

Improving Outcomes for Young People Leaving Care in Brent

Executive Summary

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Care experienced children and young people are potentially amongst the most vulnerable individuals within our society. A disrupted upbringing, lack of parental attachments and emotional instability are all common amongst children in care. Outcomes for these young people upon leaving care are distinctly worse than for those young people in the general population. Brent have a Public Service Agreement Target to improve education, training and employment outcomes for care leavers to 60% of those achieved by all same age young people by 2004/05.

In this context Barnardo's Policy and Research Unit was commissioned by Brent Council to help inform the development of their services for looked after children and care leavers. The research involved interviews with 13 local authority staff, and interviews and group discussions with 23 care experienced children and young people. The practices of leaving care teams in 4 other local authorities were also mapped to provide comparison examples for Brent Leaving Care Team.

Key Findings

Staff stakeholders and children and young people identified a number of similar issues which impact upon the services received by, and outcomes for, children and young people in care. Their views, and the information gathered through the mapping work is reflected in the following key findings.

- Education is not given sufficient priority when planning for young people's placements and future options. Concerns were raised around low levels of educational support and knowledge of social workers and carers within Brent.
- Children are leaving care with a lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills though there is no established method for assessing these skills.
- The educational support provided by the Looked After Children and Education Team is highly valued although does not include young people placed out of borough, in secure units or unaccompanied asylum seeking children.
- The transition process between the Children in Need Teams and the Leaving Care Team is currently inefficient; limited communications between the teams were highlighted by a number of staff. Concerns were also raised as to the responsibilities that either team should have around preparation for leaving care.
- There is a lack of preparation work or guidance for young people leaving care. Stakeholders highlighted financial support and guidance as a particular area which required development. Other local authorities provide support in detailed guidance or structured training programmes.
- Pathway Plans have not been completed efficiently in the past and neither staff nor children considered them to be a useful or meaningful document.
- Concerns were raised by the vast majority of staff and young people over the transition of care leavers from foster care into semi-independent or independent accommodation at inappropriate periods. Many highlighted the negative impact this may cause upon education and employment opportunities.

- Young people did not feel the degree of practical and emotional support within semi-independent accommodation was sufficient.
- The Connexions Personal Advisor provides invaluable support to care leavers though works only part time. Several other boroughs were found to have at least one full time Connexions Personal Advisor in addition to specialist staff responsible for education, training and employment.
- Disabled young people are likely to remain in education until age 19 although face limited future employment opportunities. Support and care plans for these young people did not take adequate consideration of employment.

Key Recommendations

These research findings highlight that improving outcomes for young people leaving care is not just about improving the practice of one team but of ensuring a unified and resourced approach across all services. The following recommendations are made:

- Ensure that policies and protocols for all work involving care experienced children and young people are completed, up to date, and well distributed amongst all relevant staff. A process for regular communication and information sharing needs to be established between core teams.
- Increase the number of principal social work staff within the Leaving Care Team to ensure that more innovative work and support can be developed for care leavers (including drop in support, social groups, consultations and events).
- Involve children and carers in the development of Pathway Plans using creative methods to increase children's feelings of ownership and carers understanding of their child's needs and aspirations.
- Guidance material for care leavers needs to be published and distributed to children before they leave care. Life skills training needs to be offered on a continuing basis to all care leavers before and after they leave foster care.
- Ensure that the Looked After Children's Education Team continue to provide support to looked after children. The teams role should also be widened to encompass unaccompanied asylum seeking children, those in secure units and those placed out of borough. Additional support may also be required for those in further and higher education
- Increase levels of awareness and support for children leaving care in continuing into further education and training.
- Additional support from a specialist worker within the leaving care team may increase the engagement of those young people currently not using Connexions and therefore the education, training and employment outcomes for care leavers in Brent.

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