the age of 18,⁷ in contrast to other young people for whom the family home can remain a bolt hole well into their 20s. Reasons for this early move to independent living include young people's own expectations, placement breakdown, scarcity and cost of

⁶ Companion to Leaving Care (Edited by Ann Wheal 2002)

⁷ DFES Statistics on care leavers (2002-3)

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placements (particularly foster placements). In addition, research also shows that once they leave, many care leavers continue to experience considerable instability⁸.

Given these worrying trends, it is perhaps surprising to note that local authorities already have legal duties to ensure that young people do not leave care until they are ready, that they receive support once they have left care, and that they are provided with 'suitable' accommodation. The wishes of young people to remain in foster homes should also be considered, including converting the arrangement to supported lodgings and looking at other funding arrangements. The accommodation needs of young people leaving care are obviously extremely varied, and the definition of 'suitable' may be tested, particularly in local authorities with a shortage of good supported accommodation.

Research⁹ has shown that accommodation outcomes for care leavers are helped when local authorities:

- Avoid moving young people who are in settled accommodation.
- Let young people remain in foster placements and re-designate them supported lodgings if necessary.
- Involve young people in the planning and decision making.
- Properly assess accommodation needs.
- Offer a choice in the type and location of accommodation.
- Take disabilities properly into account.
- Plan for contingencies.
- Keep young people in one place and adapt support around them.
- Have a package of support with accommodation.
- Have a clear financial plan.

Unsurprisingly these are very similar to the criteria from the Children (Leaving Care) Act regulations and are the kinds of steps a good parent would take when planning accommodation for their own child.

Good throughcare planning should be clearly designed to keep young people safe and avoid their becoming homeless. Improvements have undoubtedly been made in recent years. However, in spite of the Homelessness Act 2002, which extended the groups that qualify as being in 'priority need' to include former care leavers between the ages of 18 and 21, recent research has shown that over a third of young people experienced homelessness after leaving care¹⁰. Young people leaving care are clearly not being kept 'safe' as the Every Child Matters criteria stipulate.

Education, training and employment throughcare

Three of the Every Child Matters criteria are relevant to young people's education, training and employment: enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic wellbeing. It is the area of perhaps greatest concern to policy makers and has been the subject of a great deal of Government attention¹¹.

⁸ In Still a Bairn? research quoted in Leaving Care, Throughcare and Aftercare in Scotland (Jo Dixon & Mike Stein, , 2005), 61% of young people surveyed had moved three or more times since leaving care.

⁹ What works for young people leaving care? (Mike Stein 2004)

¹⁰ Life After Care (Ravinder Barn, Linda Andrew & Nadia Mantovani, 2005)

¹¹ Me, Survive Out There? (Green Paper, 1999), SEU Report, A Better Education for Children in Care (2003), new proposals in Higher Standards, Better Schools for All White Paper (2005)

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In spite of this focus, in 2005 only half of care leavers obtained at least one GCSE or GNVQ in year 11 (compared to well over 90% of all school children). Large numbers do not sit an exam at all. Just 6% obtained 5 GCSE's (grades A-C) (compared to 53% of all children).

As well as having lower levels of participation in post-16 education, training and employment, care leavers have consistently higher rates of unemployment when compared to other young people. 59% remain in education, training or employment at the end of year 11 (compared to around three-quarters of all children) and 30% are not in education, training and employment (compared to only around 5% of all children). The remaining 11% are no longer in touch with their local authority¹².

Reasons for success in both education and employment are unsurprisingly similar and include having had a stable care experience (ideally in a foster-care background), continuous schooling, and encouragement from carers to learn and achieve.

The experience that young people have during the time they are in care will clearly affect their ability to make a successful transition out of care. The National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Fostering Network believe that no young person should be diverted from their educational preparations because of the practical concerns of their corporate parents. The focus of their pathway planning should be on planning rather than making final decisions about accommodation and financial support. Young people in care need support to ensure they get on in school, not only to achieve their educational goals but also in order to make the right decisions afterwards. The aspirations of all those working with young people as they move through care, especially their corporate parent, should be high.

The National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Fostering Network strongly believe that unnecessary placement moves have a significant impact on young people's education and future employment prospects. Delaying young people's move out of care and into independent living and supporting them to stay in foster care placements whilst they complete their education could have a big impact on education and employment chances for young people in the future.

Practical skills

Having good practical skills is not only useful for a young person as they move through care and out of care but they can also help boost confidence. Unsurprisingly, young people with poor practical skills tend to do less well. Pathway plans must therefore include details of how a young person will be prepared for adult life in areas such as budgeting, shopping, cooking and cleaning as well as self care, health and emotional issues.

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on the experiences of young people from different ethnic groups leaving care found that only around half the research group received help and advice about practical skills such as budgeting, housing and careers. Budgeting, general management skills and understanding bills were all cited as areas where young people would have liked more support¹³.

Internal research by the National Leaving Care Advisory Service confirms a lack of practical support for young people as they make preparations to leave care. The

¹² DFES Statistics on care leavers 2005

¹³ Life After Care (Ravinder Barn, Linda Andrew & Nadia Mantovani, 2005)

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National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Fostering Network would like to see improvements in the support for young people to gain the practical skills they need in order to live independently. Service providers should use guidance from sources like the Preparation for Adult Life Handbook and the Leaving Care Handbook as well as putting the needs and requests of young people themselves at the centre of the support provided.

Emotional Wellbeing and Health in Throughcare

Having strong and healthy relationships is among the top priorities of young people as they move through the process of leaving care. Health needs however tend to be notoriously low on their list of priorities¹⁴ and perhaps reflects the need, as in most families, for parents to take charge to ensure that young people see doctors, dentists and opticians regularly and when needed. Legally, family and social relationships as well as a young person's health and self-esteem should all have consideration in the pathway plan. In addition, 'being healthy' is one of the Every Child Matters criteria.

Family & social relationships

For most young people, leaving home is an exciting experience and an opportunity to have fun. But for young people leaving care, particularly if they move to live alone, it can be a very isolating experience. Ensuring they get the right emotional support will be essential if their move through and out of care is to be successful.

Most research indicates that maintaining links with family members is beneficial to young people as they move through and out of care¹⁵. Siblings and grandparents are among the people with whom leavers often wish to retain contact. For young people from ethnic minority groups, for young parents (where isolation can be a particular problem), or for young people who are unsure of their sexuality, planning should ensure that young people are made aware of any local groups or support networks that may provide them with a means to build their confidence and form new relationships. The guidance to the Children (Leaving Care) Act acknowledges the importance of family and social relationships and recommends that pathway planning incorporate it when appropriate.

However, recent research indicates that family relationships may not always facilitate the transition to adulthood and that in some cases birth families may hold back some young people, especially those from successful foster placements¹⁶.

In practice, the sensible approach is to take the lead from young people themselves and for local authorities to support them in building and maintaining positive relationships.

Self-esteem – including health

Although health tends to be much lower down young people's priorities (compared to practical issues like accommodation and employment), the Children (Leaving Care) Act requires local authorities to pay particular attention to young people's health in assessing their needs, just as any parent would. Care leavers are particularly vulnerable to health problems and risky behaviour and are four times more likely to have a psychiatric disorder compared to other young people¹⁷. Health also seems to

¹⁴ Companion to Leaving Care (Edited by Ann Wheal 2002)

¹⁵ What works for young people leaving care? (Mike Stein 2004)

¹⁶ What happens to foster children? (Sinclair, Baker, Wilson, Gibbs 2003)

¹⁷ Companion to Leaving Care (Edited by Ann Wheal 2002)

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suffer in pathway planning as personal advisors themselves focus on the practical priorities.

The National Leaving Care Advisory Service's own research reveals that in many cases, the health needs of care leavers are not specifically identified in their pathway plan. Equally, reviews of the mental-health needs of care leavers are extremely patchy. Given the vulnerability of these young people and the disproportionate number of young people from a care background with mental-health problems, local authorities should re-examine their policies and procedures to ensure these needs are adequately addressed.

Health history is an important part of a young person's identity. Local authorities should ensure that young people have a comprehensive health assessment and that their health records are a central part of their pathway planning and preparation. Young people frequently miss out on personal and social education because of disrupted schooling. Local authorities should ensure that they have access to information about healthy living, sexual health, sexuality, mental health and that the different cultural health needs of young people from minority ethnic communities are addressed. Young people with disabilities should have access to mainstream healthcare services as well as any specialist services they need. No young person should be allowed to leave care unless they are registered with a doctor, dentist and optician.

Ensuring young people have the necessary emotional support through and as they leave care is key to their being successful in other aspects of their lives. The National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Fostering Network want to see local authorities properly addressing the health and emotional wellbeing of the young people in their care. In addition, we would like to see delivery on the commitment in the National Service Framework for children, young people and maternity services for improved access to adolescent mental health services. We further believe that local authorities should ensure they have a joined-up approach whereby services work alongside each other in partnership, putting the needs of young people first.

Throughcare for particular groups

There are a number of groups of young people who are likely to need additional and sometimes quite specialist support if they are going to be able to make a successful transition to adult life.

There has been notoriously little research on the experiences and needs of disabled young people leaving care. Yet it is estimated that of the 360,000 disabled children in the UK, 46,000 are 'looked after'¹⁸. For children and young people with special needs or a disability, a joined-up approach from the local authority, focused on the needs of the young person, is all the more vital if they are to get the support they need to make as successful transition to adult life.

Care-experienced young parents often receive less consistent emotional and practical support than their peers. Targeted approaches are needed to enable them to become successful parents. Young people must have appropriate sex education from carers and workers when still in care to enable them to make informed decisions about becoming parents. The role of fatherhood needs to be addressed whilst they

¹⁸ Companion to Leaving Care (Edited by Ann Wheal 2002)

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are in care as looked-after young men are more likely to become fathers than their peers too.

There has been considerable research documenting the high number of some ethnic minority young people in care. Recent research found that whilst there were many similarities in the needs of different ethnic groups, there were considerable differences in care experiences and outcomes upon leaving care. Asian and African young people tended to have better outcomes in the research and white, mixed-parentage and Caribbean young people had the worst outcomes. As well as many general recommendations, the research called for improvements in relations with community-based organisations that could provide additional support to ethnic minority young people and called for services to ensure that young people's racial and ethnic identity is positively reinforced¹⁹.

Research by the Youth Justice Board from May 2005 found that 40-49% of young people in custody had had some experience in the care system²⁰. In 2005, the Caerphilly judgement highlighted other shortfalls which service providers need to be aware of. In particular, the case highlighted many general issues around good care planning many of which are particularly important when dealing with young people in the criminal justice system. The Youth Justice Board also suggests that not meeting their post-custody accommodation needs can cause particular difficulties for these young people upon release from custody. These difficulties are also reflected in homelessness statistics.

In April 2004 there were around 6,500 unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people in the care of social services in the UK. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people in England have many of the same legal entitlements as other young people, including under the Children Act 1989 and the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. However, they face difficulties too, including; emotional issues such as mental health problems, bereavement, separation from family and friends; practical problems such as poor housing and not speaking English; discrimination and racism; and uncertainty about immigration status. Providing them with advice and information about the legal system and any local support groups, or networks can facilitate their transition from care.

These additional pressures make the task of successful transition to adult life all the more challenging. The care and support these groups of young people receive from their local authority and their carers as they move through the care system can make the difference. The National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Fostering Network want support improved for these groups and believe more integrated services, working around the needs of young people, (rather than expecting young people to find their own way around a complicated myriad of services) would make a big difference.

Participation of young people

Participation is a right for young people just as much as it is for adults²¹. Young people are much more likely to lead fulfilling lives in which they meet the Every Child Matters criteria if they have had a meaningful say in the decisions that affect them

¹⁹ Life After Care (Ravinder Barn, Linda Andrew & Nadia Mantovani, 2005)

²⁰ Sustainable Accommodation (Youth Justice Board, May 2005). See also Caerphilly Judgement (2005)

²¹ UNHCR, Human Rights Act S.22 (4)

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whilst in care and during the transition to adulthood. However, this has to be balanced with parental duties to protect and look after young people. The Every Child Matters criteria, 'being healthy' and 'staying safe', remain key concerns for most parents as their children grow up, even when they're not for young people themselves. So care plans and support services need to find that balance. However, by involving young people in decisions, plans are more likely to meet their needs, and they are more likely to feel empowered rather than disenfranchised by the process of being in and leaving care.

Rather than being a costly add-on, ensuring young people are properly involved in the process both of care planning and preparation for leaving care is also value for money; placements are less likely to break down and care plans are more likely to be adhered to. In addition, reviews will be more accurate and honest, meaning that changes can be planned in advance rather than in a rush during an unanticipated crisis. Young people's relationships with local-authority staff are also likely to be better and young people are more likely to attend appointments, making the services provided more successful.

The key to successfully involving young people in their care planning is to start early – ideally when a child or young person is first placed in care. Have they been given a choice of placement? Have they had the chance to visit their foster family before moving? Are their views and concerns acted upon? When leaving care, are young people fully and actively involved in the planning and preparation for leaving care? Are services working around the aspirations of young people or are young people expected to tailor their aspirations around available services?

It can be hard for local authorities and practitioners working with young people to change the way in which they work. A commitment from management and additional support and training are crucial to enabling these necessary changes to take place.

Conclusion: Using throughcare to be a good corporate parent

The quality of throughcare and aftercare services for young people leaving care across England is extremely varied. The National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Fostering Network want those areas of the country where poor provision currently fails young people in their care to take urgent action to learn from good practice elsewhere. Why is it, for example, that young people in some areas are expected to set up a house independently before they reach the age of 18 and with an allowance of less than £300 to do so?

Policy makers and service providers need to take their responsibilities as corporate parents more seriously. Legislation can only do so much and its spirit, "would this be good enough for my child?" is being forgotten. If we are really to make all children and young people 'matter', the National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Fostering Network want to see:

- Local authorities taking their role as corporate parents in the spirit it was intended in legislation and making decisions only after thinking, "would this be good enough for my child?"

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- No young people leaving care until they are ready and properly prepared for the transition and have contingency plans if things don't work out.
- Full and meaningful involvement of young people in the process of preparing and planning for leaving care during the time they are in care.
- Continuity and stability being key considerations in all decisions about a young person's support, education and living situation.
- Young people supported so that they are not forced to choose between moving to independent living and their education and training ambitions.
- Young people supported to stay in foster care placements whilst they are in education or training.
- No young people in unsupported accommodation and no young people living independently without the practical and emotional skills to make the move successfully.
- Services responding to the needs and availabilities of young people rather than an expectation on young people to fit around bureaucratic systems.
- Better integrated services that improve opportunities for all children and young people in and leaving care, particularly for disabled young people, young parents, young people in custody and unaccompanied asylum seeking young people.
- More challenges to local authorities who let down the young people in their care, if necessary leading to further rulings as happened in Caerphilly and Hillingdon.

Whilst some of these may place additional financial pressures on stretched local authority budgets, most are more about finding different ways of working that prioritise corporate parenting responsibilities. By embracing the concept of throughcare, local authorities can be better parents and give young people leaving care a better start to adult life.

Information & further reading on throughcare

Over the next two years an ESF EQUAL funded project, *What Makes the Difference?* aims to understand and help overcome the problems that lead to poor education, training and employment outcomes for many young people leaving care. It will be looking specifically at best practice across leaving care. The National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Fostering Network believe the outcomes of this project could indeed be the way in which the futures of care leavers are made more secure.

- National Leaving Care Advisory Service www.nlcas.org
- The Fostering Network www.thefostering.net
- Department for Education and Skills www.dfes.gov.uk
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation www.jrf.org.uk
- Social Policy Research Unit at York University www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru

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- Social Exclusion Unit www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk
- A National Voice www.anationalvoice.org
- Voice (formerly Voice for the Child in Care) www.vcc-uk.org
- Commission for Social Care Inspection www.csci.org.uk
- Scottish Throughcare & Aftercare Forum www.scottishthroughcare.org.uk
- North West Aftercare Forum www.nwacf.com
- NCH, the Children's Charity www.nch.org.uk
- National Children's Bureau www.ncb.org.uk
- Community Care Magazine www.communitycare.co.uk
- Young People Now Magazine www.ypnmagazine.com
- Children Now Magazine www.childrennow.co.uk

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