

## Factors that influence young people leaving care

This study examined the factors that help and hinder care leavers' transitions to independent living and their involvement in education, training or employment. Based on interviews with 36 young care leavers, it looked at their current and previous economic circumstances and activities, their support networks, and the factors that affected their career options after 16, such as housing needs, substance abuse and debt. The key issues that emerged from the research were:

-  Few young people did well at school. Their educational achievement was hindered by: disruption to schooling before being taken into care; frequent changes of school once in care; concerns about events at home; negative or discouraging attitudes of peers, care staff and teachers; and lack of motivation and confidence arising out of low achievement.
-  Financial concerns often deterred young people from continuing with or revisiting their education, although such concerns were sometimes due to a misunderstanding of benefit entitlements.
-  Young people who had a stable care history or who were able to achieve some stability in their personal circumstances on leaving care were more likely to enter and remain in employment, training or study.
-  Professional and informal support was crucial to the young person's success. The care leavers benefited from help, usually from professionals, with developing and pursuing career options. Emotional encouragement, often from family and substitute family members, helped young people to stay engaged with what they were doing.
-  Young people also required support with practical aspects of independent living. Where young people did not receive this support, the issues they had to contend with - such as substance abuse, relationship breakdown, or moving home - could tip the balance against them remaining in their work, training or education.
-  Particular issues were associated with the rural nature of the study area, including the dispersion of the young people's support networks and transport and financial barriers to visiting people in their network. The area also yielded limited training and employment opportunities.
-  Despite the obstacles that they faced, the care leavers demonstrated considerable resilience and determination in overcoming them. Although not all succeeded, a considerable number continued to strive to achieve their ambitions and aspirations

## Background

Research by the Social Exclusion Unit has shown that young people leaving care are less likely to be involved in education, training or employment and are more vulnerable to social exclusion in later life. As practitioners working with care leavers, the research team sought to examine how young people's chances could be improved by looking at the factors that enhance and hinder their transition to economic independence.

## Care history

Young people who enjoyed a relatively stable experience in care were more likely to be settled after 16. Important factors that affected their care experience included: the age they entered care and the reasons that brought them there; and the number and type of placements they experienced. Young people on care orders were least likely to be engaged in any economic activity. Care experience affected the young people's ability to build and maintain significant relationships, their education, and their attitudes and self-esteem.

## Educational achievement

The young person's care experience also had an impact on their educational achievement. The majority of young people entered care aged 14, just before they started GCSE courses. Because of their disrupted childhoods, a number of young people were already struggling with their schoolwork when they entered care. In some cases, frequent moves to new placements also required moves to a new school. This left young people struggling to keep up because schools followed different curricula. Getting behind in their work also undermined young people's motivation and self-confidence. This had a bearing on their educational achievement; most young people left school with few or no qualifications.

## Financial worries

Young people were deterred from continuing with their education or undertaking training by concerns about how they would support themselves during that time. Training and benefit allowances reflect an expectation that a young person will be living in the parental home, without the costs associated with independent living. Although young people could find part-time work to supplement their income they

were discouraged from doing so because of the complicated rules on housing benefit. The interviews also revealed that a number of young people were poorly informed about their entitlement to benefits as care leavers.

## Informal and professional support

Both professional and informal support were crucial in enabling young people to overcome the difficulties arising out of their childhood experiences and current circumstances in order to enter and remain engaged in employment, training or education. Young people benefited from help in finding out about their career options, developing plans and accessing opportunities. Professionals were best placed to provide this type of support, notably those professionals, such as Lifeskills mentors and New Deal Advisers, who had long-term, consistent engagement with the young person. Help was also obtained from careers advisers, teachers and others close to the young person.

Young people who had emotional support fared better. This type of support ranged from: encouragement to apply for jobs or training; exhortation to stick at what they were doing; someone who was available when so much else in their lives was changing. Young people who had a history of being moved on were most in need of this type of support because they were most likely to drop out when life became challenging. In general, emotional support was provided by family - or substitute family - members, but some young people found this type of help from 'befriending' professionals, such as sessional workers, who did not have the statutory duties that the interviewees associated with social workers.

Young people also benefited from help with the transition from being 'cared for' to caring for themselves, for example, managing their budgets and 'keeping house'. Family or substitute family members often provided the practical assistance young people needed, such as an evening meal or help with the laundry, although in some cases a landlady or significant other provided the bridge into young adulthood. Ex-foster carers were also an important source of support, often some time after the young person had left care and even where the young person had little initial contact with the foster carer.

### *When professionals helped*

Professionals were rated by young people: when they had a long-term or well-established relationship with the care leaver; when the professional provided informal or befriending support or support that reflected the care leaver's new 'young adult' status; and when the help the young person needed was flexible and tailored to their circumstances.

### **Living circumstances**

The circumstances surrounding the care leaver's transition to independence played a significant part in influencing his or her success. Being in settled circumstances after 16, such as accommodation, relationships and health, was associated with the likelihood of being in paid work or training schemes. Young people in secure accommodation - ideally living with family members, in a substitute family structure, or in supported housing - were more likely to enter and remain engaged in their chosen activity. Young people who had to cope with difficult issues and a significant amount of change after care struggled to stay in work or continue with a course of study. Factors that affected them included: substance abuse; ill-health; the breakdown of friendships and relationships; bereavement; and frequent house moves. Young people were more likely to be able to ride out these difficulties when they had the support of a significant other available to them.

### **Parenthood**

Young mothers in the group struggled with the same issues as the rest of the sample, but in some cases these worries were greater. For example, they were particularly concerned about their financial responsibilities and the effect of work on their benefit entitlements. They also faced additional challenges. Mothers were deterred from obtaining work or developing their skills and education because of difficulties obtaining childcare and problems of travelling out of rural areas to take up employment and training opportunities. Their concerns about being a good mother and looking after their children also encouraged young mothers to delay continuing with their education or pursuing career goals until the child was older. Despite these issues the young mothers tended to show greater maturity than their peers and were moving more rapidly towards an 'independent' adult status.

### **Problems associated with a rural area**

The size and sparsely populated nature of the study area created a number of problems. As was the case for the mothers, opportunities in rural areas were limited. Taking up opportunities could involve moving away from vital support networks. When the young people were in care, subsequent placements were often some distance from a home area and young people found it difficult to maintain contact with friends and family. The size of the authority also made it difficult to ensure young people continued at the same school when placements broke down.

### **Attitudes and motivation**

Care leavers' self-reliance and attitudes to themselves were important factors in helping them to achieve a successful young adulthood. Attitudes to education were also important. These underwent a shift after leaving care when young people were exposed to the difficulties of obtaining reasonably paid work with few qualifications. Many of the care leavers expressed regret that they had not fared better at school and, in some cases, a desire to continue with their education in order to improve their future prospects.

### **Success in the face of adversity**

In view of the adverse circumstances of their childhood, and in some cases, their experience in care, many of the young people showed remarkable resilience and success in the transition to young adulthood. Faced with many more obstacles than their peers from stable backgrounds, they overcame financial difficulties, substance abuse, relationship breakdown and ill-health at the same time as they sought to find and hold on to settled housing, establish themselves in a new work or educational environment and 'keep house' for the first time.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

While some young people succeeded, others struggled under the challenges and responsibilities they faced on leaving care. The findings point to a number of areas where developments in policy and practice may enhance care leavers' likelihood of a successful transition to young adulthood, these include:

- Improving the professional support available to young people, for example, by making it more

appropriate to the care leaver's new, young adult status; by making it flexible and tailored to the young person's needs, and ensuring it is provided by a few professionals who are a consistent presence in the young person's life.

- Ensuring that support offered by Employment and Careers/Connexions services meets the particular needs of care leavers, for example, by allowing for the impact of living independently for the first time on the young person's engagement with their economic activities and ensuring support is available to help them through the transition to independence.
- Facilitating the development of young people's informal support networks.
- Tackling the numerous financial barriers to training and education, including barriers to resuming a basic education in later life or engaging with further study.
- Helping young people to be informed about and to access the range of benefits and support available to them on leaving care.
- Minimising disruption to the young person's education while in care and maximising their involvement while at school by ensuring schools follow the same curriculum; by helping a new pupil catch up with classmates; and by exploring new initiatives such as learning mentors.
- Developing strategies to address financial and practical issues arising out of living in a sparsely populated, rural area, including: young people's difficulties in keeping in touch with people when moved to new placements; the lack of local opportunities; and poor transport links.
- Developing support that tackles young people's emotional and behavioural problems before they become entrenched and enabling young people to build on the considerable resilience and self-determination they demonstrate both during and after care.

## About the project

The research was carried out by Maggie Allen of the North Yorkshire County Council Social Services Directorate. It took place before the implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and involved thirty-six young people who had left the care of a large, rural shire local authority between three months and two years previously. They were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule that explored their social networks, past and current economic and social circumstances and their plans for the future. One year later, between June and September 2001, twenty-one young people were interviewed for a second time by the same interviewer. The analysis also incorporated information from Social Services computer records, obtained with the young person's consent. This gave details on issues such as the age of entering and leaving care and the number and type of placements.

## How to get further information

The full report, **Into the mainstream: Care leavers entering work, education and training** by Maggie Allen, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 84263 079 2, price £13.95).