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TURNING 18: Independence or cliff edge?

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Indicators of child and adult well-being for children who are and have been in the care system are poor compared to peers in the general population. This includes measures of educational attainment, employment, mental ill health, physical health, involvement in the criminal justice system, homelessness and substance misuse (Meltzer et al., 2003; DfE, 2017a; 2017b).

The lack of support provided to those leaving care has become an increasingly prominent policy and practice issue over the last thirty years. In the UK, most recently, the 2017 Children and Social Work Act gave new legal duties to local authorities to provide advice and support to all care leavers until the age of 25. However aspects of financial, housing and practical support provided to care leavers after the age of 18 remains discretionary, and there is substantial variability in provision of support between, and sometimes within, local authority areas.

On March 31st, 2017 there were 72,670 children in care, with over 100,000 children who were in care at some point during the previous year. The number of children in care has been on an upward trajectory since the mid-1990s with consistent increases in care numbers over the last decade (DfE, 2017a).

This study focuses on the experiences of residents of a nine bed therapeutic unit for young women in local authority care between the ages of 16 - 18, where the aim is to prepare them for responsibilities that come with that transition to adulthood. Young women living in this unit have often had a series of placement breakdowns, acute mental health needs, a history of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and present with additional social and behavioural needs. Their social workers have identified them as needing a higher level of support to prepare them to live independently. Interviews were conducted with unit residents and some of the professionals working to prepare them for independent living.

Few studies have focussed specifically on young people entering a care environment in later adolescence- a context that gives a particular time pressure to the work involved, given the legal age of adulthood is fast approaching. Outcomes for those who enter care later, or are in high support accommodation towards the end of care, are generally poorer (Centrepint, 2017). Young people's own perspectives about their own support, needs and conceptions of the future are under-represented in the research literature. This study sought to foreground these young women's perspectives on their experiences in order to develop policy recommendations which are located squarely within the realities of young people's lived experience.

1. TURNING 18 - 'A CLIFF EDGE'

For care leavers, turning 18 is not just a significant birthday, it is the official end of legal care, when "the relationship to everything that has supported you changes whether you are aware of it or not" (Professional). Respondents felt that young people in care found these changes difficult to understand. One professional explained how broaching the subject of young people turning 18 felt like preparing young people for a 'cliff edge':

"It was just like giving this young person a cliff edge really and saying - here you go, that's what's in front of you [...]... not a bridge in sight, but a cliff edge into a black pool of 'independence'."

Residents' understanding of this 'cliff edge' varied, and all were confused about why and when support would end. For young people living highly complex lives, this turning point often engendered anxiety and stress. 'Shit', 'scary' and 'overwhelming' were all adjectives used by them to describe their 18th birthdays:

"I don't have the capacity to take on all of the responsibilities I have to before I turn 18... and then turn 18 and still have all those responsibilities... and then more on top of it, like, I just don't have the mental capability of doing all of that" (Alicia).

Loss was identified as a significant theme for both professionals and young people. Young people leaving care, with lives marked by loss, are confronted with a complex process of legally becoming an adult, as well as having to accept the loss of a social worker as part of that transition. This person "could be, depending on your situation, one of the closest people to you" (Professional).

Frustrations about the arbitrary nature of 18 as a 'cut off' point for service eligibility were shared by young people and professionals:

"They are in the middle of a psychotic episode and we're moving them on just because it's their birthday ... there was no choice" (Professional).

A recurring response from the residents highlighted that they still felt young despite being 18 and being expected to be an adult:

"I have all the same feelings, all the same thoughts, all the same emotions I did six months ago when I was 17, but it doesn't change anything, it just makes me legally an adult" (Jenny).

2. INDEPENDENCE AS A PROBLEMATIC GOAL

Every resident struggled to conceptualise just what it would mean to be an adult. Young people leaving care are working towards a goal of being 'independent' when they turn 18, but young people and professionals questioned how to prepare someone for such a "completely abstract" and "alien" concept. Professionals and young people said the word independence was "overused", "flung around", and had "lost all meaning in the system".

One young person felt independence meant “quite a lot” to them as it signified a level of trust by professionals “if they’re showing you a bit of independence then it means they trust you a bit more as well I think” (Helen) - she gave the example of being allowed take the bus to school in her children’s home, or go to a meeting on her own, as steps towards demonstrating she could manage independently.

While some said they could not wait until they were independent, others reported feeling frightened and overwhelmed. Some associated independence with being “lonely” and “scared, very scared” or not knowing if they would be able to cope. Many agreed they had “no clue” what independence would feel like and questioned how it was possible to prepare for it, despite being given the opportunity to learn ‘independence skills’:

“when you are being independent you don’t have the choice to not be independent [...] we don’t know because we haven’t had that chance to be like ‘OK here’s a flat, live here for a week and see how you do” (Jenny).

3. THE DILEMMA OF SUPPORT

The young people universally appreciated and wanted support “I actually love the support I get” (Helen), “Yeah! It is so useful - everything. You get medical attention, support to doctors, everything just gets done with you and supports you” (Chantal - 16), and supportive professionals were seen to be those who were able to build relationships with young people that were professional and boundaried.

The young people spoke about peer support being just as important as professional support:

“I have a lot of friends that have depression and stuff and talking to them about it is easier than talking to like a staff member because like they’ve gone through like the same things” (Alicia).

Both professionals and young people warned about the impact of one-size-fits-all support: “if you have the same thing for everyone, it doesn’t necessarily cater to everyone” (Chantal). One young person reported how she had seen this to be the cause of many placement breakdowns for herself and young people she was placed with:

“not only does the placement break down but the person themselves kind of does as well... because you’re like giving them some sort of support but it has to be a support that they need” (Alicia).

The impact of unsuitable support, and a system not tailored to need was summarised by one professional:

“It is scary to think that the system that is put in place to care, ends up repeating the lack of care which they experienced in the early years of their life which put them into care in the first place! So they are trying to recover in a system which doesn’t let them recover, and makes it worse” (Professional).

4. WORKING WITHIN A BROKEN SYSTEM

While turning 18 can mark the abrupt ending of support, there was evidence that this was variable and subject to the discretion of social workers and local authorities. This was noted by both professionals and young people:

“It depends on the worker, it depends on the manager, it depends on how much people interpret legislation, it depends on which local authority ... but it still hinges on that legal point of turning 18” (Professional).

“So I have one friend. She’s 18, turning 19 this year, and she’s doing really good, because she has help... and I know another 18 year old, where like, it’s not really going too well for her, because she had less support” (Asha).

Professionals recognised and reflected on their own anxiety about the arbitrary ending of services for 18 year olds and suggested that this was endemic of most professionals:

“When a young person is near 18 [...] it feels like this urgent panic where you have to get this in place, or this, this and this needs to be thought about when someone is 17 and you’re always thinking what’s next, where are they going next?”.

Professionals were aware that the focus on young people’s needs are lost in the panic to prepare them for when they legally become adults. As a result there is an absence of celebrating and affirming a young person’s achievements up to and in turning 18:

“It’s sad because [...] you lose sight of this really important thing for the young person, which is their 18th birthday and, in a family, that would be a celebration [...] it wouldn’t be a rush to dot your I’s and cross your T’s [...] and that really does get lost in the administrative side of changing over” (Professional).



Recommendations

- Our current system design and legal framework creates a system-wide artificial panic. Local authorities and agencies supporting young people need to address the consequences of the 'cliff edge', plan to reduce its impact and develop a robust safety net for those who are struggling.
- Our research demonstrates the difficulty of knowing what 'independence' looks and feels like before it is experienced. Central and local government must move away from a uniform, generic, approach to supporting young people who are preparing to leave care. Each care leaver has different needs and capabilities; services need to have space to accommodate these differences in order to offer support in meaningful and creative ways.
- Young people need to have a central role in helping shape the design, delivery and evaluation of the support they get so that support systems meet need.
- Assessment for support should be based on need rather than age. It is imperative that young people are not restricted from accessing services when they reach 18.
- All local authorities should formally review the impact of turning 18 in the care system, and co-produce an effective assessment tool and future support plan in consultation with looked after children and care leavers.
- Policy guidance should encourage agencies working with young people preparing to leave care to recognise reaching 18 as an important positive milestone: it should be seen as a cause for celebration of a young person's life and a point at which a young person looks forward to their future life aspirations with optimism.

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ABOUT THE KEY RESEARCHER

Alice Field has worked with care leavers in London in various guises for the last 10 years, during which time completed an MSc in Child and Adolescent Psychodynamic Therapy. She is a Service Manager at Young Futures, and helped create the Therapeutic Approach which runs across both services, and is keen to develop and support more services to work with Care Leavers in a way that meets their complex needs, and is not dictated by their age.

Young Futures is a Community Interest Company set up in 2006. We provide accommodation and support to young people (16 – 25) leaving care in London. We use creative, evidence-based, therapeutic interventions and place young people in high quality, aspirational residential and semi-independent accommodation.

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