

# **Someone to Care**

## **Experiences of leaving care**

*'If I had parents to go to, I would go to my parents and ask them for help. Or I'd be with my parents so the strain wouldn't be so much. But I don't have anybody. I don't have anyone to turn to.'* (Mark, 18, London)<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

*'You need some supporters'* said Nicola, a 20 year old care leaver moving into her own home in an unfamiliar area of Liverpool. Although her parents and other adults in her life had let her down, her tenancy support worker was a steadfast presence, providing reliable care that went well beyond the practicalities of the housing issues that were his remit. To her he was *'like my daddy, mummy, uncle and cousin'*.

We have hopeful expectations for our own children, which children leaving care often have to live without. Without suitable parental support, these young people risk having a difficult transition into adult life.

This report, based on research with care leavers, contrasts the emotional circumstances they experience with the expectations we have for our own children, and looks at some of the ways in which Barnardo's is supporting care leavers.

Throughout our research, we found support workers who went the extra mile to offer stressed, and sometimes unpredictable, young people a listening ear, a reliable presence and constant encouragement in the same way parents support their own youngsters.

---

<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of care leavers.

## **The policy context**

The Government has made huge strides forward in the support that is given to young people leaving care in England. Key initiatives such as the extension of 'staying put' foster care arrangements until 21, the Care Leavers' Charter, Junior ISAs, and extra checks for those at risk of leaving care at 16, together with improvements by the Department for Work and Pensions over benefits for care leavers, will all contribute to a better system and improved outcomes for these young people.

Not all care leavers, however, will benefit from some of these important changes. 'Staying put' will work only for those young people who end their formal care experience in a stable foster care placement that is willing for them to stay.<sup>2</sup> Many others, including those living in residential care, are made to leave care when they turn 18, even if they don't feel ready. The Government should build on its strong progress in supporting those in foster care by extending support to 21 for children in other care settings.

Many care leavers get the support they need and make positive transitions to adulthood. Often local authorities demonstrate good practice in their work with care leavers, and Barnardo's works in partnership with many on service provision. However, there are still too many care leavers – often the most vulnerable – who are not getting the help they need.

## **Growing up alone**

Parents know adolescence is a challenging time for teenagers growing up. They help their children navigate the stresses of first love, studying, learning to drive, branching out socially, having new adventures, taking risks, and becoming responsible adults.

Care leavers often lack the family support that most teenagers take for granted. 93 per cent of all 16- and 17-year olds<sup>3</sup> in the UK still live with their parents, so usually rely on parental support throughout this vital stage of growing up. By contrast, a third of 16- and 17-year old care leavers in England move to live independently,<sup>4</sup> whilst their peers not in care often have family support when they are taking exams, selecting university courses, settling into jobs and apprenticeships, and forming the friendships that will follow them into adult life.

---

<sup>2</sup> Department for Education, Children looked after in England, including adoption, December 2013, Table D3 2012-13  
<sup>3</sup> Potter-Collins, A and Beaumont, J (2012), Measuring national well-being-measuring young people's wellbeing, 2012, ONS

<sup>4</sup> Department for Education, Care leavers in England: local authority data pack, October 2012

## **The research**

Barnardo's currently works with over 2,500 care leavers, providing commissioned services such as leaving care support and supported housing options, as well as additional support like advocacy, participation, counselling and emotional support, sexual health care, and advice on employment and training.

In late 2013, Barnardo's carried out qualitative research to understand more about the most vulnerable care leavers and the support provided to offer them the best help with making the transition to adulthood.

This first report from our research, based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with 62 young people, plus the workers supporting them in 15 services, describes the challenges faced by care leavers as they make the transition to adult life.

Despite the difficulties they face, some young people in this research stood out as being resilient, achieving qualifications, acquiring jobs and building stable relationships with minimal support. Barnardo's research explored the circumstances that made some others so vulnerable, and heard about solutions that helped them to cope better.

## **A troubled start**

Young people leaving care have usually had difficult early experiences in their families as well as the disruptions of being in care. Statistically, children in care and care leavers tend to experience poorer outcomes than others in their age group, and a particular area of concern is their emotional wellbeing.

The Department for Education found that half of all looked after children aged 5-16 in England raise concerns regarding their emotional and behavioural wellbeing.<sup>5</sup> A Department of Health review on measures to prevent suicide in England noted that "looked after children and care leavers are between four and five times more likely to self-harm in adulthood. They are also at five-fold increased risk of all childhood mental, emotional and behavioural problems and at six- to seven-fold increased risk of conduct disorders".<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Department for Education (December 2013), Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England, as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/216928/Preventing-Suicide-in-England-A-cross-government-outcomes-strategy-to-save-lives.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/216928/Preventing-Suicide-in-England-A-cross-government-outcomes-strategy-to-save-lives.pdf)

Most children are taken into care because their families are neglectful or abusive.<sup>7</sup> Care leavers interviewed by Barnardo's researchers for this report remembered "living off scraps" as small children, having violent or addicted parents, or parents who couldn't be bothered to take them to school.

The number of children being taken into care is increasing.<sup>8</sup> As many of these at-risk children have inadequate parental care, they are placed with foster carers or in a residential care home. A shortage of suitable carers means children in care may go on to have numerous moves of placement,<sup>9</sup> and be sent to areas far from their home. Taken together, this troubled start and disrupted care journey can have negative consequences on their emotional and social development.

All of the care leavers that we interviewed said they had worked with several social workers during their time in care. The most vulnerable and distressed young adults interviewed for this report spoke of having lost count of the number of foster placements they had been with during their childhood. Far too many had no consistent adult to rely on growing up and nowhere to call home; it is those care leavers who often have the worst outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

### Leaving care experiences

For most families, the gradual process of preparing young people to leave home and become independent takes place over several years. Recent changes to legislation will allow some young people to stay for longer in existing foster care placements, which will help ease the transition for many.

For many others though, 'leaving care' can still mean living independently of adult support from 16. Care leavers are given statutory support by local authorities and partner providers, including being prepared for moving on through a Pathway Plan, and each young person should be given a designated personal advisor to help them with their transition out of care.

For many care leavers, however, their experience of leaving home can feel sudden and raw. Nicola described it like this:

*'Once you're 16, you move out of your foster homes and then semi-independent. And then you're 18, leaving care. The day of your 18<sup>th</sup>, they will kick you out.'*

---

<sup>7</sup> 62% of the 68,110 looked after children in England at 31 March 2013 were provided with a service due to abuse or neglect. Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, December 2013.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cafcass.gov.uk/news/2014/january/december-2013-care-demand-statistics.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> Of all children looked after in England at 31 March 2013, 11 per cent had had three or more foster care placements. Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoption*, September 2013

<sup>10</sup> There is substantial academic evidence that frequent placement moves and instability lead to poorer outcomes for children in care, *In Loco Parentis*, Demos / Barnardo's, 2010.

*Interviewer: So you pack your suitcase on the day of your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and you're off?*

*Nicola: Yeah. That's very simply what it is'*  
(20 year old woman, Liverpool)

Claire said '*I was too young at 16'*; but almost immediately she met and became engaged to Paul, another care leaver in a neighbouring flat. At 17½ she was planning her wedding and choosing dresses with no-one to share the experience with but her support worker, having been removed from her violent, addicted mother as a toddler.

David described his feelings at the suddenness of his move out of care:

*'It's like they tricked me. They didn't even tell me where I was going. They just put my stuff in a case and took me there'.* (David, 19 year old, London)

Our research indicated that young people leaving residential care appeared to be less well prepared to move on at 18 than those who had been in the family setting of a foster home. Several workers explained that this was because of the high levels of attention given in residential homes. Approaching 18, they needed more time to experience and develop independent living skills, just like young people in foster care, or indeed in their own families.

## **The difficulties faced by care leavers**

The anxieties experienced by some young people leaving care are mainly caused because they need **someone to care** about them. As they start having adult relationships and dealing with adult problems they need **someone to talk to** and sometimes just **someone to be with**. When young people have their first experience of living independently, they need **someone to set standards**, and **someone to show the way**. Unless these basics are resolved, care leavers may find it difficult to make decisions about education and employment, with longer term implications for their livelihoods. Care leavers can struggle with those core aspects of day to day life because they lack the regular and consistent guidance and acceptance a parent would give.

The adult support they do have comes from dedicated, but often stretched, support workers. With caseloads ranging between 15 and 40 young people amongst the support workers we spoke to, it is difficult for them to give the same attention a parent would give with the day to day aspects of growing

up. Other people helping care leavers include advocacy workers and children's rights officers, tenancy support workers, participation workers, and employment and training advisers.

### **1. Someone to talk to**

Traumatic experiences in the early years, compounded by unstable care placements and uncertainty as they grow up, mean some care leavers are less able to cope with their feelings than other young people their age. However, we expect them to deal with more adult responsibilities than their peers from a younger age. Often young care leavers' emotions are close to the surface, with anger replacing a sense of control over their circumstances, and frustration covering the despair they feel. Without a safe place and caring adults to help them express and contain their emotions, some care leavers could appear disruptive or hard to reach. Sadly, for too many of the young people we interviewed, emotional disturbances had developed into significant mental health difficulties.

Because of their early experiences and unsettled lives the most vulnerable care leavers can have difficulty forming satisfactory attachments. The stable presence of a trustworthy support worker who offers warmth, acceptance and support, but challenges when needed, can be a vital support for these emotional problems. 21 year old Andrew said *'The best help is someone to speak to. I would have loved that, to speak about me. There is not enough of that. When I was a wee guy I had some serious issues and I needed someone to speak to.'*

This account given by an employment support worker sums up how desperate young people can be for someone to share their emotional burden. Elizabeth told us how she had been in A&E with a girl following a serious self-harm incident:

*'But I mean, she was refusing to speak to her foster parents. When we went to the hospital, she asked me to speak on her behalf. She opened up to me massively that night. I just happened to be the one person who was there; it wasn't that we had an amazing relationship or anything. She told me everything and said, "Right, I don't want my foster parents in the room, I don't want anyone. Elizabeth can do all my talking" which, you know, was what it was. I just remembered, at the end of the night, as I was leaving she reached into her bag and pulled out a razor blade. She said, "Here you go, you can take that with you now. I don't need it." On reflection, I think a lot of it was a cry for help. I don't think it was, realistically, much danger of a real suicide.'*

The consistent support of one trusted and reliable support worker made a world of difference to young people who were struggling with mental health issues. Lisa had been taken into care at 15 years old as her responsibilities as a young carer for her mother had become too much for her. Once in supported accommodation, her mental health gave way, as she said: *'I was suffering really badly with depression and anxiety. When I was in the supported accommodation, they actually attempted to save my life because I was so down. And [my worker] came along and he – he just gets you up, just like that. He just really got my confidence back. I felt silly for what I'd done in the end. He made everything seem so much easier and just is amazing.'*

#### How Barnardo's provides someone to talk to:

As well as offering caring support day to day, some of Barnardo's services are developing partnerships with local mental health services to incorporate counsellors, life coaches, or mental health nurses into their services so someone is available to help vulnerable young people access the therapies they need. For example, Helen had left a violent boyfriend: *'Barnardo's helped me to stay strong and ignore him and they got me a counsellor so I could tell her how stressed and tired I was. I didn't know what to do with myself; I was coming in here every day and speaking to the counsellor.'*

## **2. Someone to be with**

Most of the care leavers interviewed for this research lived alone and found it tough and lonely. Recent changes allowing some to stay in care for longer are very welcome and should help many young people transition out of care. For some care leavers, however, this may not be suitable, such as for the most vulnerable who may have not developed a strong relationship with existing foster carers. Many we spoke to had been moved, some on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, some suddenly, from busy children's homes or foster families to a *'dingy flat'* or damp house where they were expected to manage on their own.

Very few young people live alone. In the UK, one in three men and one in five women aged 20 to 34 live with their parents<sup>11</sup>, and only 8 per cent of this age group<sup>12</sup> live completely alone. Young care leavers who live independently, therefore, are living in exceptionally isolating circumstances

---

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/young-adults-living-with-parents/2013/info-young-adults.html>. 65 per cent of men aged 20 live with their parents and 52 per cent of women. Nearly half of all 24 year old men still live with their parents.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776\\_266357.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_266357.pdf)

and are expected to manage household affairs and difficult tenancies on limited budgets that would be challenging even for people older than them.

*In London, James told us 'Yeah I hated living on my own. I couldn't cope at first. I didn't know how to pay bills. I knew how to cook and clean and stuff; I just didn't know how to do everything else. I didn't know how to pay bills or council tax; I didn't know what the letters meant when they came through the post'.*

For some young people the situation felt much more desperate, with Anthony admitting: *'If am alone too long I self-harm and think of suicide and stuff. I try to keep my days and nights busy 24/7. It is hard but I get by'.*

In a rural area of England, Louise had tried two independent flats, but then went into supported lodgings in a family home when she developed depression and low self-esteem living alone. She had formed a warm and trusting relationship with the adults in her lodgings and was planning to visit them for Christmas dinner. This caring adult support had turned her from a depressed, solvent abusing teenager to a young adult working with visually impaired adults and leading participation groups for care leavers locally.

#### How Barnardo's provides someone to be with:

Barnardo's services and their partners recognised the difficulties caused by loneliness by organising communal activities for young people to alleviate this:

*'When we set up the Wednesday evenings, originally we were going to do an interview session one week, and a CV session the next etc. But actually, they got more benefit from just coming and having a chat and interacting with each other. We do a cook-and-eat every week. Just having a place to go that was fun or just something to do was of more benefit. And they get a hot meal; which they have to make themselves.'* (Carol, personal advisor).

At several services young people were welcome to just drop in and just sit around in the bustling office. Young people interviewed for this research were selected at random from those who happened to turn up to services on whichever day we visited; so when we asked Robert why he had turned up to the office that afternoon he told us *'I come into Barnardo's every day that I am working and it is nice to sit down and have a cuppa and a chat.'*

In Liverpool, working in partnership with the local authority, Barnardo's tenancy support workers gave lonely young people someone they could rely on. Joanne's relationships with most professionals were guarded, but she

spoke fondly of her 'lovely' tenancy worker, who put himself out time and again to give her the reliability and nurture she couldn't find elsewhere.

Senior staff at one service specially opened the office on Christmas day for any care leavers who wanted to help prepare and share Christmas lunch as a group rather than be on their own. *My Pad* in Bury was staffed at Christmas anyway; although the tenants all said they had somewhere to go on Christmas day, if arrangements fell through they could return to their familiar accommodation and have someone to be with.

### **3. Someone to set standards**

For those care leavers without a family or home base to fall back on, learning how to live independently can be challenging. Some move into housing they are not emotionally or socially equipped to deal with because they are too young and because they have few adults to turn to for advice. If housing options fall through, care leavers may not be able to 'boomerang' back to the family home as other children might.<sup>13</sup>

We spoke to some vulnerable care leavers who described how they had become homeless and were placed in unsuitable B&Bs or hostels where other residents were using drugs and had threatening behaviour. Responsible parents would not allow their child to visit friends in these settings, let alone live there. Of course no one should sleep on the streets, but bed and breakfasts and all-age hostels are often unsuitable and are not a sustainable solution to homelessness for young care leavers.

It was the youngest care leavers we interviewed who reported they risked being evicted and made homeless because of rowdy behaviour in their accommodation. Many parents might deliberate carefully before leaving a 16- or 17-year old alone in the home even for a weekend.<sup>14</sup> However, several of the care leavers in this research had been placed in their own tenancies at that age and had been unable to control their friends' behaviour when they called round.

#### How Barnardo's sets standards:

In Barnardo's supported accommodation in Bury, setting standards for appropriate behaviour is managed firmly but fairly through house rules, decided with tenants' needs in mind; a support worker was on site at all times and, like a parent, needed to know where young people were going out to and how long for.

---

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/young-people-housing-charter-summary.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/am\\_i\\_being\\_unreasonable/a1504569-To-go-abroad-for-a-week-and-leave-my-16-year-old-son-home-alone](http://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/am_i_being_unreasonable/a1504569-To-go-abroad-for-a-week-and-leave-my-16-year-old-son-home-alone)

Barnardo's emergency Crash Pad in Northumberland (supported by Northern Rock Foundation and the local authority) provides emergency housing for care leavers through eight weeks' intensive support with a family specially trained to work with young people and get them ready to move back to a more independent lifestyle. The family helps with all the practical skills of daily life as well as being available for emotional warmth and company. Young people were then better prepared practically and emotionally, to move into supported lodgings which still give them the support of a family home, but with increasing levels of independence.

#### **4. Someone to show the way**

Recent research for Lloyds Bank found that 70 per cent of young adults in the UK receive some form of financial help from their parents after they leave home, with 15 per cent having help with utility bills and 22 per cent receiving money from parents to help with day to day living expenses.<sup>15</sup>

Without that parental back up, budgeting and debt became a serious source of anxiety for many care leavers. Every care leaver that we interviewed for this research mentioned this as a difficulty, although some were clearly managing better than others, especially older young people who were settled into a work or college placement. Most of the young people we interviewed were not in a sufficiently stable situation to get a job or go to college, so they relied on welfare benefits for their food, energy bills and council tax, with Housing Benefit being paid directly to the housing provider. For some of the younger ones, it took a while to learn that their fortnightly payments were not to be spent all at once, so they quickly got into debt.

Managing utility bills can be confusing, so although it is a more costly way to pay for energy, young people told us that they preferred key meters.

*Mark: Because you don't know how much you're using [when they bill you]. When I'm at home I try to use as little as possible. Like my gas, I know what I'm using because of my gas card. But the electricity – I don't know how much I'm using.*

*Andrew: I think all the flats they put young people in should have key meters in them.*

*Mark: Yeah. It's just easier that way.*

---

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/media/pdfs/LTSB/2013/0211\\_Bank.pdf](http://www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/media/pdfs/LTSB/2013/0211_Bank.pdf)

A few care leavers described experiencing benefit sanctions and delays, sometimes continuing for many weeks, which led to serious problems coping financially. The longest delays described were at the moment of leaving care: just when young people are learning to live alone for the first time and manage their money. A pregnant 20-year old had had her benefits sanctioned due to a mix up over her change of address; at the time of the interview for this research, she had only some potato wedges to eat until her benefits were resumed. The Barnardo's service was able to provide access to supermarket vouchers and food parcels to help this young woman until her benefits had been restored.

#### How Barnardo's shows care leavers the way:

Some of Barnardo's services organised training courses to coach 16-18 year olds about the adult responsibilities of being a good tenant, gaining life skills such as paying bills, cleaning, cooking and behaving appropriately. The young people taking these courses felt they had benefited and also gained a qualification, perhaps the first qualification success they had achieved, thus building their confidence to take other courses. Louise had taken this course so knew whom to ask for help and what to say when the council took her council tax payments twice when a computer error showed her as being in arrears. Emma had been sent on a course arranged by Barclays Bank which she found informative.

In Barnardo's supported accommodation, a shared approach to learning skills was adopted, which helps build young people's self-esteem:

*'I'm Helen's key worker but she's teaching me the culinary skills, because you're such a good cook, aren't you? You showed me how to make soup last week. So it's about learning from each other as well. Even though we're staff, we learn from the young people; it's about working together as a team.'*

A lack of advice day to day could cause young people to fall behind with rent and get evicted. However, one Barnardo's service was working painstakingly with 18½ year old Ruth. She had lived in seven hostels or B&Bs in the previous 18 months and needed constant encouragement to sign on and claim her benefits, keep up to date with rent payments and stick to the hostel rules. As well as coaching her in life skills, the service spent substantial time encouraging her to keep her spirits up and praising her for each incremental achievement towards her goal of living independently.

## **Growing up together: deciding for yourself and standing up for others**

Those care leavers who live independently, often from a young age, need extra support from professionals and specialists because they often do not have the care and advice of parents as they mature. In particular, they need support with managing their emotions, dealing with accommodation and stress and acquiring everyday life skills. But also we found they want to gain independence through taking an active part in decision-making in their own lives and having the opportunity to give back. They benefit from being part of something bigger and participating actively.

The young people who were doing best included those from stable foster homes, but also young people who had some choice over their own lives, such as deciding their best housing option, or even choosing the décor in their bedroom.

Those who had the chance to participate in forums which gave them a voice and a sense they were speaking for other young people like themselves seemed to be doing the best despite some difficult beginnings. Barnardo's and its partners encourage young care leavers to engage in participation groups and activities.

Amber, for example, had spent most of her childhood in residential psychiatric institutions and left care painfully lacking self-esteem. Encouragement to take part in a care leavers' forum built her confidence until, at 21, she was the Chair. She encouraged other care leavers in her service to take part in this research, sensitively supporting the shy ones. Sarah was fearful of living alone, unable to sleep, and anxious about moving on, but she had taken an active part in a team making small grants payments to other vulnerable young people in her area. She was proud of having helped others get on and had made staunch friends amongst the other team members. Robert was greatly supported in his move back to his home town from a long-term out of borough placement, through his engagement with local LGBT campaigns, and his involvement in a local amateur dramatic group.

In a disrupted life, a community connection or participating in a consistent forum has a stabilising effect, offering important life and social skills and making a real difference. Despite their personal stresses, the care leavers who took part in this research were deeply empathetic to other young people under stress, often offering practical advice and emotional encouragement to others. They were there for each other.

## **Conclusion**

There have been great steps taken recently to improve the support available to care leavers in England. Local authorities and agencies supporting care leavers, including Barnardo's, continue to prepare these young people to enter adult life, offering invaluable advice, care and guidance. As these national changes continue to take hold, many young people leaving foster care will have better opportunities to thrive, with the chance to receive support for longer. However, all young people leaving care now need the same chance as those in foster care to 'stay put' until they are 21 and, as our research has shown, the most vulnerable still need help to achieve better outcomes.