

# Obstacles to participation in education, employment and training for young people leaving care

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the early career outcomes of young people leaving care. It draws upon the findings of a study of young people leaving care in seven English local authorities under The Children Leaving Care Act 2000 (CLCA), to explore the extent of participation and factors associated with career outcomes (Dixon et al., 2006) [1]. The paper shows that despite an increased policy focus on education and career options, care leavers continue to be disadvantaged and face considerable challenges in terms of entering and sustaining post-16 participation in education, employment and training. The problems associated with leaving care are well documented, however, less is known about the factors associated with young people doing better or worse after care. The paper explores the extent and nature of the obstacles faced by young people as they begin their career journey and utilises the study findings to locate them within the care and leaving care experience. It presents key findings, which highlight factors associated with obstructing and promoting positive career outcomes. Finally, the paper considers strategies for supporting young people in and leaving care to maximise their career options and opportunities.

**Keywords:** young people; leaving care; education; unemployment; outcomes

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## Introduction

Research over the past three decades has consistently shown that many care leavers face difficulties and disadvantage as they embark upon participation in education, employment and training (EET) (Stein and Carey, 1986; Biehal et al., 1995; Broad, 1998; Dixon and Stein, 2005). Most encounter obstacles to finding and sustaining career options in the early years after care and for some this can persist into adulthood, leading to an increased risk of long-term unemployment and social exclusion (Cheung and Heath, 1994).

In response, we have seen an increased legislative and policy focus. Maximising opportunities for care-experienced young people over the age of sixteen years is a key part of the current leaving care agenda. It is reflected in the Children Leaving Care Act 2000 (CLCA), performance assessment framework (PAF) targets and both the Green Paper, Care Matters (DfES, 2006d) and the White Paper, Care Matters: Time for Change (DfES, 2007) which draw particular attention to the disparity between care-experienced youth and their non-care peers in, amongst other things, schooling and post-16 participation. These developments include increased provision for career support as part of pathway planning through the CLCA and the introduction of targets for local authorities to maximise the numbers of looked after children achieving educational success and the number of care leavers participating in employment, education and training (EET). Additionally, we have seen the development of mainstream initiatives to tackle youth unemployment and non-participation such as The New Deal for young people, Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and increased training and education options.

Against this background, the paper draws on research findings (Dixon et al., 2006) to explore the extent to which young people continue to experience obstacles as they leave care and begin the journey into education, employment and training. It will show that, for the research sample at least, progress towards reducing the disparity between care leavers and their non-care peers in term of participation and removing the obstacles to sustaining participation has been slow. The paper considers the nature of these obstacles, locating them within young people's past and current experiences, the leaving care context and within normative youth transitions and labour market frameworks.

Drawing upon the experiences of the study sample, the paper also explores the factors that facilitate successful career outcomes after leaving care and those which impede positive progress. It also highlights current strategies for supporting care leavers to maximise their potential and opportunities and for reducing the '*significant and widening gap*' (DfES, 2006d, p.5.) between outcomes for care-experienced young people and their non-care peers.

## **The study and research sample**

The study, which was commissioned by the DfES, took place across seven English local authorities during 2001-2003. The participating authorities represented a broad geographical spread and included London boroughs, shire counties, metropolitan councils and a unitary authority. The key focus of the research was to explore the costs and outcomes associated with leaving care under the CLCA. In doing so, it looked at young people's experiences of the transition from care to independent adult living, and identified aspects of their in-care and post-care experiences that offered protective factors or posed risks for successful outcomes. It also looked at the ways that support from professionals, family and friends helped young people to achieve more positive outcomes.

Baseline interviews were conducted with 106 young people approximately two months after leaving care. Follow-up interviews were conducted ten to twelve months later to find out how they were progressing. Parallel information was collected from each young person's personal adviser (PA) and policy interviews were carried out with senior managers. Data included a range of quantitative measures as well as more open ended, qualitative material. Questionnaires and interview schedules facilitated the collection of information on young people's care careers, transitional support arrangements and initial post-care outcomes and progress in key life areas (e.g. housing, education, career, mental and physical health and well-being); the support available from family, friends and carers; and the use made of professional support services.

Outcome information related to the first 12–15 months after care. In this sense the study provided a sharp focus on the early stages of the transition from care. The findings, therefore, represent intermediate outcomes, which are indicative of the initial progress being made by young people on their journey to adulthood. A range of statistical tests was used to analyse outcomes. Some results have been reported in this paper<sup>1</sup>.

The sample was broadly representative of the general care leaver population. A similar proportion of young men (47%) and women (53%) took part in the study and one quarter was from minority ethnic backgrounds (25%). Just under half of the sample (44%) was considered by practitioners to have mental health, emotional or behavioural difficulties and 17% were considered to have a sensory, physical or learning impairment. Although the majority of young people (69%) had last entered care as teenagers; more than two-fifths (43%) had been looked after for five or more years. Over half (59%) had left care from a foster placement and 41% had left from residential or other placements, however, most had experienced a range of care placements throughout their care career. All, but one of the young people in the sample, were aged 16-18 at recruitment to the study. This age-range represents an important stage with respect to career paths, where decisions and trajectories embarked upon often lay the foundations for future choices and destinations (Banks et al., 1992).

While drawing upon the wider findings of the study, this paper will focus primarily on young people's experiences of post-16 participation in EET, in the year or so after leaving care.

## **Participation in EET**

The transition to adulthood is a time of opportunities, challenges and choices. Some young people make a successful transition from care, settling into stable post-care living and succeeding in their chosen career options whilst others make steady progress with help from support networks and professionals. However, a significant number of those more vulnerable young people face an enduring struggle. Past research has highlighted post-16 participation as a particular area of disadvantage and difficulty for many care leavers, with unemployment and over representation in low paid, unskilled occupations featuring prominently in the leaving care literature (Biehal et al., 1995; Broad, 1998; Stein, 2004).

Despite an increasing policy focus on the problem, it remains that many young people continue to experience difficulties in finding a foothold on the career ladder in the early years after care. The national picture currently shows that, when considered alongside wider patterns of youth participation, care leavers are far less likely to be engaged in education, employment and training. This was clearly evident within our study where participation rates were low and despite around half having entered education, employment or training at some point over the follow-up, most young people struggled to sustain participation and many drifted in and out of periods of inactivity. Before considering the reasons for low participation it is worth considering more closely, the extent to which it affects care leavers by looking at the different participation rates and outcomes.

Participation rates for the study sample as a whole are shown in table 1. Further analysis of individual experiences showed that there was evidence of career instability over the follow-up with 43% moving between the different career status groups.

## **Education**

In terms of education participation, there was some indication of an increase in the number of care leavers engaging in post-compulsory education. Around one third (35%) of the sample was undertaking some form of education. This represents an increase on figures reported in past research and reflects the findings of a contemporary survey of care leavers that noted a general increase in education participation from 19% in 1994 to 31% in 2003 (Broad, 2003).

This rise in education participation may be driven by a combination of wider

Table 1  
Young people's career status and progress

Career status group	Baseline (%) (n=106)	Follow-up (%) (n=101)
Unemployed	43	44
Full-time education	27	21
Part-time education	8	2
Training	8	6
Caring for child	7	8
Full-time employment	4	10
Part-time employment	2	3
Custody	1	1
Lost to follow-up	0	5
Career outcome - progress overtime		
	(%)	
Improved	15	
Remained good	31	
Deteriorated	20	
Remained poor	34	

factors including general trends in mainstream youth career options, which have seen an increase in further education opportunities. It also reflects stronger links between leaving care services and agencies such as Connexions as well as the impact of increased financial support through specific funding under the CLCA for education assistance and discretionary incentives based on attendance and progress, as well as mainstream support through the EMA. It is also likely that the need to meet government targets for maximising participation is providing a sharper focus for professionals working with care-experienced and unemployed youth.

Whilst increased education participation is to be welcomed, and our findings certainly give cause for optimism, there was equally cause for caution. First, it was apparent from our research that sustaining participation was a challenge and required careful management and support in the months after care. Only half of those in education at baseline were still in education a year on from care and overall, the number of young people in education had fallen from 35% to 23% at follow-up. Whilst some had completed their studies there was strong anecdotal evidence of early dropout due to personal circumstance and difficulties. Reports from young people and their PAs highlighted problems around debt, ability and emotional issues. There was also evidence that some young people had been encouraged to participate in unsuitable courses, which did not meet their needs, abilities or interests.

Second, despite the increase in the number of care leavers in post-compulsory education, there remained a significant disparity when compared to participation rates for school leavers in general. Government figures (DfES, 2005) report 72% of 16 year olds, 60% of 17 year olds and 39% of 18 year olds are in full-time education; far higher than the 35% of 16–18 year olds in the current study who were in full or part-time education. Additionally, significantly fewer care leavers attend University (1% compared to 38% of the wider population (Jackson et al., 2003). This was mirrored in the current study where only one young person was attending University.

### **Training**

A similar picture emerged for participation in training. Less than one in ten young people in the study had undertaken a training course in the initial period after care. Again, whilst some had completed their training course during the follow-up timescale there was evidence of attrition due to early dropout. Moreover, training did not appear to increase the chances of employment, in the short-term at least, with almost two-thirds (63%) of those involved in training being unemployed a year on from care. Training rates were also comparatively low in relation to national figures, which indicate that 75% of 16–18 year olds were engaged in training or education (DfES, 2005). The equivalent combined figure for the study group was 29%.

### **Employment**

Employment rates for care leavers were also low with only 10% of the sample in full-time work a year on from care. This corresponds to findings from recent studies of care leavers in Northern Ireland (Pinkerton and McCrea, 1999), Scotland (Dixon and Stein, 2005) and England (Broad, 2003). Furthermore, where young people were employed, there was evidence of marginal, insecure employment, either on a temporary, casual or 'cash in hand' basis.

This may well reflect wider youth labour market patterns, which show a general decline in the tendency to move straight from school to work as wider transitional opportunities become available and which have resulted in lower numbers in employment within the 16-18 age-group generally. Nevertheless, care experienced young people appear less likely than their non-care peers to be in employment. Recent national participation rates for 18 year olds in England and Wales show that almost a third (31%) had a full-time or part-time job (DfES, 2006c), indicating that those with experience of care face greater challenges.

## **Unemployment and non-participation**

Unsurprisingly, given the relatively low participation rates, unemployment featured prominently for care leavers in our study. More than two-fifths were unemployed at baseline and a year after leaving care. When full-time parents were taken into account, the number not in education, employment or training (NEET) rose to 56% at follow-up.

Of course, levels of non-participation amongst care leavers cannot be disconnected from wider social and economic trends affecting young people in general, which have seen the youth labour market becoming increasingly competitive with the rise in demand for an educated and specialised workforce. However, alongside this have arisen a number of developments to address youth participation rates such as the introduction of Connexions; the promotion of a more co-ordinated approach to post-16 education and training through the Learning and Skills Councils; and the growth of schemes such as Modern Apprenticeships and the New Deal. Also, the increased commitment to financial support for young people through the EMA and for care leavers in education, training or employment through the CLCA should establish participation in EET as a more accessible and viable option. However, as findings from this and other sources show, progress to date, has been slow. For example, the most recent national statistics suggest a steady increase in overall participation amongst the care leaver group to 63% of those still in touch with the local authority at the age of nineteen years (DfES, 2006a). Despite this, they remain considerably disadvantaged in terms of post-16 participation when compared to their non-care peers. Although statistics vary, care leavers are between three and five times more likely than their non-care peers to be NEET (DfES, 2003) with around 47% of care leavers nationally classed as NEET compared to around 10% of all young people in the 16-18 age- group.

To understand why care leavers experience difficulties and disparity in post-16 participation we need to consider the nature of the obstacles that impede their progress and obscure the opportunities available to them. A key focus of our own research involved looking at young people who were doing well and those who were doing less well to identify which factors assisted participation and positive outcomes and those that hindered success.<sup>2</sup>

## **Obstacles to participation**

Understanding and locating the factors associated with non-participation can inform the development of support to help young people maximise their potential, overcome obstacles and achieve economic and overall well-being.

The causes of non-participation arise from multiple difficulties and disadvantage

affecting the lives of those more vulnerable groups within society. For care leavers, many will encounter challenges to participation as a consequence of their pre-care, in-care and post-care experiences.

### **Pre-care**

Although the remit of the study prevented a focus on the pre-care experience of the sample, we know from exiting research that many children entering care do so with a legacy of disadvantage that can predispose them to poor career outcomes (Stein, 2004). The difficulties and experiences that brought them into care; early loss or trauma, poor parenting, family problems and disadvantage can have a lasting impact, particularly where needs are not subsequently addressed.

Studies of unemployment within the wider population meanwhile, show that socio-economic disadvantage can shape future life chances. Parental background has been identified as a factor in economic activity and living in council rented accommodation, having neither parent in full-time work or parents in manual occupations increases the likelihood of non-participation (DfES, 2000). Similarly, Bynner and Parson's (2002) identified parental income as the greatest predictor of education outcomes and thereby subsequent success in the labour market.

These factors are particularly relevant to care leavers, for we know that looked after young people are often a troubled group, presenting with high levels of difficulties as a result of early childhood experiences, which without support can impinge on progress throughout and after care. Additionally, government figures show that children and young people in care are largely drawn from disadvantaged families (Stein, 2004). Taken together this suggests that many care experienced young people carry with them a heightened risk of non-participation, a message that provides an increased emphasis on the need for a stable and positive experience of care.

### **In-care**

Future progress and life chances can also be shaped by young people's experiences in care. For many, care can have a positive impact, however, in some cases the care system can fall short of adequately compensating for earlier difficulties and disadvantage (SEU, 2003). In line with existing research, this study found that a number of features of the care experience were associated with poor outcomes after care. Amongst those found to have a particular impact on early career outcomes were risk behaviour, placement and education disruption and the age at leaving care.

For example, the looked after population has been shown to have a greater vulnerability to risk behaviour such as substance misuse (Newburn et al., 2002), offending (DfES, 2006b) and running away (SEU, 2002) when compared to the

general youth population. Such difficulties whilst in care can increase the risk of ongoing and additional difficulties after care, including unemployment and social exclusion. This was demonstrated in the research, which found that those involved in offending were more likely to continue to offend after care, fared worse in education attainment and career outcomes and were more likely than non-offenders in the sample to be in the NEET group ( $p=0.003$ ). Also, when compared to other young people, those who had problems with substance misuse appeared more likely to have poor career outcomes (38% and 69% respectively,  $p = 0.013$ ).

This suggests that involvement in risk behaviour, and the personal difficulties associated with it, can at best divert and at worst prohibit young people from establishing an early foothold on the career ladder. Being relatively free of difficulties meanwhile raises the likelihood of entering and sustaining participation.

A further predictor of poor outcomes was instability whilst in care. Placement movement is a common feature of the care experience for all too many young people (Jackson, 2002) and has been associated with failing to settle post-care. Stability in care meanwhile promotes successful outcomes (Stein, 2004). The majority of young people in the current study had experienced several moves, over one third (37%) moving four or more times during their last care episode. Notably, those who were doing well in terms of career outcomes were more likely to have had fewer placement moves ( $p=0.039$ ).

There was also some indication that the type of placement from which young people leave can impact on future participation. Those leaving foster care were less likely to be unemployed at baseline ( $p=0.046$ ) and appeared less likely to become unemployed over time. It is likely that this reflects the trend towards higher participation in post-16 education amongst the foster care group and the practice of placing more troubled teenagers in residential care.

A further feature of the care career that has been linked to difficulties after care, and one which carries much relevance to career progress, is the extent to which looked after young people experience education difficulties and disruption. Whilst much focus has been placed on the education attainment of those in and leaving care, as discussed later, of equal importance is the problem of education disengagement. High rates of exclusion and truancy are evident within the looked after population generally (HM Inspectorate, 2001) and this was reflected within the current study. Almost two-thirds (62%) of young people had been excluded and 71% reported truancy (37% of which was persistent).

Truancy and exclusion are linked to poor education performance and have been identified as predictors of future risk behaviour such as offending, substance misuse, social exclusion and unemployment (Youth Justice Board, 2002; Hibbert et al., 1990). This resonates with our own findings that those who had experienced truancy and exclusion were more likely to be NEET a year after care ( $p=0.003$ ).

On a practical level, missing out on school can result in missing out on work experience placements and on opportunities to develop confidence, interpersonal

skills and a sense of achievement through academic and non-academic activities. As a consequence, these young people may be ill-prepared for post-16 participation, placing them at a disadvantage in the youth labour market.

Finally, for young people in the current study, the most significant factor of the care career in relation to participation was the age at which they left care. Almost three-quarters (73%) of those leaving aged 18 or over were active in EET compared to a third of those who left aged 16 (33%) or 17 (31%). This provides a clear message that those who leave care earlier have a higher risk of non-participation; a finding mirrored by Courtney et al. (2005) who found that staying in care later facilitated participation in education and employment. It is likely that having time to complete their schooling, and gradual preparation for post-care living, provides young people with a breathing space in which to develop the skills and the circumstances from which to step onto the career ladder.

### **Post-care**

Circumstances after care also influence career outcomes. Negotiating the changes and challenges involved in transitioning from care to independent adult living is a testing and complex process, regardless of earlier experiences. For many it can prove overwhelming and destabilising, particularly in the absence of consistent and effective support networks. For young people in the sample, a lack of stability after care could undermine progress across all life areas, including finding and sustaining participation in EET.

The Work Foundation's categorisation of the causes of unemployment provides a useful framework for considering the specific experiences reported by young people in the study, in relation to participation and the barriers they faced in terms of their post-care circumstances. Barriers to employment are categorised as personal (skills, confidence, circumstances and lack of career information), institutional (benefit regimes, training programme design and capacity), local (core public services, childcare and transport) and structural (lack of demand, hiring behaviour, attraction of informal economy) (Jones et al., 2004).

Personal barriers include poor education attainment, which can have an enduring impact on career opportunities. Failure to achieve educationally is a widespread and much publicised difficulty for care-experienced youth. Over half (54%) of young people in the study had no qualifications, broadly reflecting the national picture (57%) (DfESb, 2006) and highlighting the considerable disparity to the general population, where only 5% leave school without qualifications. Unsurprisingly, we found that good education performance increases employability, with all but one of those in employment in the study having achieved a good education outcome ( $p=0.028$ ).<sup>3</sup>

Personal barriers to successful career outcomes were also located in the transitional process itself and the practicalities of post-care living. Unlike normative transitions,

which happen gradually, care leavers experience a number of key transitional events at an earlier age and in a shorter space of time. Finding a home, a career and rebuilding family and social networks tend to overlap in the immediate months after leaving care (Biehal et al., 1995) and can present competing demands and challenges for those adapting to post-care living and the resulting increased adult responsibilities.

Leaving care brings with it the need for suitable post-care accommodation as few care leavers can or do return to their families. Many young people, as was the case in this study, move to semi-independent or independent living and sustaining their independent living status can be difficult on a financial, emotional and practical level. Indeed, most leave care before the age of 18 having received limited preparation for independent living (Biehal et al., 1995) and subsequently, accommodation breakdown and movement are common. A third of young people in our sample had moved home three times and one in five had experienced five moves or more. Additionally, periods of homelessness affected 35%. Those who had experienced greater post-care housing instability were more likely to be unemployed ( $p=0.04$ ).

Whilst housing and career are mutually reinforcing, insecure accommodation can clearly undermine career stability and participation. Understandably perhaps, young people are more likely to give priority to more pressing needs such as homemaking, therefore for most care leavers (and those supporting them) securing and managing accommodation often takes precedence over finding a career (Dixon et al., 2006). This being so, care leavers may therefore have a delayed entry into EET participation when compared to other young people, who are more likely to establish a career path before leaving home.

Personal difficulties can also undermine the ability to find or sustain employment, education or training. As discussed earlier, care leavers may be struggling with involvement in substance misuse or offending. Our research found that having a good career outcome was associated with fewer difficulties such as offending ( $p<0.01$ ) and substance misuse ( $p=0.05$ ). Additionally, young people with mental health, emotional or behavioural difficulties were more likely to have a poor career outcome at follow-up ( $p<0.01$ ).

Institutional barriers such as benefits regimes meanwhile, are particularly relevant to care leavers. As we have seen, most enter the NEET group in the early years after care and are subsequently economically inactive (Broad, 1998; Dixon and Stein, 2005). Under the CLCA those below 18 receive financial support for living and housing costs from their local authority (with the exception of young parents and young disabled people). Those rising 18 are entitled to job seekers allowance and housing benefit. However, high accommodation costs and low pay for young people in work can conspire to increase the likelihood of falling into 'the benefits trap', where reliance on benefits can prove a disincentive to participation. Furthermore, rules for benefits entitlement, which require the claimant to be available for work, may prevent young people from participating in some forms of education or training.

In terms of local barriers, a lack of transport and childcare services can offer

additional challenges to finding and sustaining participation. Young people commented on a lack of choice in where they were housed, which could result in them being remote from education, employment and training providers. Although care leavers are entitled to EET related costs, including travel, via their leaving care team, difficulties with distance and travel could prove a disincentive to participation. Also, whilst finding opportunities that fit around childcare responsibilities, is an issue for all parents, it is perhaps more so for those young parents, such as care leavers, who are estranged from their family networks and therefore unable to rely on informal assistance.

Structural barriers affecting care leavers' access to career opportunities include wider labour market trends affecting the workforce in general. The demand for a more skilled labour force and changes to the availability and range of options can impact upon the career trajectories of all young people. However, poor attainment amongst the care leaver group places them at a greater disadvantage in a labour market that places a high premium on academic achievement.

Finally, financial circumstances can also influence young people's participation in EET. Pay scales for young adults are often structured to reflect the norm of remaining within the family home and receiving parental support until the early twenties. Income for those in the study who were employed ranged from £40 a week to a more respectable £250 and the average for those in education and training was £53 and £59 respectively. Payments for most forms of youth participation can, therefore, be insufficient to sustain independent living. This research suggested that some young people were either deterred from participation or encouraged to participate in unsuitable educational courses rather than employment, because the high costs of their accommodation meant that, as one PA concluded, '*it doesn't pay to work*'.

Overall, these obstacles present a significant challenge to young people who may already be struggling with the responsibilities of independent living, personal difficulties or motivation. They also present a challenge to those working to support young people into participation.

## **Increasing the chance of success and overcoming obstacles**

We have seen that participation in education, employment and training is lower for care leavers than the youth population generally and sustaining participation against a background of wider difficulties is a challenge. What are the implications for care and leaving care services? Our research highlights a number of factors that can facilitate or obstruct participation in EET and suggests ways in which young people can be assisted to overcome obstacles and maximise their potential and employability.

The findings demonstrate that leaving care later and from a stable care background, can increase the chances of both educational attainment at school, and post-16

participation in EET. Proposals to reduce placement movement and educational disruption are prominent in current policies, including the White Paper (DfES, 2007). Similarly, proposals to enable young people to remain in care longer are highlighted. Of course this requires allowing young people the option to remain in their placements, which brings with it the need for adequate placement availability and financing.

An increased focus on education and career planning whilst in care can also increase young people's potential and options within the labour market. A number of strategies exist to support the education of looked after children. The Children Act 2004 imposes a specific duty on local authorities to promote and increase the educational achievement of looked-after children, whilst measures intended to improve educational outcomes include a duty to give priority to looked-after children in the schools admissions process. However, there is also a need to strengthen the focus on careers within young people's care plans and pathway plans. This would enable an early assessment of strengths and aspirations and enable professionals to help young people address deficits in skills, abilities and motivation far sooner.

The research also suggests that services need to give greater attention to groups at higher risk of non-participation such as young people coping with emotional, mental health or behavioural problems and those involved in substance misuse or offending. As we have seen, those more troubled young people are more likely to be unemployed which can perpetuate further risk behaviour. Those with more complex needs will, therefore, require more intensive and structured support to address their immediate difficulties and facilitate post-16 participation. This was evident within the study sample with those who had multiple difficulties receiving more intensive support ( $p= 0.023$ ). However, providing more intensive support to trouble young people could have consequences for service resources. Leaving care staff noted that this group often drew heavily on their time and meant that those young people considered to be doing better received less support.

Findings also highlight the need to recognise that for some young people, an early and poorly prepared move into education, employment or training can prove overly challenging and, particularly if unsuccessful, ultimately discouraging. Strategies to support participation may well need to consider a longer-term approach to facilitate a delayed or gradual arrival into the career arena. Also, given the obstacles that many care leavers encounter in making the transition into EET, it is important that they receive consistent support to overcome earlier disadvantage and on-going difficulties. It has been seen in this research that a positive experience of care based on placement stability, educational participation and support to reduce risk behaviour can make a difference to outcomes, and that the opportunity to make a gradual transition from care and achieve post-care stability can facilitate successful post-16 participation. However, even where these conditions were not readily apparent, a common feature for those making progress was the provision of consistent and focused support,

whether from professionals or from friends and family.

Support to increase young people's career potential and opportunities is a key part of leaving care policy. The CLCA places a duty on local authorities to support young people, in some cases up to the age of 24, as they make the transition to independent living. This includes help with accommodation, finances, developing positive self-esteem and the ability and resources to achieve their aspirations as well as career choices. In terms of specific careers support, it was found that local authorities employed a range of measures to tackle the causes of non-participation and increase employability. Some leaving care teams in the study had engaged a member of staff with a specific remit for increasing participation. In other areas Connexions advisors were seconded to the leaving care team to work with young people in and leaving care whilst in others, multi-agency steering groups had been established to co-ordinate access to education and employment and to monitor local outcomes. Local authorities also offered a range of initiatives to increase care leavers' skills. For example, they offered workshops on basic literacy, numeracy and information technology and access to mainstream initiatives such as the New Deal. More, however, could be made of Corporate Parenting (CP) as a means of increasing career opportunities for care leavers. For example, employability schemes could be established which involve ring-fencing work experience placements or jobs within the council and guaranteeing interviews for care leavers who apply for council jobs. Although such a strategy was mentioned in some areas, it appeared to be fairly limited in scope and take-up.

Similarly, local businesses appeared to be a much under-used resource, in that none of the participating local authorities had drawn in the support of local employers to increase participation for care leavers. Through the principle of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and initiatives such as Business in the Community, local businesses give a commitment to supporting vulnerable groups in the local area by providing work or sponsorship. One example is the Starting Blocks Project, which involved a voluntary agreement between a local authority and a large private company to provide a programme of supported work experience placements to care leavers. Findings from a pilot project suggest that supported work placements can offer an opportunity to develop or refresh skills, build confidence and self-esteem as well as challenge or confirm career goals and importantly, for more vulnerable young people who lack the confidence to engage in EET, provide a stepping stone to mainstream initiatives (Dixon, 2006). At a more strategic level, therefore, CP and CSR can provide important resources and opportunities for helping care leavers gain work related experience, and drive up their potential and participation.

## Conclusion

The findings discussed in this paper reflect and confirm existing research and practice evidence that: many care leavers continue to face considerable challenges in finding and sustaining education, employment and training in the early years after care. Findings also highlight the association between key feature of the care and leaving care experiences and career outcomes, demonstrating that many care leavers face disadvantage as a legacy of their earlier experiences and post-care circumstances.

Recent initiatives to engage care leavers include promoting further education, both as a pathway to higher education and work and as a valuable step in its own right, alongside facilitating entry into training and work experience programmes to increase work skills and readiness. These are imperative and require proper funding and ongoing monitoring. However, despite an increase in the range of options and initiatives to increase participation, there remains a significant gap in achievement and engagement for the care leaver group when compared to their non-care peers. Factors associated with non-participation can be located within the pre-care, in-care and post-care experience. In recognising these obstacles, carers, social work professionals and leaving care services can target support more effectively.

This research concluded that having a solid foundation from which to make the transition to adulthood is most important. Factors that enable young people to maximise their career chances include identifying emotional and health needs early, addressing the causes of truancy and exclusion, and increasing education attainment for young people in and leaving care. Increasing in-care stability and, importantly, delaying the age of leaving care are also crucial. However, whilst these messages are echoed within the White Paper (DfES, 2007), they carry wider implications for the availability of care places for young adults and the retention and recruitment of foster carers more generally.

Post-16 participation cannot be addressed in isolation. Whilst much can be done to better equip and prepare looked after young people for life after care, wider structural factors can remain a challenge. Giving consideration to the type of accommodation available to young people leaving care, including the location and cost, is a crucial factor in smoothing the pathway towards participation. Adequate pay for those in EET and greater flexibility for undertaking training and work experience for those on benefits can also lead to increased and sustained participation.

Finally, holistic support after care can help young people address personal difficulties, reduce risk behaviour and secure stable accommodation, thus providing a more conducive context for embarking upon education, employment or training. It is without doubt amongst the most important factors in improving outcomes. Focused, consistent support whether from leaving care professionals, other agencies or family and friends can turn poor outcomes around and help sustain success, both in terms of career and life chances in general. These are enduring challenges. The White Paper (DFES, 2007) and the subsequent Children and Young Person's Bill

provide a new and important opportunity for services to work together to meet these challenges and to enable young people in and leaving care to reach their full potential and achieve economic and general well-being after care.

## Notes

1. In most cases the p-value is given if the test was statistically significant (i.e.  $p=0.05$  or less). This simply means that the probability of the result or association happening by chance is less than 5 in 100.
2. A 'good' career outcome was assigned where the young person was economically active and progress was rated as positive by the PA. If either was rated negatively, a 'poor' outcome was assigned. Young parents were not included in the outcome analysis.
3. The PAF A2 indicator of one or more GCSEs or GNVQs at any level was used as a measure of a 'good' educational outcome.

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