

Giving care leavers more control over their futures

Care leavers' transitions into learning and work.
The role of the Personal Adviser and the process
of Pathway Planning

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FOREWORD

NIACE carried out this piece of work to assess the impact of Pathway Planning and the support of Personal Advisers on care leavers' routes into learning and work. We were keen to carry out this piece of work as care leavers' access to education has been a cause for concern to us for many years. Young people who have been in public care struggle to achieve at school due to their circumstances. They need holistic and informed guidance when making choices about education and training, and employment routes.

NIACE is calling for all local authorities to develop good practice in planning for education, employment and training as part of the Pathway Planning process 16 – 18 and beyond, and for them to make a commitment to the establishment of trained Personal Advisers who are up to date with what's available locally in terms of learning and work opportunities. We believe that professional information, advice and guidance should be available to all care leavers, through trained Personal Advisers, to holistically support these young people to make informed choices about their futures.

NIACE recommends the development of a framework and resources to enable Personal Advisers to do this, supported by examples of good practice to enable all local authorities to develop an effective strategic approach to planning for learning and/or work.

Carol Taylor OBE
Deputy Chief Executive
NIACE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction – The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has been funded by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to research the impact of Pathway Planning and the support of local authority Personal Advisers (PA) on care leavers' access to and engagement with learning and/or work at transition stage ages 16 – 18 and up to 25.

The research took the form of national surveys, face to face and semi structured telephone interviews and care leaver focus groups. In addition, examples of broader good practice in supporting care leavers into education and/or work were collected.

Key findings – The 3 key findings for each of the main topics are summarised below together with recommendations of how these could be addressed. By addressing the recommendations below NIACE believes that:

- Care leavers' opportunities to make the right initial choices for education and work and remaining in education and/or work will be greatly enhanced
- Care leavers will be better informed about learning and work opportunities that exist locally
- The role of the Personal Adviser will be professionalised
- Pathway Planning for education and work that is holistic, tailored and emotionally supportive can be developed and promoted locally and nationally in a consistent way.
- Care leavers will be at the centre of the Pathway Planning process, able to take full part and recognise the Pathway Plan as their contract with the local authority to access the practical and financial support they are entitled to

Personal Advisers

1. Not all PAs are up to date with information on routes into work, learning opportunities and services available to support care leavers at this crucial transition stage. PAs agree that they need access to information and training on all of the above.

Recommendation : Statutory guidance to state that PAs receive regular training on routes into work and learning, opportunities to work and learn and local services available that can support this. This should be addressed at a strategic level through partnerships between local authority leaving care teams, JCP, National Careers Service, education providers and specialist IAG advisers and could be provided by local authorities or any of the aforementioned external services.

2. The provision of expert information, advice and guidance only happens when ex Connexions staff are in place. However, in many cases these staff are not formally included in Pathway Planning processes and are not always consulted by the local authority Personal Advisers.

Recommendation: The Ofsted Single Inspection Framework to include a paragraph that requires local authorities to demonstrate the provision of high quality information, advice and guidance through transition stages and Pathway Planning.

3. Care leavers and PAs agree that the ideal package for a PA is a minimum level 3 qualification in information, advice and guidance, previous experience of supporting care leavers, an in depth understanding of the issues impacting on care leavers' lives and a professional approach.

Recommendation: Statutory guidance to recommend that PAs be working towards/or be qualified to a minimum standard of Level 3 in information, advice and guidance. Local authorities to require experience of working with care leavers previously and an understanding of the issues impacting on care leavers' lives as part of recruitment activity.

Pathway Planning

1. Care leavers see Pathway Planning as a process that is done to them rather than one that they fully participate in, that is for their benefit.

Recommendation: A national framework and resources to be developed for effective Pathway Planning for education and work that is adaptable to the needs of individual care leavers. Guidance for local authorities about how to ensure care leavers are at the centre of its development.

2. Care leavers feel particularly vulnerable and disempowered during the Pathway Planning process and say there is a lack of emotional support available to them throughout the process.

Recommendation: A national curriculum framework and resources to be developed on emotional intelligence and managing emotional trauma tailored to care leavers specific needs and experiences.

3. Personal advisers agree that many care leavers are not emotionally and practically prepared to make choices about work and learning at 16 – 18 and that they require targeted preparation and support, over a period of time, to understand their options and make informed decisions.

Recommendation: Local authorities to take the strategic lead in planning and securing the delivery of targeted support and learning provision, such as short courses that are designed to enable care leavers to make smooth and positive transitions into independence. This should involve working in partnership with key local stakeholders, such as FE colleges, adult and community learning providers and specialist third sector agencies. The most important skills to develop include a range of lifeskills, such as budgeting and financial management, self care and living skills,

managing relationships, physical and mental health, time management, managing tenancy and accommodation, building self confidence and emotional intelligence.

A strategic partnership approach

1. There are many positive examples of local authorities and local services coming together to support care leavers into work and learning.

Recommendation: Develop and nationally disseminate a resource that identifies the key elements of local strategic approaches that achieve positive outcomes in enabling care leavers to make effective transitions into learning and/or work, supported by a series of case studies

Conclusion: Care leavers are individual young people with individual experiences of life. They have one thing in common - they are growing up in the care of a local authority, where local authorities are often referred to as a 'good enough' parent. It is the duty of every Local Authority to do everything in their power to ensure that each care leaver makes the best individual choices about education and work.

A holistic approach to Pathway Planning and consistent, professional support from a known and trusted Personal Adviser will improve the chances of care leavers having a positive experience of learning and work, giving them the best chances in leading a fulfilling adult life. This needs to be led at Director level in local authorities and embedded in a strategic approach that has partnerships with key local services and providers at its core.

SECTION 1.0 – INTRODUCTION

NIACE is the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, the national voice for lifelong learning. We are an internationally respected development organisation and think-tank, working on issues central to the economic renewal of the UK, particularly in the political economy, education and learning, public policy and regeneration fields.

We campaign for the personal, social and economic benefits from lifelong learning, work to improve people's experience of the adult learning and skills system, and fight for all adults to have opportunities throughout their lives to participate in and benefit from learning.

1.1 Aim of this research

The aim of this research is to consider how the process of Pathway Planning and the support of local authority Personal Advisers (PA) impact on care leavers' access to and engagement with learning and/or work at transition stage ages 16 – 18 and up to 25. It will identify the enablers and barriers to how information, advice and guidance are given at the point of transition for the young person in care and make recommendations about how this could be changed to ensure more positive outcomes in terms of learning and work for care leavers.

1.2 Methodology

This paper draws on surveys, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and desk research.

Desk research was undertaken to provide a concise analysis of the policy and context within which personal advisers support young adult carers, the Pathway Planning process and the wider outcomes experienced by care leavers.

Two national surveys were undertaken:

- 27 care leavers responded
- 47 PAs responded

Three focus groups were undertaken - a total of 25 care leavers participated.

Semi-structured interviews were completed with:

- 3 PAs
- 3 care leavers
- 3 specialist education, employment and training advisers

Interviews were conducted either by telephone or face to face. In addition contact was made with a number of local authorities, providers demonstrating a proactive and effective approach to Pathway Planning and supporting care leavers into learning and/or work.

1.3 Context

15.3% of young people in care compared with 58% of their peers not in care, achieve five GCSEs grade A* to C at Key Stage 4 whilst a high proportion (67.8%) have some kind of Special Educational Need, the most common being emotional and behavioural difficulties.¹ Although GCSE results are slowly improving for care leavers, the statistics show that there is still much to be done to make sure that young adults leaving care at 16 – 18 have the best chances of getting into learning and/or work as young adults.

Care leavers often have chaotic life styles, can experience many changes in accommodation and the social care staff responsible for them, and leave school with few qualifications following regular interruptions to school attendance. Over the last few years there has been much work done through policy and practical initiatives to improve care leavers' chances of making the right choices and staying in learning or work.

A cross-departmental Strategy for Young People Leaving Care has been published which requires government departments to consider care leavers as part of all new and existing policies. The right to remain in foster care up to the age of 21 will mean longer term stability for young people living in care. Agencies leading in this area of work - the National Care Advisory Service (NCAS), The Who Cares? Trust, Barnardos, A National Voice, The Care Leavers' Association, The Prince's Trust and NIACE are working to raise awareness of the barriers faced by care leavers in accessing work and/or learning. In May 2014, statutory changes² made it imperative for local authorities to have a Virtual School Head in post who is responsible for and has the power to challenge the educational experience of those young people in the care of that particular local authority.

A number of initiatives have been put in place to The From Care2Work initiative and Quality Mark developed by Catch 22 has increased the number of employers and local authorities working together to provide apprenticeship places for young people leaving care. The introduction of the Buttle UK Quality Mark for FE and HE; the setting up of the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL)

¹ Statistical First Release DfE 11 December 2013

² Improving the adoption system and services for looked after children DfE 1 July 2014
<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/improving-the-adoption-system-and-services-for-looked-after-children/supporting-pages/virtual-school-heads-vsh>

with a focus on care leavers routes into higher education; and financial support in the form of an enhanced Pupil Premium for looked after children (LAC) and adopted children; and an FE and HE Bursary. The publication by BIS of Skills Support for Care Leavers (2014), clearly lays out care leavers' rights, entitlements and possible pathways in terms of education, employment and training. This, alongside publications by NCAS and other key agencies, has helped to increase care leavers' awareness of their rights and choices in terms of education and work.

However, the restructuring of councils, often due to budgetary constraints has meant that the expertise available to provide learning and employment support is much diminished. Information, advice and guidance services, formerly provided by Connexions, has been greatly reduced in most local authority areas. Research³ has shown that 82% of leaving care managers reported this within their council. This has significant implications for PAs in that they either need to have such expertise themselves or they need to be able to refer care leavers to others who can provide this support. At the moment the first point of referral in the absence of an information, advice and guidance service for young people is the National Careers Service. Whilst the National Careers Service has the expertise to provide support and guidance to care leavers, its capacity to be responsive to the individual and often intensive needs of care leavers is limited. In addition, awareness of the National Careers Service and the support it can provide to care leavers is limited due to lack of active promotion of its services.

As clients of social care, care leavers are subject to a broad range of processes and professionals responsible for different aspects of their wellbeing. The way a young person leaving care is supported in terms of education, employment and training is interwoven within the leaving care processes. The following section describes the main elements of this, the Pathway Plan and the role of the PA.

1.4 The Pathway Plan

At age 16 a social worker will refer to the information in a young person's PEP (Personal Education Plan) and overall Care Plan to prepare a Pathway Plan for a young person who might be leaving at 16 (but usually at 18 with the possibility of staying in foster care to 21). At 16 a PA should also be appointed who will take part in the young person's assessment, preparation of and review of the Pathway Plan in negotiation with the care leaver. One of the sections included in the Pathway Plan focuses on plans for education, employment and training. NIACE welcomes the recognition by Ofsted in its single inspection framework⁴ of the importance of the Pathway Planning process in terms of care leavers making a successful transition from care to independence. It names the following broad requirement:

Pathway Planning is effective and plans (including transition planning for looked after children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities) address all young people's needs and are updated as circumstances change. (p.24)

³ Funding Leaving Care, Making the cut: One year on, London: National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, 2012.

⁴ Framework and evaluation schedule for the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers – 3 June 2014 No. 130216

Statutory guidance⁵ is clear about what the Pathway Plan should contain:

Pathway Plans must have an explicit focus on career planning, taking into account the young person's aspirations, skills and educational potential. (para 3.7)

Joint work with the Integrated Youth Services/Connexions and Careers Advisers is vital so that responsible authorities make sure that young people are fully aware of the options and entitlements available to them. Local authorities should use career planning tools to inform young people's Pathway Plans. (para. 5.5)

For care leavers the Pathway Plan is to all intents and purposes their 'contract' with the local authority whose care they are in, signed by themselves and their PA, that enables them to claim financial and practical support for education, employment and training, as well as other things such as accommodation and health and wellbeing

Statutory guidance recommends that the Pathway Plan should be reviewed at least every 6 months. It must be reviewed whenever the care leaver or local authority asks for this to happen and the care leaver should have a copy of the most up to date version, signed by themselves and the PA. Anecdotally, the format of the Pathway Planning form is developed/adapted by individual local authorities to suit the needs of their internal/external processes as well as those of the care leaver. There is not a nationally used standard template for a Pathway Plan, which results in inconsistent and patchy processes across local authorities.

1.5 The role of the PA – the 'golden thread'

Statutory guidance summarises the functions of the PA:

- To provide advice (including practical advice) and support.
- To participate in assessment and preparation of Pathway Plans.
- To participate in the review of the Pathway Plan.
- To liaise with the responsible authority in the implementation of the Pathway Plan.
- To coordinate the provision of services and take reasonable steps so that care leavers make use of services.
- To keep informed about care leavers' progress and wellbeing

Children's Minister , Edward Timpson, in his response to the Education Select Committee (May 2014)⁶, has said that support from a PA should be available up to 25 Existing guidance on PAs has been strengthened to say that local authorities should ensure that all their care leavers are aware of their entitlement to have this support and that those who are experiencing a number of difficulties in their lives

⁵ The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers – Including the Care Leavers England Regulations (2010). – DfE Oct 2010 – implementation 1 April 2011.

⁶ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/education-committee/16-plus-care-options/oral/9572.pdf>

should receive the encouragement and practical support to feel able to return to education or training. In the same response, the Minister implied that the appointment of a PA attempts to address the need for a young person to have continued and consistent support from an adult they can trust and form a positive relationship with – referred to in the Care Inquiry⁷ as the 'golden thread' that should be running through the care system.

Currently the role of PA can be undertaken by somebody specifically employed for this reason by the Local Authority or someone already involved in the care of the young person, e.g. a foster carer or trusted family member.

Statutory guidance recommends that the young person in care has some choice about who their PA is but ultimately it is the decision of the local authority. There are also no specific requirements for a formal qualification to undertake the role of a PA. A care leaver is entitled to the support of a PA up to the age of 21 and if they are in education, or training, up to the age of 25. A care leaver, depending on their status, can return to the local authority after the age of 21 up to the age of 25, if they plan to go back into education or training. In this case a revised Pathway Plan will be drawn up with this aim at its core. A PA will be appointed to do this.

1.6 Research evidence – Pathway Planning

NIACE's research and advocacy work on care leavers⁸ shows that with the right support, many care leavers can and do get into learning and/or work, particularly where the support is tailored and considers the whole young person and not just individual elements of their life experience or need. With local authorities acting as 'good enough' parents, allocating a PA at 18 to provide a range of support that includes helping care leavers to make choices about learning and work, and a background of good foster care or residential placements - care leavers are likely to be in a better position to manage the transition from childhood to adulthood and all that it entails. The quality and form of support they receive to do this as well as health and lifestyle issues, can have a great impact on whether, at 16 - 18, they make a successful transition from school to further learning and work, the most likely destinations for young people being to a low skilled job, a traineeship or an apprenticeship, volunteering, college or university.

For many, steps into learning and work on leaving care are hindered by the complex issues that are part of their life experience. Frequent changes in placements, disrupted education, emotional trauma, difficulty in forming positive relationships, being in contact with a range of professionals and at the centre of many different types of processes and meetings can lead young care leavers to feel disempowered and not listened to.

In 2014, a research report published by The Centre for Social Justice⁹, found that many care leavers had a poor experience of the Pathway Planning process:

⁷ <http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/pages/the-care-inquiry.html>

⁸ Care Leavers Voices

⁹ Survival of the Fittest? Improving Life Chances for Care Leavers (Jan 2014)

'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.' (page 33)

'The 2011 Children's Care Monitor found that only 60 per cent of care leavers knew they had a Pathway Plan in place, whilst the recent APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers found that only half of care leavers had a Pathway Plan.' (page 33)

The lack of expert support for education, employment and training and a place for care leavers to go to for that support was highlighted by research carried out by NCAS, entitled, 'Open Doors, Open Minds.'

'It was worrying to find that foster carers and social workers were among the most likely to say that they did not have enough information on education as these were the professionals whom many young people said they would turn to for help.'

'Half of professionals working with looked-after children and care leavers had not received any training relating to education in the last three years'.

More recently the LIFT Children's Homes Project run by Catch 22 found during co production workshops with young people, managers and key workers that there were flaws in how Pathway Plans were set out:

'Pathway Plans are often too long, out of date and inaccessible for both young people and staff. Young people and staff felt that a 2 page summary would help them to understand and retain the most important parts of the plan.'

'She (PA) tries so hard, she actually cares'

SECTION 2.0 – SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

This section summarises the key findings from this research.

2.1 The experience of leaving care

Care leavers talk about the lack of emotional support on leaving care at 18 and feeling let down:

'Sudden cut off of support - it's quite intense to no longer have that constant support.' Care Leaver

'Just a phone call from my key worker would've been nice because you do get attached because that's what you're used to.' Care Leaver

Care leavers say it is really important to feel that the person supporting them actually cares about them and is consistent in their support:

'She [PA] tries so hard, she actually cares.' Care Leaver

'She [PA] was always there if you needed a little chat if you got upset.' Care Leaver

2.2 The Personal Adviser

2.2.1 Support

A lack of consistency in the support offered by PAs is evident from the survey responses. Care leavers' responses range from never having a PA to frequent changes in PA. Care leavers regularly comment on the frequent changes in the social worker supporting them more than the PA. One care leaver's attitude towards being supported by a PA is quite ambivalent towards the role of the PA because of the frequency of changes in staffing:

'I was used to so many changes in social worker that the PA was just another one.' Care Leaver

Approaches to providing support for care leavers are not uniform or consistent across local authorities. There is a broad range of ways in which care leavers first meet their PA. In some instances there is a gradual handover from social worker to PA, some care leavers continue to be supported by the same social worker, who took on the role of PA, some local authorities switch responsibility to a 'Leaving Care Team' which might be in house or part of an external agency e.g. Barnardos, some local authorities have specialist EET advisers available in house and the local

authority PA do or do not work very closely with those specialist advisers. Care leavers at focus groups often refer to PAs as '18 Plus Workers'. The broad range of titles is not particularly helpful to care leavers' clarity about their rights on leaving care and who should be supporting them and how.

2.2.2 PA responsibilities

The research explores care leavers' concept of what a PA's responsibilities are. Responses indicate that roughly half of care leavers are not aware of a PA's role in Pathway Planning or that a PA should provide support in terms of learning and/or work opportunities, whilst others are very clear about this:

'A PA is someone a young person will be appointed to when they're about to leave foster care, this person will help them to build your Pathway Plan and advise on things regarding education. The PA I think, replaces the Social Worker?' Care Leaver

2.2.3 Forming a positive relationship

It is apparent from the research that PAs reports of supporting care leavers and care leavers' experiences of being supported do not match. PA work patterns and pressures play a big part:

'The PA only worked for 2 days a week, so ended up checking things out myself... it was quicker.' Care Leaver

'Second PA would only meet when she needed to and wouldn't be available at any other time... she would only talk about what she needed to get done in paperwork... she wouldn't make herself available.' Care Leaver

Care leavers value a professional approach rather than one of friendship:

'A professional approach – supporting rather than leading but my PA did give her opinions...' Care Leaver

Two thirds of care leaver respondents find the support from a PA to be useful and confirm that they would be the first port of call for information, advice and guidance about learning and work. One care leaver comments on how the system pushes care leavers into education just to continue to be supported:

'The system pushes us into college to keep PA support over 21 and that's not always the best thing for the young person but they still need support.' Care Leaver

Other ways care leavers want support is around help to claim benefits whilst at college, finding work on leaving university, managing mental health and forming more effective relationships.

2.2.4 PAs' skills, experience and qualifications

The research tries to establish what skills, work experience and qualifications are ideal for a PA supporting care leavers into learning and/or work. There is a general consensus that qualifications in IAG, understanding of the issues facing care leavers and experience of working with care leavers is the ideal package for a PA:

'The understanding of the issues, having the experience and having the qualifications are three things that go hand in hand, which is a very good package to have.' Care Leaver

That there is no statutory requirement for a PA to have a qualification in IAG, leads some care leavers who are not happy with the support they have received, to have little respect for their skills:

'They're not qualified; they don't know anything.' Care Leaver

The research sought to identify what qualifications existing PAs do have. A small number of respondents (7) have no qualifications relevant to their role. Relevant qualifications held by PAs is across a broad range of levels that include in-house training, degrees, NVQs and diplomas and a broad range of subjects e.g. social sciences, teacher training, youth work, health, policy and psychology, social care, socially useful theatre and behavioural studies.

Just under half of respondents think there should be a minimum qualification for PAs in information, advice and guidance at level 3:

'Advice and Guidance is more than knowing all the requirements for a certain job, it includes keeping up to date with changes to student funding, working with LDD young people and changes to legislation, knowing how/what a LAC person can expect in terms of support.' PA

Half of PA respondents say they prefer PAs to have access to a qualification specifically designed for the role of supporting care leavers. Others suggest a level 3 qualification in working with young people, youth work, careers advice and guidance and/or social care to be suitable for PAs

Care leavers and PAs agree that the most important skills and knowledge that a PA could have are an understanding of the issues that affect young people in care, good communication skills, up to date knowledge of educational and work opportunities available locally and nationally and of local organisations that can support care leavers. Keeping up to date was key:

'Especially with changes in legislation and housing and things like that, you need to know what's going on.' Care Leaver

The overall findings suggest that the ideal qualification for a PA working with care leavers is one that has, as its learning outcomes, demonstration of an understanding of the range of complex issues experienced by care leavers; strategies to support those issues; and the ability to support the needs of care leavers at transition by providing expert information, advice and guidance for getting into learning and work.

The broad range of qualities and skills that care leavers and PAs say they need to have reflect the complexity of the role. Care leavers do report gaps in those skills that have a big impact on their access to education and/or work:

'I did feel supported by my PA but she didn't really help with education or work though. I would've liked some support to get funding for courses.' Care Leaver

'She's a nice person, but anyone can be nice, for your role you need to be an advocate and I just felt she couldn't advocate for me, I felt she couldn't do this.' Care Leaver

2.2.5 PA training needs

The complexity of both the role of the PA and the support needs of care leavers suggests that PAs need to have regular training/information sessions to confidently support care leavers into learning and/or work. Differences in levels of confidence for PAs depend on the ability to signpost to a specialist adviser who in many cases is not available. In terms of work opportunities, less than half of PAs have done any training in this respect but many feel that having regular meetings with JCP and careers advisers is very helpful:

'We regularly meet with staff from the JobCentre who advise regarding the work schemes and opportunities that they provide. Similarly we meet with Young People's Support Service who again explain to us the opportunities that they can provide our young people and in particular the Youth Work project.' PA

Where respondents have undertaken an NVQ Level 3 or 4 in Supporting Young People's Development or in Information, Advice and Guidance, or a Connexions PA Diploma, it has helped them to be much more confident about supporting care leavers into work.

'The above qualifications have aided me to be confident in supporting care leavers seeking suitable options in work/education and to support with job search skills, assist with completions of application forms, preparation of interviews etc.' PA

More than half of PAs say they would like more training in all aspects related to getting a job, for example, CV writing, writing a job application, job search, building employment skills, legislation, promoting yourself, taking part in interviews as well as confidence building and managing mental health difficulties.

PAs want to know more about understanding how DWP works in terms of benefits, knowing employees' rights and wages, how to get access to apprenticeships, how having a job or paid training can affect housing benefits and council tax. PAs think all of this could be achieved through closer working with JCP and DWP and training could be offered by JCP.

In terms of supporting access to learning the majority of PAs are confident in doing this and thought that good links with colleges and universities are the most important

aspects of this. Only a quarter have undertaken any training on supporting care leavers into learning. Some think a qualification in this would help:

'A qualification that enables us to have an understanding of education support, employment and work based training programmes available for young people.' PA

Those respondents not confident in providing IAG about learning, see their role only as a signposter. Only one PA thinks it is too much to ask of them due to pressure of work:

'I do not have time to keep up to date with all college courses. There are thousands of college courses all with different entry requirements..... I can give general advice and signpost a young person.' PA

2.3 Care leavers, learning and work

2.3.1 Care leavers' readiness to learn/work at 18.

PAs say that most care leavers are not ready to think about learning and work at 18 and require support up to 25 whatever their circumstances. It is evident from responses that at the time of leaving care, young people have more important issues to manage such as finding suitable accommodation, living independently, managing finances, setting up a home. There are different reasons given for this with the main ones being a lack of emotional stability and the development into adulthood being slower and less linear than many of their peers due to inconsistent levels of support in care. One respondent thinks that care leavers are not prepared early enough to realise the importance of learning and work. One of the specialist advisers says that many care leavers want the material benefits of having money but find this hard to link up to the need to learn and get into work.

The majority of PAs agree that care leavers need a longer lead in to formal learning and work:

'Our young people can be very delayed due to their complex lives. They can need longer to think about what they want to do with their futures and require support later into life than the 'average' young person.' PA

2.3.2 Care leavers' aspirations

'I thought, I didn't want to do it, but if that's the only option you're going to give me, I might as well take it'. Care Leaver

It is apparent from the focus groups that there is a pattern in the types of work and learning that care leavers generally engage in, that are limited to their own life experiences and knowledge. Subjects include health and social care, childcare, nursery nursing, hairdressing and floristry. There is also evidence of care leavers making poor choices and changing course frequently – mainly as a result of lack of support and advice initially when making choices. One young mum has applied for an art and design course that she has chosen herself. The social worker supporting her didn't discuss her options but helped her to apply. On entering the art and

design course she found it was much too high a level for her abilities and she dropped out. She feels she needs much more help to find an appropriate course for her.

Effective communication between PAs and care leavers is identified as vitally important in enabling them to make informed choices:

'The more talking you do with the young person, the more answers you get and the more you can help them if you don't do this you could ignore them when really they need help or you could put things in place they don't need...' Care Leaver

2.3.3 Support into learning and/or work – what works well

During the course of this research, case study evidence has been gathered about local authorities and providers undertaking effective practice to support care leavers into learning and/or work. Some examples are included in this section to illustrate the key findings.

It is evident that care leavers want much more information about the types of jobs that are available and a chance to try out jobs first in order to make positive choices.

'Reading about hairdressing isn't much fun. If you could go out and see more stuff... that would've made me more intrigued.' Care Leaver
'You need to try it out before you sign up for it to make sure you like it and get excited about it.' Care Leaver

The support from PAs is not consistent across local authorities. A quarter reported that their PA did not help them at all in terms of learning. However, PAs who did support care leavers to get into learning had done so in a range of ways, the main one being to get into college and had continued to support them whilst in learning.

'My PA just says yes, we'll do something about this. The best PAs are proactive...' Care Leaver

Where effective partnership arrangements are in place between LAs, colleges and universities, there is evidence that PAs are up to date with courses on offer and care leavers have someone to support them with visits to college or university and the chance to get used to the environment and meet the staff before applying. The example below from the Assistant Head of Virtual School at Kent local authority, Rachel Calver, describes how the work she has done in her previous role at East Kent College and in her current role at Kent Virtual School complement each other:

Rachel has 10 years' work experience as a Support Services Manager at East Kent college and is using that experience in her most recent role as Assistant Head for Post 16 with the Virtual School Kent. Whilst working at East Kent College Rachel helped to set up measures to enable effective partnership work between college staff, local authority staff (social workers) and care leavers themselves. A designated teacher has been appointed as the key point of contact for this purpose. Members of college staff come into the local authority in their local area to talk to Virtual School Kent staff and social workers to invite them to the college and introduce them to the designated member of staff. Foster carers also have this opportunity.

Rachel has delivered training to foster carers about opportunities for young people they look after to move into education post 16 and recognises that this needs to be done more widely in the county. A lot of the foster carers attending are unaware of recent changes to education, for example, the raising of the participation age or that there are other options than staying on at school, post 16. Rachel also tells them about the local authority's link to the local CXK (charity in Kent, supporting young people to develop) under the Youth Contract; how at October half term some young people may be asked to leave their courses; the new English and Maths GCSE qualifications; where to go for help in the college etc. Rachel then gives the foster carers' feedback on the training to the LA Foster Training Development Team.

To keep the Social Workers up-to-date with the recent educational changes, Rachel, along with colleagues from the Local Authority, CXK and Training Providers held an update session for the current post 16 Social Worker teams. This has been recognised as an event that needs to take place annually. As well as offering training, Rachel aims to meet some of this need by developing a timely Post 16 bulletin that includes key things such as contact details for designated staff in college; financial support available and how to access it at key times of the year, such as Christmas and in February when decisions have to be made about next steps in education.

A strategic, joined up approach by local authorities, local FE and HE providers and voluntary sector organisations means that support for care leavers into education and/or work can be prioritised and made consistent. Kent and Medway (above) have formed a Care Leaver Progression Partnership which brings local authorities, learning providers and voluntary organisations together to support care leavers/young people in the Kent and Medway region. They have jointly signed a Mission which sets out their commitment to this support.

The following example from Stoke City Council describes how work to develop a separate education pathway plan post 16 and the integration of a specialist careers adviser in the social services team, have helped:

In Stoke, the Virtual School Head and specialist education adviser worked with members of the Children in Care Council to devise an EPP (Education Pathway Plan) that is a post 16 version of a PEP. All of Stoke's children in care/care leavers will have an EPP, which will enable a clear plan and actions to support the plan, to be documented, and will include all relevant partners, including colleges, youth offending, training providers and so on.

Stoke local authority has a careers team (formally Connexions) which the specialist adviser was part of, but who is now the dedicated Careers Adviser for post 16 children in care/care leavers, and sits within the social work teams. This enables smoother communication and transition, and ensures a strong multi-agency approach. They now also have 2 housing officers within the team.

The specialist careers adviser works one to one with young people to give careers guidance, and works with training providers and colleges to ensure they are supported whilst there. She keeps up to date on all vacancies and developments, and is able to work flexibly with the young people, attending home visits, or seeing them in other locations if needed.

The multi-agency approach within the team ensures that all aspects of the young person's life are dealt with as holistically as possible, and ensures that they are in communication about any issues that may arise.

Many providers have improved their support for care leavers through achievement of the Buttle UK Quality Mark:

Peterborough Regional College holds the Buttle UK Quality Mark for supporting care leavers. The college's mission is to 'raise aspiration, realise potential and inspire success through high quality education and training'. This mission underpins the Looked After Children and Care Leavers (LAC/CL) strategy to raise aspirations and achievement and provide support at entry and throughout the course. The college arranges termly meetings with Local Authorities allowing them to work closely together. This has enabled them to develop and implement smarter strategies and ways of working including the setting up of a weekly attendance monitoring. The need for additional support has been recognised in these meetings and has led to enrichment activities being designed specifically for the needs of care experienced students, for example, at the request of the LA, a basic cookery course was set up for unaccompanied minors to support independent living.

A 'Welcome to Peterborough Regional College' event came from these meetings as it was recognised that arrangements needed to be put in place to ensure the right support was given to care leavers from the outset. This event is for Local Authorities, foster parents, carers and the young people to provide information and raise aspirations. This incorporates application, IAG/study/career progression information, transition and on-programme support, services available, key college contacts and completing applications for bursary. A calendar of enrichment activities and parent evening letters are sent to LAs to ensure that they are made aware of these events.

Literature is regularly updated and reviewed to ensure all are aware of contacts and support available including funds learners are entitled to and referral points. In addition, LACs/CLs are specifically referred to in the college prospectus and website.

PAs who liaise with specialist advisers (often ex-Connexions staff) value the expert knowledge and advice that they provide. This specialist support is also identified as important by a number of care leavers:

'She was the one who gave me the kick up the bum I needed' Care leaver

Support in making choices and applying for courses through regular contact and provision of information about what colleges/universities offer works well:

'We had regular contact, she supported me in making choices and knowing what's available, bringing the prospectus for colleges to my home and going through the application with me.' Care Leaver

The following extract is taken from an interview with a specialist adviser working for a county council in the East Midlands – names have been changed for confidentiality – and describes the all round support she offers to help care leavers to get into learning:

Lorraine has an NVQ level 4 in information, advice and guidance, which she achieved 10 years ago and has worked to support NEET young adults since then and with care leavers for the past 3 years. Her role is to work specifically with care leavers as a Prospects Personal Adviser situated in the Social Services Dept at the County Council. It is her role to help care leavers to look at all the work and educational opportunities available to them. She helps care leavers to make appropriate decisions and sees herself as carrying out the role of a good parent. She takes the young people on visits to organisations who can offer support, e.g. she took a young mother to Sure Start – this helped to build her self confidence, make social contacts and as a result she is starting college this year. Lorraine helped with this by initially taking the college prospectus to the young mum, visiting the college with her and meeting the tutor which ended up as an interview for the course. The college held an open event which Lorraine supported the care leaver to attend where the college staff gave her advice on the course and childcare available. Lorraine then followed this up by liaising with the social worker to keep him/her up to date with plans and needs. Care leavers qualify for a bursary and they need a letter from their social worker to verify they are in care, which is attached to the college application form. Lorraine makes sure the social worker knows the care leaver needs the letter and any associated equipment for the course. Taking a proactive and holistic approach to supporting care leavers to make informed choices, access learning, overcome practical and emotional barriers and gain the full support that they are entitled to is crucial in enabling effective transitions.

Finding the right support for individuals works well, for example, a college with a crèche can make the difference of whether or not a young mother goes to college. Similarly, brokering an introduction to a member of staff whose role in the college/university is to support care leavers whilst they are in learning has a hugely positive impact on whether or not a care leaver applies and whether or not they stay in learning.

Work experience offered by local authorities helps to develop care leavers' confidence, soft skills and employability skills. Some care leavers have the chance to get involved with their Children in Care (CiC) Council within the local authority. One young woman describes how as a member of the CiC, she is given responsibilities such as interviewing prospective foster parents. She comments on how important it is for confidence building to celebrate care leavers' achievements.

'We ran lots of celebration events which give a good sense of achievement, e.g. when people got GCSEs. For young people that are there to be awarded a certificate for achieving something is really good.' Care Leaver

Catch 22 has an initiative entitled 'From Care2Work' which works with local authorities and other employers to provide apprenticeships for care leavers. This has been very successful and has developed a quality mark awarded to local authorities and employers who demonstrate their commitment to building the employability skills of children in care and care leavers. One employer that holds the quality mark is Marriott Hotels. The hotel group has worked in partnership with a

number of local authorities to offer opportunities and support to care leavers, including enabling some care leavers to experience working abroad.

The example below describes how Hampshire County Council offer internship (traineeship) places for young people with a number reserved specifically for care leavers. Hampshire County Council is working to ensure that young people leaving the care of the local authority have the best possible chance of progressing positively into further learning or employment.

The Hants County Council Internship Plus (Traineeship) Programme provides children in care/care leavers with a paid work experience programme and bespoke training, usually at level 1 or level 2, to support their progression to a full apprenticeship, or other employment. The Government's Traineeship framework is being used to fund the scheme and it forms part of the wider Hampshire Youth Investment Programme which gives young people apprenticeship opportunities within the County Council. This will be providing 1000 employment opportunities by 2018, of these 150 will be for care leavers through the Internship Plus (Traineeship) programme.

It is having a positive impact on the life chances of some of the most vulnerable young people: 53 young people have started the Internship scheme, and of those completing, 50% have gone on to an apprenticeship, employment or further learning.

One intern on the scheme struggled to achieve in education because of time spent in care, changes in accommodation and health issues. She found it difficult to find work and particularly the kind of employment, or work experience, which could lead to the opportunities and professional training she aspired to. She had a series of casual jobs and became homeless.

Through the Internship Plus Programme, she is now working in a role that offers valuable experience; she is studying for an NVQ qualification in Business Administration and is hoping to gain an Apprenticeship within Hampshire County Council. She now has a settled home life and is working towards a career in accountancy

Where local authorities provide holistic support care leavers' chances of getting into learning and/or work are greatly enhanced. The following are examples of this

One of the care leavers who contributed to the focus groups spoke about an initiative called, '**Motivate**' provided by their local authority - this is a 6 month life coaching programme which helps care leavers to set achievable goals and manage behaviour.

'It was actually breaking down what half of these young people's problems are and making them create themselves better than they was.' Care Leaver

Setting achievable goals had a powerful impact.

'That changed my perspective on life itself. The life coach was more encouraging and seemed more understanding'. Care Leaver

Motivate helps the young people by asking them what they want to do for themselves, what they want to achieve and then helps them to develop their own goals and make a plan to reach them which is realistic and achievable.

'Springboard' - This is funded by The Big Lottery Fund's Youth in Focus programme until 2016 and is managed by a charity called 'Foundation'. It offers all round holistic support for care leavers aged 16 – 24 in the York, Selby and Ryedale districts. The project offers wrap around personalised support that is responsive to need. 'Foundation' leads a partnership of organisations across the 3 regions to deliver a wide range of activities, events and opportunities for care leavers in response to their choices and aspirations.

Similarly, **The Care Leavers Association** has set up a project entitled '**GOAL**' which helps to support care leavers to develop independent living skills. Its modules are entitled: Motivation and Taking Responsibility; Self-Care and Living Skills; Managing Money; Managing Tenancy and Accommodation; Social Networks and Relationships; Drug and Alcohol Use; Physical Health; Emotional and Mental Health; Meaningful use of Time and Offending.

2.4 Pathway Planning

The Pathway Plan is part of a care leaver's overall care plan together with the PEP (Personal Education Plan) formed during school education. The Pathway Plan should be developed taking into consideration the content of the PEP. Anecdotal, evidence suggests that local authorities develop their own format of the Pathway Planning form that works for their own systems and processes. Some local authorities have developed effective and creative approaches that are engaging and are responsive to the needs of the young people in their care, but this isn't consistent across the country

2.4.1 Development and review of the Pathway Plan

There appears to be no uniformity in the way Pathway Plans are developed. In some cases this is done over a 3 – 4 hour session between social workers, Personal Advisers and the young person or in a very few cases as 2 or 3 separate sessions

depending on the needs of the individual young person and what they can manage.

Care leavers report that the number of sections and themes covered in a Pathway Plan are too extensive to be delivered effectively in one session.

'PP sections should be done separately as doing it all in one go is tiring. Hard to squash it all in to two or three hours.' Care Leaver

However, care leavers say that this has been their experience and as a result they feel that Pathway Planning is a process done to them rather than for them. They often feel intimidated, vulnerable, disempowered and emotionally unsupported:

'I wasn't aware what it was about at first... they said we were going to have a meeting about a plan or something. They came to visit me at my foster placement and there was about four or five of them, so I was just like, 'what the hell is this?' It was my new social worker so I wasn't quite sure about it. I just answered the questions.' Care Leaver

Care leavers report that initial approaches to undertaking Pathway Planning meetings vary and that the importance of the meetings is played down:

'My PA described it as just filling in a little form... ' Care leaver

Care leavers also express little confidence in why Pathway Planning takes place and feel there needs to be more follow up support:

'They only do it because it's a legal document and they have to do it. But once you've signed it I suppose no one's there to pick up the pieces if you have read it and you're crying or whatever.' Care Leaver

Care leavers are not aware that the content of the Pathway Plan would enable them to claim the support they are entitled to from local authorities:

'The first problem is that young people don't really know what a PP is and the importance of it. I think unless you're already part of a group where someone is telling you what it is you're not really interested and it's just another form you have to do.' Care Leaver

PAs report the main barriers to undertaking the Pathway Planning process effectively are care leavers' lack of emotional maturity, that care leavers' priorities on leaving care often do not include planning for work and education and that other issues are much more pressing for care leavers at the transition stage of moving into independence, the most important being settling into new accommodation.

PAs and care leavers agree that the format of most Pathway Planning forms can be improved. They report that it is generally not young person friendly. Care leavers think, overall, that Pathway Planning forms can be brought up to date by being completed electronically or online and that the use of less formal language would enable young people to be able to understand its purpose more clearly and enable them to feel more empowered to participate in a process designed to benefit them.

'Could have speech bubbles asking what thoughts were and scales to mark off etc. Needs to look nice with pictures. It's just so you feel more part of it and like you can fill it in.' Care Leaver

'I think they need to get with the times. Technology is so advanced - why are they still writing it on paper?' Care Leaver

One PA thinks that the education, employment and training section of the form should be more extensive and inquiring as to how the local authority intends to support the young person to reach their educational potential.

PAs think that young people should be engaged earlier, that more time should be given to the process and that the plans should be written in the young person's own language.

'The plan is not young person friendly and looks like every other document that young people see from social care. This puts the young people that I work with off. It is too formal and needs to look different...' PA

The Pathway Plan is supposed to be reviewed every 6 months as a minimum. It is thought that this is not often enough due to the quick changing circumstances in many care leavers' lives and circumstances. Every care leaver should have a signed copy of their Pathway Plan. A few care leavers report that they do not have a copy of their plan and say that they had not signed a copy. PAs say that in order to develop effective Pathway Plans, there needs to be more regular contact between themselves and specialist advisers to keep up to date with opportunities and initiatives and that the specialist adviser should have more interaction directly with the care leavers.

2.5 Conclusion

Care leavers are individual young people with individual experiences of life. The majority has one thing in common - they are growing up in the care of a local authority, where local authorities are often referred to as a 'good enough' parent. It is the duty of every Local Authority to do everything in their power to ensure that each care leaver makes the best individual choices about education and work.

A holistic approach to Pathway Planning and consistent, professional support from a known and trusted Personal Adviser will improve the chances of care leavers having a positive experience of learning and work, giving them the best chances in leading a fulfilling adult life. This needs to be led at Director level in local authorities and embedded in a strategic approach that has partnerships with key local services and providers at its core.

