

Executive Summary of Youth Matters Response from the National Leaving Care Advisory Service

The National Leaving Care Advisory Service is the only service with a national remit to promote and influence policy and practice in relation to young people leaving the care of local authorities. The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum is the only national network of local authorities on leaving care.

- We welcome the Green Paper and the commitment to narrowing the gap between young people who do well and those who do not. However, we are concerned at lack of focus on care leavers and looked after children as improving support for these groups is key to narrowing the gap.
- We are extremely concerned about the arbitrary age limit of 19 and would prefer to see services and support for young people provided according to their needs.
- We are concerned that the proposals in the Green Paper could further exacerbate ‘territorial injustices¹’. The needs of all young people, especially the most vulnerable, should be addressed and the Government should ensure that opportunities are truly open to all young people.
- We have a number of concerns around Opportunity Cards relating to the capital and running costs, the cards being used as a form of punishment and that the cards could divert resources from concrete activities and opportunities for young people.
- We welcome the Opportunity Fund as a chance to increase provision for young people however we have concerns about the size of the capital budget. We would also like to see the Government taking specific steps to ensure harder to reach young people are encouraged to get involved and that the cost of transport to access activities receives specific attention.
- The Government should take steps to ensure that care leavers and looked after children are not excluded from the benefits of volunteering.
- We support the idea of young people receiving IAG based on their needs rather than via various service providers and we welcome the proposal that there be minimum standards. However, the Government must ensure that care leavers and looked after children get the same support and advice through their corporate parents as other young people have through their families. We also would like to see the Government look at the costs of accessing IAG, particularly via mobile phone technology.

¹ Mike Stein; (1999), ‘Leaving care: reflections and challenges’, in Stevenson O (ed.) *Child Welfare in the UK*, Oxford: Blackwell.

- Regarding integrated services we have a number of concerns and would urge the Government to ensure leaving care teams have their role as corporate parents properly protected. We would also like to see improved co-ordination between children and adult services.
- There are a number of issues missing from the Green Paper including; accommodation needs of young people, the role of corporate parents, details of what funding will be available to support new proposals and how the most vulnerable young people can be better supported.

Response to the Youth Matters Consultation from the National Leaving Care Advisory Service

The vision of the National Leaving Care Advisory Service is that all young people leaving care will have an equal opportunity to achieve their potential and to participate fully in society. It is the only service with a national remit to promote and influence policy and practice in relation to young people leaving the care of local authorities.

Although the implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 has resulted in significant improvements in the treatment of young people leaving care, outcomes for care leavers (in terms of each of the five Every Child Matters outcomes) continue to remain stubbornly behind those of other young people.

The National Leaving Care Advisory Service (NLCAS) has four main objectives:

1. Advise, inform and influence policies and priorities around leaving care.
2. Advise, assist and inform local authorities and other providers of services to looked after children and care leavers.
3. Promote and enable the participation of young people in the services they receive.
4. Work alongside statutory and voluntary agencies to ensure that looked after children are better prepared for adult life.

Benchmarking Forum of 35 Local Authorities

The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum has existed since 2000 and is facilitated by the National Leaving Care Advisory Service. It is the only national network of local authorities on leaving care. Its aim is to benchmark services to young people leaving care with a view to promoting and supporting good practice in member authorities. There are currently 35 members, most of whom have been members since 2000.

This response is being made jointly by the National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Benchmarking Forum

General

The National Leaving Care Advisory Service welcomes the publication of the Youth Green Paper and the focus it gives to the needs of young people. In preparation for this response, the National Leaving Care Advisory Service has consulted widely with local authorities through the Benchmarking forum and more generally through our website. This submission incorporates the views we have received as part of this consultation. Given the remit of the National Leaving Care Advisory Service, the focus of our response is around the particular issues facing young people leaving care and how the proposals in Youth Matters could impact upon them. Whilst care leavers are a relatively small group (each year around 6,000 young people leave the direct care of a local authority), they are disproportionately over-represented in other vulnerable groups including: homeless young people, young parents, young people dependent on drugs or alcohol or young offenders.

The National Leaving Care Advisory Service warmly welcomes the commitment in the Green Paper to narrowing the gap between those young people who do well and those who do not. We also welcome the acknowledgement that there is a minority of young people that faces serious or multiple problems. Given these facts, we are extremely concerned that there is no specific mention of the needs of care leavers at all in Youth Matters. Looked after children are mentioned just once and care leavers receive no mention at all.

We believe that if the Government is serious in its aim of narrowing the gap between those young people who do well and those that do not, care leavers and other vulnerable groups of young people, including those with multiple problems, will need increased focus in terms of both effort and resources.

Gap is currently widening not narrowing

We are particularly concerned that the gap between those young people that do well and those that do not continues to widen. In terms of education outcomes, improvements have been made in many areas but the gap is still widening. Despite a number of PSA targets around education, training and employment for looked after children and care leavers, outcomes remain bleak. In 2004, less than 50% of care leavers gained even one GNVQ or GCSE grade A-G². Disruption to education and pressures to live independently much earlier and more abruptly than other young people should be better acknowledged alongside the fact that this may lead to educational delays and care leavers taking qualifications later than other young people.

² DFES Statistics

The Government will not achieve its aim of reducing inequality without further targeting of support for care leavers and other groups of vulnerable young people. The ESF EQUAL *What Makes The Difference?*³ Project should be closely monitored by the Government for its recommendations for improving outcomes for care leavers.

Age limit of 19

We are extremely concerned that the Green Paper operates around a cut-off age of 19. The average age for most young people leaving the family home is 21, and many return home before leaving permanently (demographic studies suggest that the average age for leaving home permanently is between 25 and 29). For care leavers, the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 was amended in its passage through Parliament to increase the age until which local authorities have duties and responsibilities towards care leavers to 21 (and higher, for those still in education). The national minimum wage has a separate rate for 16 and 17 year olds, a developmental rate until age 21 and the full rate doesn't apply until age 22. Other organisations involving young people, including the youth wings of political parties, also have a much larger age range.

By introducing new legislation with a somewhat arbitrary age limit of 19, care leavers would be further set apart and other young people could find themselves missing out. More vulnerable young people are likely to be the ones that miss out most from an age 19 cut-off both in terms of targeted support and access to advice and opportunities. We would therefore urge the Government to base the cut-off age for services and support around the needs of an individual young person with a cut-off of 21 (as for most care leavers) or higher, if circumstances (such as education) require it.

Avoiding a lottery of support

There is a postcode lottery of support for care leavers, which have been referred to in research as 'territorial injustice'⁴. We are therefore concerned that many of the proposals in the Green Paper could further exacerbate differences in levels of support and opportunities. Care leavers and other vulnerable groups of young people will therefore need to be particularly targeted for new opportunities, activities, and advice and information to avoid increasing inequalities.

As corporate parents, local authorities should ensure that care leavers get the same access to opportunities as other young people and should facilitate the steps that a young person wants to take, such as taking up activities, volunteering, etc. The Government should ensure that the needs of all young people, especially the most vulnerable, are properly addressed and that opportunities are truly open to all young people.

³ What Makes the Difference is an ESF EQUAL funded project that aims to understand and help overcome the issues that lead to poor education, training and employment outcomes for young people leaving care in England and Wales. The project will run until December 2007. WMTD has secured £3.5 million of funding to achieve its aims.

⁴ Mike Stein; (1999), 'Leaving care: reflections and challenges', in Stevenson O (ed.) *Child Welfare in the UK*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Measures to empower young people

- **Opportunity Cards**

We agree that young people should have the opportunity to take part in a range of activities and that provision of activities is currently patchy and of a varying quality. However, we do have a number of concerns about some of the proposals, most notably, Opportunity Cards. The capital and running costs of setting up and administering an opportunity card scheme is likely to be extremely high. Rather than investing in a complicated IT project, the Government could have a much more significant impact for the same investment if it concentrated on the opportunities and activities themselves or on transport to enable young people to access existing provision.

Secondly, we are concerned about Opportunity Cards being removed from young people as a form of punishment. Care leavers are disproportionately represented in the prison population and whilst in care are three times more likely to be cautioned or convicted than their peers⁵. The Green Paper itself acknowledges that involvement in positive activities can prevent young people being drawn into anti-social behaviour and crime. Other Ministers have also acknowledged this (DCMS press releases 2002 and 2003). We believe that the removal of a card that gives them access to activities could take young people further down the path towards criminal behaviour. We would urge the Government to remove this punitive measure if it pursues the idea of opportunity cards further.

Finally we are not convinced that there is evidence that opportunity cards are either wanted or needed. We are concerned at the lack of research evidence in the Green Paper backing the idea. We are, however, firmly convinced that there is currently a lack of actual opportunities and would urge the Government to divert investment from opportunity cards into opportunities funds and concrete activities for young people in their local areas.

- **Opportunity Funds**

The Opportunity Fund is a real chance to increase the provision of opportunities and activities for young people. We welcome the proposal that young people themselves will be able to take the decisions about how the funds are spent in different areas. However, we are concerned that a £40 million capital budget will not make a significant impact on opportunities and places for young people to go and amounts to only around £100,000 for each local authority in England.

As with opportunity cards, we want reassurance that the funds will be distributed fairly, not only nationally, but also within areas so that care leavers and other groups of vulnerable young people that do not have access to activities at present get targeted support. There is a risk with the Opportunity Funds that the same groups of young people will continue to get involved and make decisions.

⁵ Department of Health Statistics 2003

We would like to see the Government taking specific steps to encourage harder to reach young people to get involved so that resources go where they are most needed.

One real problem faced by care leavers and other vulnerable young people in non-urban areas is transport to access activities. We would urge the Government to look at how to ensure that care leavers and other vulnerable young people in rural areas are not further disadvantaged because of transport costs.

- **Opportunities to volunteer**

We welcome the commitment to the implementation of the Russell Commission recommendations. Whilst there should be some acknowledgment of the pressures young people leaving care are already under, care leavers must not be excluded from the benefits of volunteering. The Government needs to ensure that care leavers and other groups of more vulnerable young people who do not traditionally volunteer are specifically targeted and the necessary support provided to enable them to benefit. Building opportunities for care leavers to volunteer could be extremely successful.

Information, advice and guidance

Through the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, care leavers have the right to advice, guidance and support until the age of 21 (or higher, if in education or training). We support the idea that young people should get IAG based on their needs rather than via various service providers. By devolving funding in this way, the Government will provide local authorities with the opportunity to ensure that young people in the care system and leaving care have a constant source of advice and are not passed from one service to another as they move through the care system.

We welcome the proposal that there be minimum standards of IAG for young people. However, the proposals in the Green Paper are weighted towards young people in a stable family setting and in stable schooling. Care leavers and children in the care system are much more likely to have their education disrupted or to have frequent moves from school to school. Provision should be made to ensure that young people who experience frequent school moves are specifically targeted to ensure they don't miss out and that those who are disengaged or absent from school or college are not prevented from accessing IAG. We welcome the investment to test the success of personally negotiated agreements in re-engaging 16/17 year olds who are outside learning or work.

Whilst we recognise the role parents have to play in providing IAG, young people in or leaving care must be entitled to the same levels of support from their corporate parents. The corporate parenting role can be complex, involving foster carers, social workers, personal advisors, youth workers and others. Nevertheless, the Government must ensure that care leavers and looked after children get the same support and advice through their corporate parents as other young people have through their families.

Young people are big users of mobile phone technology. For young people leaving care in particular they can be an important lifeline. However, making calls, even to freephone lines can be expensive from a mobile. The Government should work with mobile network providers to ensure that calls to help and advice lines for young people are exempt from network charges.

The Government must also ensure that targeted support for IAG for young people in and leaving care is protected and cannot be used for mainstream services.

In addition, as mentioned above, the cut-off age of 19 is arbitrary. We would urge the Government to adopt a flexible upper age limit that responds to the needs of the young person.

Integrated Services

Again, the concept of a lead professional is already a familiar one for care leavers through personal advisors, and the development of the role in integrated services may be something that the National Leaving Care benchmarking forum of local authorities could advise on.

We are concerned however that there is no detail in the Green Paper as to how leaving care teams will fit within integrated youth services. We would have concerns about the integration of leaving care services into general youth services because of the impact it could have on the concept of corporate parenting. Leaving care teams must be protected in order to enable them to fulfil their parenting role properly. We would further urge the Government to consider the re-introduction of ring-fenced funding for leaving care services to ensure they are properly resourced.

We welcome the acknowledgment in the Green Paper of the important link between young people's physical and mental health and their ability to learn and achieve. However, in the Green Paper, health is only discussed in the context of IAG. We would argue that if integrated services for young people are to be truly effective, health services for young people should be incorporated too.

As regards other services for young people, we strongly support the idea of integration to ensure better access to the support that is available. Looked after children and care leavers must also be able to access universal services in the same way as other young people and their corporate parents should ensure they are aware of the services available to them. The Government should also consider establishing specific standards to ensure care leavers and other vulnerable groups of young people get proper access integrated youth services.

There is a lack of co-ordination between children's and adult services at present. For care leavers this lack of co-ordination can be between looked after children services, care leaving services and adult services. This can be a particular problem for young

people with particular needs – special educational needs, disabilities, etc. – and can be particularly problematic during the transition from one service to the other. The Government should also look at how these services could be better co-ordinated, keeping the needs of young people at the forefront of service provision.

Missing from the Green Paper

In addition to a lack of focus on the needs of care leavers, looked after children and other vulnerable young people, there are significant omissions from the Green Paper which we're keen to highlight as they have a considerable impact on these groups.

- **Accommodation needs**

There is no significant mention of housing issues at all in the Green Paper. Yet the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 imposes a duty on local authorities to ensure "suitable accommodation" for care leavers, and one of the five Every Child Matters criteria is to ensure that all children can 'stay safe'. This is a key issue for care leavers and looked after children. All young people should be entitled to a home and not just a roof over their heads. Yet for many care leavers this is far from being a reality. Care leavers are still frequently given unsuitable housing placements with no support and many looked after children have frequent placement moves, often without any consultation with them. We would urge the Government to ensure that all young people have their accommodation needs protected and that service providers are aware of the rights of young people in or leaving their care.

We urge the Government to ensure that all young care leavers and other vulnerable young people get accommodation that suits their needs such as supported lodgings, bed and breakfasts with support, hostels with support, supported accommodation and independent units with support. The Government must also ensure that the private rented sector meets standards required of the social sector and that support is available to young people in private rented accommodation too. Housing authorities should be made aware of their own role within the corporate parenting role for care leavers.

- **Role of corporate parents**

Given the lack of focus on care leavers or looked after children in the Green Paper, the Government should ensure that new powers and rights conferred on parents generally are also clearly defined for corporate parents.

- **Funding**

The Government's vision and principles within the Green Paper are to be warmly welcomed, and the National Leaving Care Advisory Service and the Benchmarking Forum look forward to being able to support new improvements. However, we are concerned that there is not enough detail about how the Government's aims are to be achieved, most notably the aim of closing the gap between those young people who do well and those that do not. Unless funding priority is given to providing support

for the groups of the most vulnerable young people to access opportunities and activities there is a real risk that such groups could fall further behind.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to input our views in the Youth Matters consultation. The Green Paper is a real opportunity for the Government to deliver on the principle of narrowing the current gap in outcomes for young people and giving every young person the opportunity to achieve their full potential through, being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic wellbeing.

Yours sincerely

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