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Opportunities and challenges: supporting journeys into education and employment for young people leaving care in England.

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Summary

Research over the past three decades has consistently reported poor outcomes in education and employment for many young people leaving care in England. Evidence indicates lower levels of education attainment and post-16 participation for young people in and leaving care in comparison to other young people and suggests a lasting impact, with care experienced adults at greater risk of social exclusion, being overrepresented in marginalised groups such as the long-term unemployed, homeless and prison populations and adults with mental health difficulties. This paper draws on recent research carried out with young people leaving care to explore the challenges they face in finding and sustaining participation in education, employment and training. It shows that support from formal and informal sources to address the practical, emotional and

financial challenges they encounter as they transition from care is crucial to successful journeys and that young people's own motivation and self-belief are significant factors in increasing and sustaining participation.

Keywords: care leavers; post-16 participation; education, employment, training.

Introduction

Low participation rates in education, employment and training for young people in and leaving care has been an area of particular concern for policy and practice in England for many years. This is reflected in existing UK research, which has consistently shown that many care leavers face greater difficulties and disadvantage compared to other young people, as they embark upon their journeys into adulthood and involvement in education, employment and training (EET) (Stein and Carey, 1986; Biehal et al 1995; Broad, 1998; Dixon and Stein, 2005, Dixon et al, 2006). These studies show that a significant number encounter obstacles both in terms of finding and sustaining EET options in the early years after care. Furthermore, for some this will continue into later adulthood, contributing to long-term unemployment and other difficulties including homelessness, mental health problems and risk behaviour such as offending and drug and alcohol addiction, placing them at greater risk of social exclusion (Cheung and Heath, 1994, Dixon et al 2006). Alongside this, recent research has highlighted the range of obstacles facing young people transitioning from care as they begin to negotiate their journey through education and employment and consider the career options available to them. As discussed later, these obstacles can stem from pre care experiences, in care experiences and circumstances on leaving care, which often place care leavers at a disadvantage compared to other young people embarking upon their career journeys.

In response to the greater awareness of the nature and extent of these difficulties, there has been an increased legislative and policy focus on addressing the educational, employment and training needs of this vulnerable group. Maximising EET opportunities has become a key part of the care leaver agenda and is reflected in the range of legislative developments over the past decade or so. These include the Children Leaving Care Act 2000 and subsequent amendments, the Care Matters Agenda, the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and Children and Families Act 2014, which have acknowledged the disparity between care-experienced youth and their non-care peers in, amongst other things, qualifications and post-16 EET participation and have put in place strategies and support to close the gap and improve outcomes. As discussed in this paper, it has also been recognised through a range of mainstream and specialist support programmes to reduce unemployment and inactivity for care leavers.

This paper draws together findings from recent research studies of young people in and leaving care, including evidence from policy and practice. The paper takes account of the voices of young people themselves, together with the views of their lead professionals, to capture the difficulties and challenges of finding and sustaining EET options after care and to better understand the factors that have helped some young people to overcome these challenges. It begins by outlining the current context for care and leaving care in England, describing the care population and primary legislative context, and will outline the key research studies on which the findings in this paper are based. The paper will discuss evidence from a recent study of young people in and leaving care to demonstrate current participation patterns for care leavers and will also highlight current practice and policy examples of strategies to facilitate EET participation for the group. Finally the paper outlines the main challenges that care experienced

young people encounter as they move into adulthood and the impact these challenges place upon their abilities and opportunities to participate in EET. The paper will draw on the voices of young people to demonstrate what is needed to enable care leavers to improve their career opportunities.

Care and leaving care in England

Responsibility for children and young people in and leaving care is held by the Government's Department for Education (DfE). At local level, it is the responsibility of children's services in each of the 152 Local Authorities in England. The overarching legislation is the Children Act 1989 (and subsequent amendments) including, for care leavers, the Children Leaving Care Act (CLCA) 2000, both of which set down specific duties and powers for local authorities to provide care, support and services for looked after children during the time they are in foster or residential care and when they move on to independent living.

A looked after child can legally be in care until the age of 18 years, however, legislation states that young people can remain in their care placements beyond 18 and in the majority of case, those living in post care semi-independent or independent accommodation are entitled to leaving care support until the age of 21 years (or 25 years of age if returning to an education or training course). Leaving care support is envisaged to be holistic in nature and includes financial assistance (with the local authority being responsible for paying a leaving care allowance and accommodation costs until young people reach the age of 18); assistance with finding and sustaining accommodation; support to take up EET; and support to meet the emotional, social and wellbeing needs of the young person. Care leavers are allocated a leaving care worker, often know as a

personal adviser (PA) to support them through the transition to adulthood and are expected to contribute to their own pathway plan, in which they and their PA outline the goals and milestones en route to independent living and the support needed to achieve these goals. In short, services should act as any good parent would to ensure that these young people have access to the same care, support and opportunities as other young people, a concept known as 'corporate parenting'.

Government statistics on the characteristics of children and young people who come into state care are collected and published annually (DfE, 2014). The latest statistics show that there are currently 68,840 children in care, the highest number since 1985. The majority of these children have been removed from their family on a care order, whilst 29% have come into care on a voluntary agreement. The most common type of care placement in England, for those who are unable to remain with their own family is foster care (75%) while around 9% are looked after in residential settings such as children's homes, residential schools and secure settings. Most of these children and young people have experienced trauma, family disadvantage and difficulties prior to entering care with the majority coming into care for reasons of abuse and neglect (62%). Other reasons include family dysfunction (18%), family in acute stress (11%), absent parenting (7%), parental illness or disability (4%), child's disability (3%) and child's unacceptable behaviour (3%), thus demonstrating that children and young people in and leaving care are one of the most vulnerable groups in society.

Each year around 10,000 young people aged 16 and over leave care (DfE, 2014). Many move on from their final care placement before the age of 18 (when they legally leave care), mostly aged 16 or 17 years, and move into semi-independent or

independent accommodation, most commonly their own tenancy in a flat or a house. Figures show that this is much earlier than young people in the general population move out of the family home to embark upon independent adulthood. Certainly within the recent economic climate in the UK, which has seen high youth unemployment and increasingly unattainable house prices, the average age for leaving the family home has risen, with current estimates between the mid-twenties to early thirties (Office for National Statistics, 2014a). This emphasises the vulnerable nature of care leavers, who are taking on the many responsibilities of independent adulthood much sooner than other young people, often without the benefit of a family support network to help them negotiate the challenges of setting up a home, finding a job or obtaining the resources to undertake further study.

Outcome data for young people leaving care in England are gathered at local and national level for 19, 20 and 21 year old care leavers and provide information on the types of accommodation that care leavers are living in and their status in terms of EET activities at each age point. Recent data reports that the most common type of accommodation is independent living (39%) followed by living with parents or relatives (10%) whilst 4% were remaining with foster carers beyond the age of 18 under an option known as 'Staying Put'. This option was introduced by Government in 2011 to enable young people to remain with foster carers after leaving care and to assist foster carers to provide ongoing accommodation. As of 2014, the option must be available to young people in foster care across all local authorities (DfE, 2013).

In term of economic activity, evidence from national statistics suggests that despite some narrowing of the gap between care experienced youth and other young people,

those in and from care remain at a disadvantage in terms of educational outcomes and post-16 participation in EET. Over one third (35%) of care leavers aged between 19 and 21 were not in education, employment or training (a status known as NEET) in 2014, compared to around 13% of young people aged 16- 24 years nationally (Office for National Statistics, 2014b)

Overall, therefore, evidence suggests that many young people in and leaving care have experienced considerable difficulty prior to and during care. Furthermore, the transition to adulthood is often undertaken much earlier and without the safety net of a supportive family when compared to other young people. These factors can present risks to achieving successful outcomes after care and whilst some care leavers will overcome these difficulties and do well, many will struggle to establish stability in both their home and work life.

The research and methodology

Data has been drawn from two studies of young people in and leaving care carried out by the author and colleagues (1. Dixon et al, 2006 and 2. Dixon and Lee et al, 2015). Study 1 involved interviews with 101 care leavers at two points in time (baseline soon after leaving care and follow-up 10 months later). Study 2, a large study of young people in and from care, involved interviews with 579 young people to explore their views on care and leaving care. Importantly, the latter study utilised a peer research methodology, which involved care experienced young people aged 18 to 22 years, receiving research training and support to interview other young people in and from care.

These studies involved gathering data on the wider experiences and outcomes for care leavers, though both included an exploration of participation and progress in EET.

Both studies employed mixed methods approaches, gathering quantitative data on characteristics and qualitative data via face to face interviews with young people. Information was also gathered via questionnaire and/or interview with the young person's lead professional (social worker or leaving care worker) to explore views on young people's progress and support needs.

Data presented in this paper is drawn mainly from Study 2, carried out between 2011-2014, to provide an up to date picture of participation rates in EET. This study also provided a unique opportunity for care experienced young people, as peer researchers, to select a particular area of interest to focus on at follow-up interviews with a sub sample of care leavers in the study. The peer researchers chose to explore factors associated with participation in education and subsequent career pathways, focusing on what had helped or hindered participation. The peer researchers assisted with the development of the follow-up interview schedule and carried out interviews with 52 care leavers who had been in education at baseline, one year prior to interview. Data was analysed using thematic analysis carried out by the peer researchers during a series of analysis workshops and focus group discussions. This enabled the research to explore the peer researchers' interpretations of the findings thus utilising the perspectives of care experienced young people.

Participation in education, employment and training after care.

Education

In England compulsory education currently ends at the age of 17, however, at the time of the data collection, the school leaving age was 16 years. To enable comparison with

national statistics, this paper reports on those young people from Study 2 who were aged between 16 and 24 years (n=444) and who had therefore left compulsory education at the time of interview. A positive finding was that around two-fifths of young people in the study (43%, 192) had continued their education with 40% (179) engaged in further education (FE) at school or college and 3% (13) in higher education (HE) at University. This represents a continuing trend reflected in research, which shows increasing numbers of care leavers in post-compulsory education. Findings from Study 1 for example, carried out in 2006, showed that 35% of care leavers were in FE or HE, whilst a study of care leavers in 2003 reported an increase in participation from 19% in 1994 to 31% in 2003 (Broad, 2003).

This rise in education participation may be driven by a combination of factors including general trends in mainstream youth career options, which have seen an increase in further education options and opportunities. Policy and practice developments, meanwhile, have included targets for local authorities to maximise the numbers of looked after children achieving educational success and the number of care leavers participating in EET generally. Alongside this, has emerged a stronger focus, underpinned by recent legislation, to directly support young people in and leaving care to engage with education during and after care. The introduction of a designated teacher in every school to provide a direct point of contact and address the educational needs of school pupils in care was made statutory in 2009 and the introduction of the Virtual School Head in each local authority, to hold responsibility for overseeing support and monitoring educational progress of young people in care in their local area has provided a useful driver for increased awareness and support for care experienced young people. A further example is the Care Leaver Strategy, a cross- government department call for all departments to

work more closely to develop a coherent approach to supporting care leavers, which includes departments responsible for education, employment and welfare (HM Government, 2013). This establishes a clear expectation that leaving care services should work together with education and careers services to support young people in and from care to take up education options.

Evidence from our own research of joint work included careers advisors providing information drop-in sessions within leaving care services to offer support on education and work readiness skills and careers advisors being employed within the leaving care teams to directly support young people and build links with education and training providers. One local authority noted *'we have a dedicated Universities Worker who has his finger on the pulse of which Universities are offering which bursaries for care leavers'*. At national level, recent changes to extend welfare benefits for young people undertaking further education demonstrates joint working between children's social care and the department responsible for welfare benefits. This policy has increased the window of opportunity for care leavers to catch up on lost educational opportunities at school, through the option to return to learning up to the age of 21, with the benefit of continued state financial support such as income support and housing benefits. The initiative, known as 'second chance learning' recognises that vulnerable young people in and leaving care often experience disrupted school careers that impact on their attainment and also tend to experience instability and difficulties after leaving care, which prohibit the transition into FE. There is continuing evidence that young people leaving care do far worse in education attainment than other young people leaving school. National data reports that only 38% of care leavers achieved good quality GCSEs compared to 80% of school leavers generally (DFE, 2014). Second chance learning allows care leavers to

benefit from a broader timescale in which to address more pressing issues, such as accommodation, and then return to education later to pursue qualifications (NCAS, 2012).

A further initiative to facilitate care leavers involvement in education options was introduced by Buttle Trust UK. The initiative set up a Quality Mark to encourage and also recognise UK Universities and FE colleges that provide specific support and resources for care experienced young people attending HE and FE. This can include financial support towards purchasing a laptop; guaranteed provision of vacation accommodation for care leavers unable to return to a foster or residential placement; and access to emotional support. To date, 112 Universities and 81 FE institutions have been awarded the Quality Mark for their support and commitment to facilitating care leavers' participation (see <http://www.buttleuk.org/pages/quality-mark-for-care-leavers.html>). Though there is no recent research on the impact of this initiative on attendance and experience of University, national statistics show an increase in University participation from 1% in 2003 to around 6% nationally (with figures ranging from 4 % to 16 % across individual local authorities) (DfE, 2014, Jackson et al, 2003)

The rise in participation in post-compulsory education for young people in and leaving care may also reflect the increased financial support for care leavers through specific funding under the CLCA to provide education assistance (e.g. books, equipment and travel allowance) and discretionary incentives based on attendance and progress, as well as mainstream support for vulnerable young people through Pupil Premium payments, which provides funding for schools in England to help raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils (such as those in and from care) and through a bursary for all 16 to

19 year old young people who are attending school or college in England. Further targeted financial support for care leavers who are attending University is also available from local authorities. The HE bursary for care leavers provides around £2000.00 for care leavers starting their first year of University before their 25th birthday.

Although the picture for education participation seems positive for young people leaving care, evidence from national data and existing research suggests that there is still some way to go before participation reaches the level for young people generally. Data from Study 2 did not differentiate between full and part-time education participation so it is unclear what proportion of the 43% were attending part-time courses. There was evidence, however, from information gathered on the types of courses that many were engaged in relatively short and low level courses such as basic skills training, adult literacy and numeracy courses, personal development courses and national vocational qualifications (NVQs), though there was also evidence of more advanced study such as A levels and undergraduate degrees. This makes comparison difficult, however, it is highly likely that participation in FE and HE for care leavers in the current sample and also for care leavers nationally, 19% of whom are in education (DfE, 2014), is lower than participation rates for young people generally. Recent national data shows that 42% of all 16-24 year olds were in full time education in 2014 (Office For National Statistics, 2014a). Additionally, significantly fewer care leavers continue to attend University (6% compared to around 38% of the wider population).

Employment and training

Employment and training rates for care leavers in Study 2 were low. Fewer than one in ten was involved with some form of apprenticeship or training (7%, 32) or full or part-time

employment (9%, 38). This is partially explained by the relatively high number of young people within the study engaged in education though it might also reflect wider youth labour market patterns, which until recently have seen record youth unemployment rates and also patterns of participation that suggest a general decline in the tendency to move straight from school to work due to greater transitional opportunities such as education and apprenticeships. Nevertheless, low participation in employment for care leavers mirrors findings from existing UK research (Pinkerton and McCrea, 1999, Dixon and Stein, 2005, Broad, 2003) and from Study 1, which found that only 10% were in employment and in most cases this was short-term or casual work (Dixon et al, 2006). Moreover, employment rates amongst the care leaver group continues to represent much lower rates of employment and training in comparison to all young people, with national statistics reporting that 52% of all 16 – 24 year olds in the general population are in some form of employment (UKCES, 2012), indicating that those with experience of care continue to face greater challenges and disadvantage in finding and continuing employment. This is despite a surge in mainstream support to increase employment opportunities and work readiness (i.e. having the skills and means to undertake employment), such as the government funded National Apprenticeships for young people aged 16 and over to become paid employees within a company and receive training and gain recognised qualifications. In addition to options that are open to all young people, a number of specific employment training schemes have been developed for care experienced young people only. These schemes recognise that many care leavers will have additional needs to other young people, which might place them at a disadvantage in the work place, and aim to provide a higher level of targeted support to facilitate the particular employment and wider needs of those more vulnerable young people in and leaving care. One national example of such a scheme is the government's From

Care2Work programme, which was developed and delivered by the National Care Advisory Service (NCAS). The programme team acted as intermediaries to bring together local authorities and local employers to develop work experience opportunities for care leavers. Through joint work plans and sharing knowledge of the needs of care leavers, leaving care workers and employers were able to provide young people with time-limited, supported work placements designed to increase work skills and experience, provide an introduction to the work place and improve young people's self-confidence and employability. An evaluation of the programme highlighted its success in working with 140 local authorities and 30 national companies '*to identify packages of employability support and opportunities — with 126 opportunities [for young people] either available or planned*' (NCAS, 2010, p4). The evaluation highlights a number of successes where young people went on to take up full-time employment or were able to acquire the work experience and skill-set required to take up further training or education. Further examples of employment support from Study 1 included local authorities establishing 'employability projects' that were designed to provide sponsored employment opportunities and work experience tasters, ring fenced opportunities or guaranteed interviews for care leavers, mainly within the local authority's own departments (Dixon et al, 2006).

Young people not in education, training or employment (NEET)

In addition to those who were participating in some form of EET a small number of young people were caring for a child full time (3%), however, a considerable number were not participating in any formal activity. Being NEET was in fact the second most common status for young people in the current research sample. Analysis of those aged 16 and over at the time of interview showed that almost two in 10 young people (17%,

77) were NEET compared to 13% of 16-24 year olds generally (Office for National Statistics (2014b). Analysis carried out on the NEET group to explore key characteristics showed no difference in gender, ethnicity or across local authority area, however, there was a significant association between NEET status and qualifications. None of the young people who were NEET at interview had achieved a standard level of high school qualification (i.e. 5 or more A*- C grade GCSEs) compared to 18% of those who were in some form of EET who had achieved this level ($p=.014$). This demonstrates the importance of qualifications as a protective factor for securing education, employment or training after care.

Though the trend towards increased participation in post care education is without doubt positive and an indication of the increased focus and support within this area of young people's lives, there is as yet little room for complacency. Evidence from our follow-up interviews showed that whilst young people were finding and embarking upon education, training and employment opportunities, sustaining this participation was a particular challenge. As discussed in the following section, there was a relatively high level of drop out amongst young people in the sample. For example, further exploration of the young people who were NEET at interview showed that although over one quarter (27%, 18) had been NEET throughout the previous year, most young people in the group had been involved in some EET activity during the year prior to interview. Most commonly this had involved FE (32%, 21) and employment (18% 12). This suggests that almost one third had completed or dropped out of college and that almost two in ten had lost or given up their job. A further 15% (10) had become NEET after participating in trainee and apprenticeship placements.

Understanding the causes of non-participation and factors that promote participation in EET, is not straightforward, however, care experienced youth are likely to face greater challenges finding and sustaining career opportunities due to the tendency towards poor qualifications and competing priorities associated with taking on independent living much sooner than their peers. This was explored in greater detail with young people taking part in the follow-up interviews.

Factors that affect participation

A sub-sample of young people from Study 2 who had been in education at the time of first interview were selected for a follow-up interview one year later (n= 52). The focus of the interview was young people's participation in EET over the year to explore decisions around sustaining participation, the types of activities undertaken and reasons for moving on from education. All young people had been enrolled in education provision including school, college and University at first interview. Courses ranged from short-term basic numeracy or literacy courses to GCSE and A levels, BTECs, diplomas and undergraduate and post graduate degree level courses.

At follow-up one year later, less than one third (27%, 14) were still in education (though all but two of these young people had remained on the same course). The majority of young people had, therefore, left their education course. The most common reason for ending participation was completing their course (53%, 17), which reflects the short term nature of some of the courses studied, as noted earlier. A concerning finding was the relatively high drop-out rate for those who had been in education. Almost half of the group (44%, 14) had left their course early due to circumstances related to ability, personal troubles or financial difficulties, as discussed further below. Whilst three of the

young people had subsequently found full or part-time work and three were applying for further college courses, half of those who had left early had failed to find alternative activity and were NEET at follow-up. This mirrors findings from the earlier Study 1, which also identified difficulties in sustaining participation. Only half of those young people who had been in education at baseline were still in education one year on from care and reports from young people and their PAs highlighted problems around debt, ability and emotional issues as obstacles to continued participation. There was also evidence that some young people had been encouraged to take on unsuitable courses that had not met their needs, abilities or interests.

Obstacles and facilitators to participating in EET

To examine some of the obstacles and facilitators to participation in EET, young people and lead professionals were asked to describe what had or might have helped facilitate participation. Obstacles and facilitators were often different sides of the same coin, for example whilst access to support enabled participation, a lack of support proved a barrier. A thematic analysis of the data carried out by the peer research team identified a number of key facilitators and challenges to finding and sustaining education, employment and training.

Personal motivation and aspirations: A strong message arising from young people's interviews was the importance of personal drive to succeed. Having the motivation to embark upon education or employment and having the determination to succeed was seen as an essential driver in achieving positive outcomes in EET. This was particularly the case when young people felt they had achieved despite adversity, '*being where I have been and still getting a job is an achievement*'. There was also the

acknowledgement that without self-motivation, support from professionals might prove fruitless, *'I chose to do this course, I did it myself, I went to college on my own and enrolled...it is the person who has to be motivated and want to do it otherwise social services cannot help'*.

Lead professionals also noted the importance of young people's own motivation and ambition in helping them to sustain participation, *'what has helped her is her own determination to learn and want to learn and accept support offered by others'*. Lead professional also emphasised the importance of young people being motivated by others, through the encouragement of carers, friends, tutors or other professionals, *'It takes the young person's own good motivation and encouragement from staff and family'*.

Where young people were struggling to maintain participation, meanwhile, this was sometimes attributed to a lack of motivation, self-belief or encouragement, *'the young person's lack of motivation has been an obstacle... low confidence in her abilities, she has dropped out of several training courses, she has needed encouragement'*.

Choosing the right education course or employment route was also an important factor in motivating young people to continue. Young people cautioned against taking on education or training that did not suit their interests or skills, or for reasons, such as financial incentives, *'you've got to want to do it, take a while to settle in and don't go for something you're not interested in', 'if you want to do it fine, but don't just do it because you get money'*.

The consequences of choosing or accepting the wrong course was prominent in young people's reasons for dropping out of education, '*I left, I did the entire first year, didn't like it so didn't continue*' and '*I didn't want to do it anymore, I lost interest and left two months ago*'.

Lead professionals also highlighted the need for EET support to appeal to young people's interests in order to facilitate engagement, '*we are dealing with young people so you got to make it interesting... making the whole approach a bit more young people focused, fun, interesting, it would help a lot*'. Examples of innovative approaches to engaging with care leavers were identified in the study and included providing taster sessions or summer courses at education institutions that involved student mentoring support to familiarise young people with student life and promote education as an option.

Expectations, aspirations and stigma: A common theme running through reasons for participation and non-participation in EET was the impact of others' expectations of care leavers. This included examples of high expectations and aspirations for young people in and from care as well as examples of low expectations related to negative stereotypes of the care population, which could amount to young people feeling stigmatised. A young person who was in her second year of University described the impact of her carer's encouragement and high aspirations for her to succeed, '*for me it was my foster carer that has drilled it into me that I am capable of doing what I want to do*'. Another explained that challenging negative stereotypes and wanting to be the same as others had motivated her to apply to University, '*I didn't want to be different and everyone else was going to University and going to college and I didn't want to be the leaving care girl who didn't do it. I wanted to be the girl who did do it*'.

Lead professionals talked about some of the difficulties they encountered in trying to support their young people to find EET opportunities, which included having to challenge low aspirations and expectation and negative stereotyping from carers, support workers and employers. This was evident in the failure of some carers to support and encourage young people to do well at school and in some cases discouraging young people from moving away from reliance on benefits, as one lead professional explained, *‘some kids don’t have that support to build that level of aspiration. We were trying to get [her] some work experience and the foster carer, on benefits, said “what, you are going to go out the house for that?” It’s a culture thing, “well, I’m not going to work, I’m going to go on benefits”. You’re just fighting a losing battle’.*

Another lead professional described some of the challenges in overcoming negative stereotypes of care leavers when trying to set up work placement schemes, *‘there’s a lot of companies where the stigmas for being in care is still there, they think “ I’m risking some money , I want somebody stable not somebody like that”, so it’s trying to overcome that’.*

Personal circumstances and disincentives: Obstacles to young people finding and sustaining participation in EET also related to their personal circumstances as well as wider societal factors. For some young people, having few or no qualifications, coping with personal troubles such as bereavement, family problems, difficult accommodation circumstances or dealing with the reasons that brought them into care in the first place, could prevent them from taking up or continuing EET opportunities, particularly if support was lacking. One young man who had dropped out of college told us *‘ the course work*

was hard to achieve with things going on in my life, consequences of stuff that had happened and the tutor wasn't supportive'.

Problems associated with physical and mental health and risk behaviour, such as offending and substance misuse were also highlighted as obstacles to participation and demonstrated the level of difficulties that vulnerable young people were coping with alongside their attempts to pursue education and employment. One young person who had left her college course and part-time job cited *'a lack of confidence, health issues, increasing mental health issues, low mood and social isolation'*. Another explained *'I kept getting into trouble which led to getting kicked out of college'*.

For some young people, focusing on more immediate *'priorities'* such as addressing personal difficulties could provide a diversion from EET or a cause for ending participation, as summarised by one lead professional,

'I think some of my young people have such chaotic lives that just the concept of doing anything that they could commit to on a regular basis is just a complete anathema to them. They have got their families kicking off, they have got mental health issues, trying to avoid going to prison and you say "oh do you want to go to college" and they just look at you, like how is that my priority?'

A key priority for care leavers is the need to find stable accommodation and set up home and this was also highlighted as delay or diversion from to participating in EET, *'I think the idea is you want to sort the basics first don't you. You know you've got to have the solid, grounds first, accommodation and finances.'* More practical problems, such as having to travel a *'distance form home'* to college and the cost of meeting *'travel'*

expenses’ or *’childcare costs*’ were also highlighted amongst the reasons for dropping out of education and employment .

An important issue raised by young people and lead professionals was the financial disincentives of participation. For example, the high cost of University fees could deter young people from pursuing education. The low rates of pay for youth apprenticeships and employment, which tend to be based on the assumption that most young people are living at home with family, might also mean that some training and employment options are not viable to care leavers who are living independently and are responsible for their own housing and related costs. This dilemma was voiced by several lead professionals, *’we were told to push apprenticeships but our young people normally get to 18 and move into their own place and are finally ready to do an apprenticeship and they just couldn’t afford it, they would be [financially] better off staying on job seekers allowance than doing an apprenticeship, so we find that’s a real barrier’.*

These issues highlight the challenges that care leavers need to overcome to achieve positive outcomes in their journeys into education, employment and training. They also demonstrate the need for consistent, targeted and accessible support to address these challenges as well as joined up approaches across support agencies. The final area highlighted by young people and their lead professionals was formal and informal support.

Information and support: Information, advice and support were crucial factors in helping care experienced young people into EET. This included knowing about financial entitlements and work placements and opportunities available in their local areas. Young

people felt strongly that information needed to be accessible and provided in different formats so that it was available to as many young people as possible, regardless of their circumstances. Suggestions included newsletters, texts and a Facebook page with updates from careers, job centres and leaving care services. Support, whether professional or informal was considered essential, *'having that one person whoever they are'*. Examples of practical support, meanwhile, included help with completing college, training and work application forms; wake up calls to ensure young people made it to college and work on time and financial assistance with travel, clothing or college materials.

Our research found many positive examples of support to address young people's needs. Lead professionals highlighted the positive impact of specialist staff joining the leaving care team *'the employment worker is now on board full time, working with young people individually towards EET'*. Other examples of effective joint working included the introduction of dedicated support workers within education settings, *'one of the colleges has a children in care youth worker, which is really helpful because they are the first point of contact and liaise with [leaving care team] and the tutors if there are any difficulties'*. Supportive teachers, tutors and employers played an important part in helping young people to sustain participation in EET, as lead professionals explained, *'college gave [yp] a chance. Due to their circumstances they had problems, which college helped with while [yp] attended'*. This was particularly helpful where there was some acknowledgment of the issues facing care leavers, *'supportive training provider who understands the difficulties young people face living independently.'*

The continued support of carers was also prominent amongst young people's responses and clearly demonstrated ongoing encouragement and aspirations for their young person, *'I still have contact with my foster carer and she helps me a lot as far as that goes, like getting involved in the college...to sort of guide you. 'Look there's this going on, get involved' and stuff like that'*. Importantly, young people felt that support, both practical and emotional, should be there whether or not a young person was doing well, *'you need positive reinforcement when you do something good –to be proud of your achievements but it is also needed when you are at your lowest ebb'* demonstrating the importance of consistent support to guide and encourage, as a good parent would.

Conclusion

Despite considerable policy focus on increasing participation and positive outcomes for young people in EET, 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 youth participation in England, care leavers are less likely to be engaged in education, employment and training.

There is, however, a greater understanding of the obstacles to participation for young people in and leaving care. The impact of past and ongoing difficulties, the legacy of early disadvantage and the tendency towards poor qualification on leaving school, place young people from care at a disadvantage in the youth labour market. Added to this is the prospect of moving from care to independent living, which for many takes place aged 16 and 17 and therefore coincides with a crucial time in young people's lives when they

are completing compulsory education and embarking upon post-16 career paths, which can destabilise and delay attempts to participate in EET.

Nevertheless, the picture for participation in EET is on the surface a relatively positive one for our research sample. The most common activity for those who had left school was further education, which reflects the increased practice and policy focus on supporting young people into education and the financial and broader support to enable young people to take up college opportunities. However, high drop-out rates suggest a need for greater support to sustain participation by finding the right course to suit young people's needs, providing emotional and practical support to enable them to address difficulties that might threaten performance and participation and ensuring adequate financial support to meet the costs of education, including travel, materials, child care and fees.

Addressing the high numbers who are NEET after care requires more focus on improving young people's employability. This can come from improved educational outcomes but can also be achieved through work experience and training programmes that focus on improving young people's work readiness, confidence and motivation as well as more overt work related skills. Examples of close links between leaving care services and local employers and training providers and having access to specialist employment workers within the team can facilitate increased opportunities for young people.

The challenge therefore, is to provide support to overcome these obstacles to ensure that care experienced young people have the same aspirations, experiences and opportunities as other young people, to reach their potential.

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