

Research



How do young people experience the transition from being a Looked After Child to living independently and how can it be improved in the eyes of the young people using the service?



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How do young people experience the transition from being a Looked After Child (LAC) to living independently and how can it be improved in the eyes of the young people using the service?

**Victoria Harris
CAMS**

Abstract

The aim of this study was to research the transition from being a looked after child to moving into independence from the point of view of the young people and what they feel could improve this service for future generations.

This research aimed to explore the transition between being looked after and living independently. To achieve these aims, face to face semi-structured interviews, phone interviews, email questionnaires and text interviews were employed with a relatively small sample of young people. A final sample of 30 participants was achieved and all young people were aged between 17 and 25. The majority, i.e. 25 people, were from a white British background. Some of the young people were living in independent accommodation and some were in supported lodgings. Although semi-structured, the interviews were flexible enough to allow the probing of issues that arose during the interview.

Anecdotal evidence from young people interviewed during this study showed that young people making the transition from being a looked after child to independent living have issues with the amount of support they are getting from their social work team. It is thought that insufficient emotional support or financial preparation for young people will inevitably mean the young people are heading towards a downward spiral.

The first main finding of the project was that many of the young people had to live on low levels of finance, due to either not having adequate benefits paid to them or the skills to manage the money they are given. The second main finding was that young people felt they were not supported enough in the early days of independent living. Many of the skills needed to live on their own, such as cooking, cleaning and DIY, as well as emotional skills, were learnt in practice. The implications for practice are stated and conclusions from the study are drawn in the full report.

Victoria Harris
CAMS

Introduction

The past few years have seen a plethora of new legislation relating to the transition between being in care to autonomous living. This study looks at if and how this legislation has changed the experience of this transition for looked after children from a young person's perspective. Looked after children often struggle with the transition as they do not have family support to fall back on. In 2007 the Care Matters paper was introduced which changed the way services were offered for this population of disadvantaged young people. One of the most significant changes was that prior to this legislation being introduced the age for leaving foster care was 18. Since 2007 the proposal is that looked after children are allowed to remain with foster carers until the age of 21. Despite these legislative changes, the evidence suggests that young people still struggle in making the transition from being a looked after child to living autonomously.

This report provides a brief account of the methodology employed to conduct the research, reports the main findings and then discusses the implications for practice. Finally, the conclusions drawn from the study are reported.

Aim

The aim of this study was to research the transition from being a looked after child to moving into independence from the point of view of the young people and how they feel we could improve this service for future generations.

Context

Young people around the world have difficulties with the transition from being a child to becoming an adult. Add into this scenario not having the support of a network of family around to advise and offer a helping hand and the situation of this transition becomes even harder. This study was designed to look at what the difficulties are during this transition and how services can make it easier for the young person from the young person's point of view.

In 2000, the Children (Leaving Care) Act was produced in order to improve the life chances of young people living in and leaving local authority care. Its main aims were to: delay young people's discharge from care until they are prepared and ready to leave; to improve the assessment, preparation and planning for leaving care; to provide better personal support for young people after leaving care; to provide better personal support for young people after leaving care, and to improve the financial arrangements for care leavers (Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000). Despite some improvement for care

leavers subsequent to the new legislation, there remained acute difficulties in accessing financial support for education, and in accessing health, particularly mental health services (Cameron et al. 2007).

In 2006, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, admitted failing the most needy children. He was documented saying 'It was appalling that the government was spending as much as £2 billion on children in care and yet only 8 per cent were gaining five decent GCSEs and only 1 per cent went onto university' (*Guardian* 2006). This made policy-makers think again about what provisions were in place to support young people as they left care and moved into autonomous living. A consultation was devised that spanned the whole country and aimed to involve as many young people as possible to find out the areas they thought could be improved, and how. During the consultation period it was found that the opportunity to delay the move into adulthood was not always open to all young people and the absence of this opportunity resulted in unwanted transitions that happened too fast. This made one of the recommendations of this paper to find ways to enable young people to remain with foster carers up to the age of 21 (*Care Matters: Time For Change*, DfES 2007).

In 2007 there were on average 60,000 young people in care at any one time, split as 33,400 males and 26,600 females. The number of these who were of leaving care age was 5,800, 3,200 male and 2,600 female. The number of these young people not in education, employment or training was 1,690 (National Statistics 2007) which is just under 30 per cent. Education, employment and training are seen as important predecessors of success in the transition into independence. Mortenson (2000) argued that 'In almost every way, people with more education enjoy a higher standard of living. They live longer, have better health, and are happier and more productive than those with less education.'

Jackson and Martin (1998) found that when consulting with a small group of high achieving young people about what made them better at surviving the care system and having greater resilience compared to their siblings and peers, they regarded success in education as a crucial factor. This has support from a study that looked at progression into higher education and university, where the researchers found that a third of participants who had gone to university felt a strong desire for a 'guardian angel' to support and encourage them during their time at university (Martin and Jackson 2002).

Methodology

This research aimed to explore the transition between being looked after and living independently. To achieve these aims, face to face semi-structured interviews, phone interviews, email questionnaires and text interviews were employed with a relatively small sample of young people. Although semi-

structured, the interviews were flexible enough to allow the probing of issues that arose during the interview.

Participants were asked how long they had been living independently, whether they felt they had received enough support during the transition process and whether their core skills necessary for living independently were defined enough. Information was also collected about how often they have contact with their social worker and if they were a social worker what they felt they would do differently.

All participants in the study were recruited by statutory agencies working with people in the process of leaving care in one local authority area of London and all the fieldwork was completed in a three month period. Young people were recruited on the basis of informed consent and all those who participated were given assurance of confidentiality. To preserve their anonymity, all names have been changed in this report. The criteria for participating in the study was that the young person had to be over 16 and currently making the transition or had made the transition in the past from being in care to living autonomously. All participants had to be within care for a minimum of 13 weeks prior to leaving care and have a named social worker overseeing their case.

A final sample of 30 participants was achieved. All young people were aged between 17 and 25 with the average age being 19.5 and there was an equal split of 14 males and 16 females. The average age for males was 18.92 and for females it was 20.13. One sixth of the population of the sample was from a minority ethnic background.

All participants had been through or were in the process of leaving care. All had been in care for a period of 13 weeks before entering the leaving care process. Staff within the leaving care team were asked to nominate young people who met the criteria of the study and posters were put up asking young people to contact the researcher directly. An incentive was offered to take part in the study and travel expenses were paid to enable them to meet the facilitator in person if that was what they wanted. The incentive for participating in the study was a £10 shopping card which could be used in a number of different places.

The study initially intended to conduct face to face interviews with all participants but due to difficulties with accessing the young people and arranging face to face meetings a different approach was adopted. The biggest problem encountered was the time staff took to nominate young people for the study. No young people nominated themselves to take part and many of the young people nominated by staff did not meet the criteria, for example were either too young or had not been on the care system for 13 weeks before joining the leaving care team. Face to face interviews were unscheduled interviews which allowed for the facilitator being able to ask the questions in a way that the young person could understand or change the way they asked the question to be more understandable. All questions were open ended so that the young person could answer in the way they felt comfortable

and then probing could take place to allow the facilitator to delve deeper into areas they felt were pertinent to that individual young person. Both the researcher and the facilitator was aware of the negative influence interviews can have due to lack of expertise on the interviewer's part (Marshall and Rossman 2006) which could lead to short answers instead of long narratives

Many of the young people nominated for the study did not want to participate due to time restraints or sensitivity of the subject, nevertheless the research still managed to achieve a sample of 30 young people. Of these, 14 took part in face to face interviews; eight took part in phone interviews; six answered the questions via email correspondence and two via text. The researcher tried the snowballing method by asking all the young people to introduce their friends to the study but this was not fruitful with this client group.

Each face to face interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes and there were 15 questions in each; email and text questionnaires were limited in the amount of probing possible so lasted a shorter period of time. Before the interview participants were asked to read and sign a consent form or during a phone/text interview were read the consent form and asked if they agreed. Participants were then lead through the confidentiality of the study, the right to withdraw at any point and where they could get a copy of the final report. As well as myself, a facilitator was used during all face to face interviews, who was completely independent of the service so young people felt comfortable talking about the service and their social workers without fear of what they said being fed back to their social worker. Anecdotal evidence from working within this service prior to this study suggests that young people will feel more comfortable answering questions about their care if the facilitators of the interview are completely independent of the service as then the young person has no fear or negative consequences within their care resulting from the interview. Ethical consent to carry out the research was given by the head of children's services as there was no ethical board within the borough. After all the interviews were completed they were transcribed and main themes were extracted.

Findings

Money

The top theme and possibly the topic young people spoke most about was the amount of money they had to live on and the skills they had or had not acquired to be able to manage their money. Many of the young people stated that they felt they had not had the money management skills taught to them before they started the transition; others said that they had the skills but that was more thanks to the carers rather than the social workers. Every young person said they would have liked some money management skills taught to them before going into independence. Some young people had got

themselves into so much debt from not being able to maintain money till the end of the week. Others stated that they needed more help knowing when to pay bills and how to budget for food and other essentials as well as paying bills. Felicity told us:

'We get paid £47.95 on a Tuesday and by the Wednesday that has gone... The first week I got the money I went food shopping and got what I thought was a week's food which came to just over £48.65 which was more than I had without even thinking about anything else.'

Not having money can be a really isolating experience for these young people as they have no one to fall back on for extra support if they need it. Some of the young people stated that they cannot go out because they do not have the money to get transport anywhere, including work sometimes. Sarah told us:

'Money is a problem – if I got a job I would lose my income support and because I am at college I couldn't work enough hours to make it worth it so I do really struggle on the money front.'

It is well known that many looked after young people achieve very poorly at school and therefore re-enter the education system at a later age in life and yet the corporate parent provides very little financial support for this. This is supported by the findings of a study which stated 'young people reported receiving little explicit support from carers for educational goals, and gave frequent accounts of frustration at lack of financial and practical support for attending college and university. Age restrictions on accessing local authority support and welfare benefit restrictions for those in education were a particular source of difficulty, especially where there had been delays in acquiring the necessary school leaving qualifications due to disruptions in attendance' (Cameron et al. 2007). This is well supported; Allen (2003) stated that 'the economic pressures of living independently meant that many care leavers remained out of work because concerns about the risk to their housing benefit prevented them from accepting low paid jobs'. Empirical evidence suggests that these circumstances can push the young person into more informal or illegal working behaviours which can put them at a very high risk. Poverty has a negative impact on all areas of a person's life, for example mental health, emotional isolation and physical wellbeing.

Support

Looking at all the transcriptions, it becomes apparent that the quality of skills learnt before the move out of care is a real roulette of whether your foster carer was very supportive or not. Some young people believed that they were very well prepared to become independent because their foster carer had taught them things and supported them through the move and even after the move if there were significant problems. However, on the other side of the coin were the young people who felt that they were unprepared to move into independence because their foster carer was not very supportive. Most young people said they had weekly contact with their social worker and that

they felt they could phone the social worker if they had a problem. They felt the amount of support dramatically decreased outside of office hours and many young people said they did not know where to go or what to do if a crisis were to happen at a weekend or in the middle of the night.

Emotional support was also paramount with the young people. They highlighted the need for a more interpersonal relationship between the social worker and the young person. Katie said:

'I think they [social workers] need to give you more emotional support, they don't understand that it's hard to be prepared for something when you don't know how hard it will be.'

This was supported by Daniel who told us:

'Social workers could be more "real", too much "just a job" attitude – need to look outside of the social work handbook.'

Melissa described her idea of being a good social worker as:

'If I were a social worker I would really try to bond with the person because I think sometimes kids need someone to talk to and when they just see a social worker as someone doing a job they don't tend to always say how they really feel. That's when things can often go wrong. I think we need to see you as a friend, in a way the name social worker can be a bit scary and off-putting.'

Young people feel particularly vulnerable during the transition period and this is when they need extra support. Young people feel as if they are catapulted into adulthood with little support from social workers within conventional office hours but outside of this feel unsupported and alone. Some young people felt they needed more help with day-to-day life skills like cooking, cleaning and DIY, but most felt they had some support and knew where to go if they needed more.

Another important factor that was presented again and again was the amount of social workers young people felt was satisfactory to have dealt with their case during their care. One young lady told us she felt the number of social workers that had dealt with her throughout her time being in care and moving in independence was too high. Turnover of staff should be kept to a minimum in the young people's view and where it's not possible a transfer period should be adopted. Rachel enlightened us:

'don't want them changing all the time because you cant get used to them so you don't open up...it feels like everybody knows your business'

This has become evident every time young people talk about the difficulties of being in care, along with having to keep telling people everything about yourself without knowing anything about the person you're telling it to.

Young people felt the groups that were run by the leaving care team were the most useful part of the service, with some life skills being taught. The level of knowledge about cooking was generally satisfactory in the young person's eyes but not always the most nutritional. Young people commented that they felt the groups were more useful when separate groups were run for boys and girls rather than the current status which is mixed, however reasons for these feelings were not explored.

There was a difference between the girls and the boys. Girls found it much easier to talk about the problems they had and the areas about which they needed extra help, whereas the boys were more likely to express things as acceptable and as not needing help with anything else. However, when probed, it became clearer that boys too had experienced the same problems as the girls; they were just less likely to ask for help.

Implications for practice

From the data these young people have provided there are several implications for practice in terms of supporting them as they make the transition from care to autonomous living. Firstly, they need to be prepared for managing their own money, which is something they are not familiar with while they are in foster care. Secondly, young people need more support from their social workers in the initial stages of independent living. Thirdly, given that they are entirely without support outside of office hours and at the weekends, there is a need for some form of floating support to be made available. Fourthly, young people need more preparation in life skills, for example how to shop on a tight budget.

During the initial stages of moving into independent living young people need more support from their social worker. The area in which they are most disadvantaged is the ability to manage their money. These young people are unfamiliar with having to manage money as, while being looked after, this is dealt with by their foster carers. So when they are given money they do not understand the idea of saving for later in the week but this should be something that is installed into them as it normally would be by a parent. Added to this was that the young people did not have adequate money to live on and even if they had been advised and trained in money management to a much higher level they felt they still would not be able to afford to live adequately.

There is also a need for floating support that young people can access during out of office hours. This could be in the shape of a support group or peer support, or it could be an on duty social worker who can answer calls and deal with any crisis. If a mentoring scheme were established that provided young people with someone to go to in the case of needing advice, or someone to talk to when they are lonely, it might stop young people feeling so emotionally unsupported. I think practitioners need to be aware of and responsive to the

particular needs of each young person. They do not all have the same needs and therefore a 'one size fits all' type of service may not be responsive enough to meet their needs. Services need to be flexible to respond to the various needs different young people may present.

Young people remarked that they are comfortable coming into the leaving care office and sometimes do not feel they have the confidence to go somewhere different if they are referred somewhere else for a problem they need to deal with. A way to solve this is to improve integrated working throughout all children's services and be able to offer a level of support from a multi-agency approach in that one place and then be able to refer them on if they want more support and feel comfortable going elsewhere. If there were a one-stop shop within a place they come to daily they would be more likely to speak to someone about any problem before it reaches a crisis level. Counselling/money management/debt advice/housing support could all be offered either as a drop in once a week or as a theme for the groups that are already running, but run by professionals who have specialist knowledge of the subject rather than normal social work staff. The groups that are running at the moment offer young people somewhere to come to that often provides food and washing facilities but more could be done to encourage healthy eating and exercise both in and out the groups.

The subject of money will always be a priority on young people's lists but it is a real life threatening situation for some of the young people making the transition from being looked after to living independently as they have no support network to fall back on. There are two options for changing this situation for future generations. Either the government needs to raise benefit levels for these young people in order to give them a decent amount of money to live on, or the service that is supporting the young person needs to set about introducing intensive pre-support for all young people to enable them to get a job. Some of the biggest issues for young people on this subject is writing a CV and noticing that some of the skills they use everyday are things that can be put into a CV as a work skill. However, focus on employment needs to start at school age. Surely encouraging young people to stay in school and get a decent education, which can lead to them securing a better job when they decide to leave education and enabling them to succeed better in their adult life, would be a better option.

Conclusion

Recent research suggests that one of the most important factors in preparing for the transition is success in education, so more emphasis needs to be given from a very young age to looked after children to the importance of achieving better education and support in achieving this. There is a wealth of evidence that shows that achieving highly at GCSE level determines how successful they are regarding their future (see particularly Mortenson (2000)). Therefore, the focus placed on education by foster carers should be

paramount, for example creating a positive learning environment for the child at the foster carer's home to enable them to complete homework and assignments.

The study has provided valuable insight into the transition of a small group of young people moving from being a looked after child to living independently. In this sense, it has made a valuable contribution to our knowledge in this field. All recommendations are drawn from direct quotes from young people who have been through or are experiencing the transition about what they think will improve the services offered to other young people in the future.

If these young people are not supported for the first six months to a year of their independent lives it will affect their mental and emotional wellbeing. Young people feel quite isolated and have little emotional support available to them. Floating support or a mentoring scheme, which all young people have to sign up for, would increase feelings of support that the young people felt in the early days of their transition. A mentoring scheme has been tried in a different area of the country with positive results. 'Young people that had received help from a specialist Leaving Care service explained how it had helped them having outside support and being involved with mentoring groups. Having access to staff and other young people, who knew about leaving care, was generally appreciated' (Morgan and Lindsay 2006).

It is clear from the interviews that many of the young people are struggling to live on their own but are nonetheless coping with the experience. Their biggest concerns are financial and having inadequate incomes to meet all their needs and, on top of this, not having been prepared to manage the money they do have. This has direct support from *Young People's Views on Leaving Care* (Morgan and Lindsay 2006) which found that 'Many young people commented that they felt inadequately prepared to manage their own finances.'

As a practitioner, this research was a valuable experience. There were difficulties with gate-keepers and high drop out rates; however, the implications for practice that have been suggested will improve the lives of young people who have been in care, making the transition to independence easier for years to come.

While young people feel they benefit from the groups that are running within the leaving care team, these could offer more facilities, for example cooking skills, nutrition advice and practical skills that will help them to manage their own households. The conclusion from this study suggests that a range of services need to be available to help these young people as they make this transition and the support seems to fall into three separate areas: money, emotional support and practical support.

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Or write to CWDC, 2nd Floor, City Exchange
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