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Corporate Parenting for young people in care - Making the difference?

catch
22



Jo Dixon and Jenny Lee with Mike Stein, Harriet Guhirwa, Sharn Bowley and Catch22 NCAS Peer Researchers

Introduction

Young people in care and care leavers want to know that their corporate parents (the local authority, collectively with other relevant services) will care for them and do their best for them. In this, one of the largest peer research studies, we report if, and how, this is being achieved.

Our research provides an update on corporate parenting from the perspective of policy and senior managers, social workers and leaving care workers, and importantly, of young people themselves.

We trained 36 care leavers as peer researchers, carrying out interviews with 579 young people in and from care in 12 local authorities. This created a competent and enthusiastic team and produced a wealth of information on progress and perspectives in corporate parenting.

Our four year study was funded by the Big Lottery and was led by Catch22 National Care Advisory Service (NCAS) in collaboration with researchers from the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York.

Main aims of the research

- Understand how corporate parenting is being delivered across English local authorities from the perspective of Children's Services and other 'partner' agencies;
- Explore the risk and protective factors that impact upon young people's care experience and progress and consider their progress in comparison to other care and non-care young people.

Further objectives

- Test out the peer research methodology, to understand the impact of the model on young people, and the research process, and the effectiveness and use of evidence gathered from young people by young people.
- Generate evidence based recommendations for policy and practice.

The main data collection activity involved three annual rounds of data gathering each summer 2011 to 2013.

What is corporate parenting?

Corporate parenting is founded on the principle that the local authority, collectively with other relevant services, should have the same aspirations and provide the same kind of care that any good parent would provide for their own children.

Peer research

Peer Research assumes the perspective that peers are experts within the area of their own experience. It often involves the peer researcher interviewing or facilitating focus groups with their peers. To be truly effective and inclusive, peer researchers should take an active and participatory role in all aspects of the research process from set-up to dissemination, not just the data collection. Our model is committed to these principles.

Young people aged 18 and over who had been in care in the 12 study local authority's, were recruited and trained as peer researchers.

To protect confidentiality of data and minimise the chance that participants could be known to peer researchers and vice versa, our model of peer research requires that peer researchers do not conduct interviews in their own local authority (LA). Instead, LAs were paired up and peer researchers travelled to the partner LA to carry out interviews there.

To make peer research happen successfully requires a strong commitment to facilitating young people's participation, demonstrated through effective support networks and sufficient time and resources to ensure that the experience is not tokenistic but is positive, meaningful and enriching for all those involved

With support and supervision from the Catch22 NCAS participation team, research manager and local area research coordinators (ARCs), the peer researchers assisted with the development of the interview schedules, recruiting young people and conducting interviews with children and young people aged 13 and above in and from care across the 12 local authorities. The peer researchers also took part in the analysis, write up and dissemination of the interview data.

Catch22 NCAS

Peer Research Model



'I gained more self-esteem and confidence as a result of doing the peer research. I was able to relate to young people better and it also led to me doing different pieces of work with young people within the local authority'

(Peer Researcher)

This project shows us the difference between simple participation and building self-efficacy. The attention paid to the needs of young people, their training and support, meant that their experience was not simply one of joining in. Instead they were able to feel fully involved and fully part of the project. Being responsible for working in other local authorities, arranging their interviews and travel heightened their feeling of self-efficacy, that intangible quality which is at the root of progress for vulnerable young people.'

(Independent evaluation of PR methodology and impact)

What makes a good parent or carer?

Young people's views

Most young people rated their local authority as a good parent. However there were clear differences between local authorities with one area receiving the highest mean score and a different area receiving the lowest.

When we looked in more detail at the area that received the lowest rating we saw that young people identified why they perceived their authority to be a poor parent; the most common issues related to the absence or lack of communication and low levels of direct contact with lead professionals.

In addition, care leavers appeared more likely than those young people in care, to give a lower score, indicating a greater tendency to be dissatisfied with their corporate parents.

We asked young people what makes a good parent or carer:

- Listening to young people was by far the most common attribute expected of a good parent, appearing in 30 per cent of responses (n=162).
- This was followed by support (n=111) and help (n=84).
- Showing love or enabling a young people to feel loved came up in 11 per cent of responses (n=58), and providing a safe place to live or keeping them safe was quoted 27 times.
- Showing respect for young people, their views or for their culture was high-lighted in 4 per cent of cases (n=22) as was being treated like family and wanting the best or having their best interests at heart, (n=14).

'A good parent? Someone who looks after you, loves you the way you are, understands you, listens to you and won't walk away when things get tough'

(Young person, research participant)

Young people's rating of their local authority

CP	Frequency	Percent %
very poor parent	26	4.6
1	22	3.9
2	28	4.9
3	140	24.6
4	186	32.7
very good parent	167	29.3
Total	569	100.0



Making corporate parenting happen

Corporate parenting is a complex jigsaw, bringing together local, regional and national services, extending to elected members, senior managers, middle managers, specialist staff, frontline practitioners and carers – and who else? Young people themselves, of course! And making it happen will therefore require co-ordinated and consistent actions at these different levels - political, strategic, operational, practice and service user. Who would have thought parenting could be so complicated? But perhaps corporate parenting is just a contemporary recognition that – *‘It takes a village to raise a child’*.

Below we have set out some of our key findings in terms of what is required to ‘make corporate parenting happen’.

Professionals’ examples of good corporate parenting

<p>1</p>  <p>Children in care councils</p>	<p>2</p>  <p>Effective multi-agency work</p>
<p>3</p>  <p>Supporting young people on their pathways to adulthood</p>	<p>4</p>  <p>Council apprenticeship and accommodation schemes</p>
<p>5</p>  <p>Employing participation workers</p>	<p>6</p>  <p>Investment in specialist leaving care staff</p>

Making Corporate Parenting happen

Young people’s perspectives

Young people’s views of ‘good parenting’	Reflect wider research findings on ‘authoritative parenting’ – young people want to be listened to, to be loved, to be supported, to be helped, to be respected, to be safe and often, to be given boundaries.
Making this happen for young people in care	Requires good quality placements. This will require rigorous selection of carers who can meet the diverse needs of the different groups of children and young people who come into care, and who experience different pathways through care into adulthood.
Policies, support services and training,	Should equip foster and residential carers with the skills to provide ‘authoritative’ parenting and at the same time not encumber them with unnecessary bureaucratic processes that may undermine their caring role and stigmatise the children and young people they are looking after.
Social workers, personal advisers and other professional staff	Have an important role to play – in seeing young people regularly, in listening to them and in involving them in all decisions that affect their lives.

Making corporate parenting happen

Organisation and delivery of services

Different models of service provision	whether, 16plus, 18 plus or 'throughcare', services should ensure that young people have continuity of care, and, skilled and trained staff who are able to respond to young people's individual needs. Regardless of the model re-structuring was often viewed as disruptive.
Young people's transfer from care planning to pathway planning	should be a seamless process, and pathway plans should be user friendly and engage young people.
'Staying Put' arrangements	are being implemented in different ways by different local authorities – the opportunity to share experiences may well further policy development.
Young people should be given the opportunity for health assessment	<i>after</i> leaving care in order to link them into appropriate services where needed.

Joint working and protocols

- Agreements**
 - Services for young people living in and leaving care should develop joint working agreements with all relevant local agencies.
- Clarity**
 - Joint working agreements should make transparent the roles and responsibilities of each service.
- Culture**
 - A culture of joint working should be promoted by joint training and development days and working practices, including, secondments, planned visits to provide services and co-location.
- Named staff**
 - Having named staff in local services who understand the needs of young people living in and leaving care should enhance the responsiveness of services in meeting the needs of young people
- Involvement**
 - Care leavers should be involved in discussions about service delivery.

Making Corporate Parenting happen

Having a coherent strategy

Foreword

- By lead cabinet member and young person to illustrate key commitment and co-production

Corporate parenting values:

- These should address the 3 big questions: if this was my child would it be good enough for him or her? If I were that child, would it have been good enough for me? and how could I make it even better?

Principles:

- Identifies key principles highlighting looked after children are entitled to same care, support stability, health and education as our own children; flexibility of services; participation; access to universal services; diversity; CP continuing after 18; challenging negative perceptions; commitment and teamwork

Pledge:

- The Pledge informs all of the work – and should lead to continual monitoring of performance in conjunction with the Children In Care Council

Standards:

- Being a corporate parent involves commitment and involvement in panel meetings; training; celebrating success of LAC; foster homes and children's homes meet standards of 'homeliness, friendliness and openness of cares and staff'; meeting with young people and listening

Features of Outstanding corporate parenting:

- Identifies features of outstanding CP and how they are implemented

Multi-Agency Looked After Partnership (MALAP):

- Identifies priorities relevant to particular authority for example: placement stability and attachment; preparation for adult life, and; communication and participation

Priorities for improving Corporate Parenting:

- Listening and responding; supporting CP; actions to improve service quality and impact; actions to engage the Council in CP

Corporate Parenting Improvement Plan:

- Identifies the main areas of activity; whose responsibility it is to address them and the timescale for addressing them.

What success will look like:

- Identifies outcomes, for example: increased stability; improved health; improved educational outcomes; places to go and things to do high quality staff; quality and safety of placements; emotional wellbeing and making a positive contribution, and; achieving future economic wellbeing.

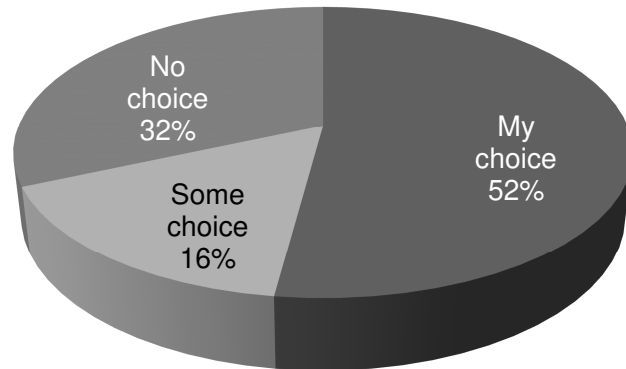
Supporting young people’s transition from care

Care leavers were less likely to feel that their local authority was a good corporate parent and our research identified a number of areas of potential additional support.

Choice in leaving care

Care leavers in our study were asked the important question of whether they felt they had a choice about leaving care.

Choice about leaving care (n = 263)



Messages for Corporate Parents

- Many care leavers (around a third) felt they had no choice about leaving care, but this was heavily weighted in some local authorities so that either a significant majority or a minority of young people felt they had a choice. Lack of choice is therefore not necessarily inherent to the system, but something that local authorities can influence and have within their power to improve.

Support in unregulated placements

Our data showed that around 43% left care from accommodation other than foster care or residential care.

Final Care placement as defined by lead professional	% (N)
Foster Care	39.6 (72)
Residential Setting (including children’s home)	17.0 (31)
Semi-independent Accommodation (including supported lodgings)	29.6 (54)
Independent living	4.9 (9)
B&B	3.3 (6)
Other (including with parents)	5.0 (10)
Total	100 (182)

It is important that young people who move into unregulated placements at 16 or 17 do not automatically lose their care status. The key to the process is the scrutiny of support and consideration of the choices of young people.

Messages for Corporate Parents

- Corporate parents should review whether moves to unregulated placements are positive for young people, check that they get adequate support and assistance in these ‘other arrangements’ and what the options are for young people who do not manage more independently, for example, do they have the option of return to a care placement. Corporate parents should ensure that they have the statutory safeguards in place to scrutinise such decisions, i.e. if a young person moves to an unregulated placement under 18 the decision should be reviewed by the IRO and signed off by the Director of Children’s Services.

Skills for independence

The study explored young people’s preparation for independence and their participation in decisions about their lives. The majority of young people were confident about their independence skills. However, money management is clearly a concern to many. Care leavers continue to take on the responsibilities of their own tenancies from an early age and express concerns about the stresses of paying the bills.

Young people’s preparation for independence – skills audit

Independence skill	How well young person feels able to do % (n=)		
	Very well	Quite well	Not very well
Cooking	53.4 (307)	37.0 (213)	9.6 (55)
Washing and ironing	59.6 (340)	30.7 (175)	9.6 (55)
Keeping your home/room clean and tidy	57.7 (332)	28.9 (166)	13.3 (77)
Self care	85.0 (488)	14.1 (81)	0.9 (5)
Managing your money	37.2 (213)	37.2 (213)	25.7 (147)
Finding out where to get help and information	62.3 (356)	29.9 (171)	7.7 (44)

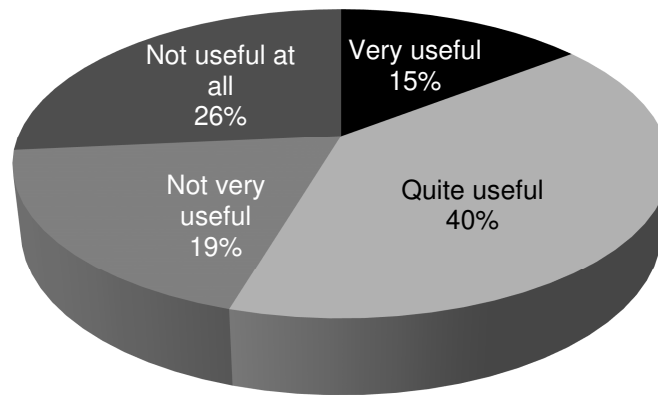
Messages for Corporate Parents

- Corporate parents should ensure that care leavers financial capabilities are built up through the care and pathway planning process and support given to young people and their lead professionals who are pivotal in co-ordinating their preparation for independence. There is existing good practice to learn from including encouraging savings from an early age (e.g. building on the Junior ISA Scheme through which the government already contributes to looked after children), exploring delegated budgets to assist those in care to test their skills with the support of carers or other workers (such as the budget holding lead professionals pilot¹); partnerships with local banks and financial institutions and local or online financial management schemes provided by public, private or voluntary organisations locally and on-line.

Pathway planning

Although Pathway Plans were found to be useful to a number of young people, many found the process irrelevant and went their own way.

Young People's views of pathway planning: How useful is your pathway plan to you? (n = 185)



Because it direct[s] me to the path of achievements - it sets clear aims and objectives for me as to what I want in life (male, age 20)

Because it's always good to know where you went wrong so you can try change it (female, age 21)

Because they just repeat my old reviews and they never update them (female, age 17)

You don't use it. I've seen it but more for social workers than me (female, age 19)

Messages for Corporate Parents

- A central and pressing question for corporate parents should be: what might be done to increase the sense of ownership and engagement for these young people? Can the plan be broken down into manageable steps and promoted as a contract between the corporate parent and young person; a tool for driving changes? Introducing more accessible one page summaries which pull together actions agreed and who should be completing them and working with young people to encourage using alternative formats (such as online sites and mobile applications).

Accommodation

Headlines: Accommodation

- 60% of those in care in our sample were in a foster care placement.
- 45% of care leavers were living independently, with young people taking on the responsibilities of managing their own tenancy at various ages but at the earliest from aged 16.
- 70% had lived in 1 or 2 places in the last year, but care leavers were less likely to experience stability.
- 83% felt supported when moving to their current accommodation, valuing planned moves and both practical and emotional help.
- The vast majority of young people were happy with their current accommodation, but care leavers and young women were less likely to feel satisfied.
- Home meant safety, security, being part of a family and cared for, feeling comfortable, having somewhere to sleep and eat, making the place your own and having freedom.
- Lead professionals judged the majority of current accommodation as very suitable.

Living independently

Care leavers continue to move into independent accommodation from an early age, taking on considerable responsibilities to maintain their tenancies and pay the bills

Age of young people living in semi-independent and independent accommodation

Age	Semi-independent accommodation % (N)	Independent living % (N)
16	12% (14)	3% (4)
17	38% (46)	10% (15)
18	22% (27)	22% (33)
19	13% (16)	22% (32)
20	12% (15)	31% (47)
21	2% (3)	10% (15)
22	1% (1)	2.0% (3)
Total	100 (122)	100 (149)

Young people were asked about moving to their current accommodation, including whether they had felt supported, received sufficient information about the place they would be living and how much of a choice they had been given. The majority, 83% (n=461), did feel supported. In data collection years 2 and 3, young people were asked which sources of support had been most helpful in settling the young person into their current home. Young people valued practical and emotional support from their support staff. Whilst young people who did not feel supported mentioned feeling alone and being left to sort out the move themselves.



Messages for Corporate Parents

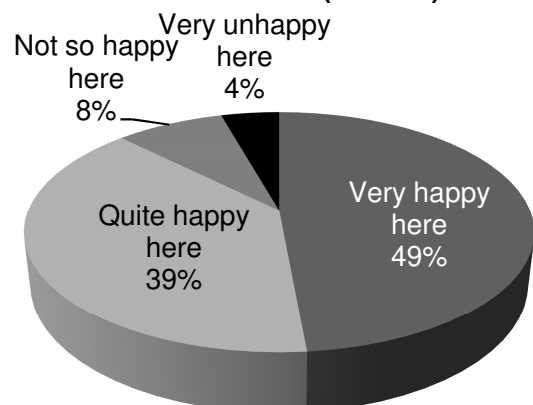
- It is essential for services to work with the young person to ensure they are “tenancy ready” and to ensure this is not a ‘one off’ programme but built into ongoing support. To support this there should be joint protocols and training with social housing providers, and flexibility with nominations to housing option, given the needs and vulnerabilities of care leavers so that accommodation is available when young people have demonstrated they are ready.

Suitability of accommodation

Accommodation remains a key aspect of stability and security. In general young people felt happy with their accommodation, local area and safety, but care leavers were less satisfied.

The 72 young people (12%) who were not happy with their current accommodation were more likely to be care leaversⁱⁱ.

Young people's Satisfaction with current accommodation (n = 574)



Messages for Corporate Parents

- Corporate parents should make sure they have clear mechanisms in place to receive feedback from care leavers on key indicators such as the suitability of the accommodation, the location and the support they are receiving and such monitoring should ensure any problems or threats to sustainability of accommodation are picked up at the earliest opportunity.
- Corporate Parents need to integrate the principles and areas in the statutory guidance in Schedule 6 of the The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 which define suitability and use such criteria to assess unregulated placements for young people.

Supporting young people to manage their accommodation

Lead professionals were asked to outline any support offered to the young person with their placement or current accommodation and any constraints or difficulties they had encountered in providing or accessing support. Themes are identified below

Support and enablers:

- Holistic/"wrap around" support, including housing, education, employment and training (EET), family and health interventions.
- Meeting the individual needs of the young person, including religious, cultural, intensive support, respite, staying put, semi-independent.
- Assisting with independence skills, including money management and benefit applications.
- Practical help and use of the Leaving Care Grant, finance, furnishings.
- Emotional and behavioural support.
- Good quality on-site and floating support offered by accommodation providers.
- Assisting with isolation and providing activities.
- Positive relationships with professionals, including regular meetings.
- Supporting the young person's choices and assistance when positive outcomes do not result.
- The young person's willingness to engage with the support offered.

Constraints and barriers:

- Lack of appropriate placements and support, including "Staying Put" opportunities and holistic support for young people with complex needs.
- Lack of resources and financial constraints, including problems accessing resources and long waiting lists.
- The young person does not wish to engage with the support offered or their behaviour leads to options being limited.
- Difficulties with the benefits system and debt for the young person.
- Housing support and accommodation providers not meeting the needs of the young person or up-dating the lead professional.
- Geographical isolation – the young person is some distance from specialist support, education or their lead professional.
- Relationship with the birth family was unconstructive.

Messages for Corporate Parents

- Given the views of lead professionals about what helped young people in their accommodation or placement and the constraints they were faced with, investing in strategic thinking with corporate parent partners is beneficial to those 'on the ground'. For example, developing protocols and partnerships with the local Job Centre Plus

office, including devising mechanisms to alert support staff if benefit applications and payments are delayed or there is a threat of sanctions (which will inevitably have a 'knock on' effect to housing stability) will help staff supporting young people.

- Young people highlighted the benefits of planning, pre-placement viewings and meetings, and being given information and support about housing options. Lead professionals need to feel confident in supporting young people in this aspect of their lives and to have colleagues to turn to for expert advice as and when needed.

Staying put

A small number of young people in the study appeared to be in some kind of Staying Put arrangement with their foster carers (i.e. 6% of care leavers) and eleven young people were in some kind of "residential setting" aged 18 plus (likely to include some semi-independent accommodation or unregulated placements). In addition, some lead professionals commented on the lack of resources available to fund Staying Put options.

Messages for Corporate Parents

- Corporate Parents should continue to work hard to make such opportunities are available where possible and appropriate and that an element of flexibility is built into accommodation pathways for care leavers. Care leavers may take on a tenancy and realise they are not ready and would like to return to a more supported environment to build on their skills and resilience. It is highly likely that their pathway to independence may not be linear and that support will be needed to make sure young people avoid housing instability and are given a flexible and responsive service.

Education, employment and training (EET)

Headlines: Education, Employment and Training

- Our study echoed previous work which shows that young people in and from care continue to experience much higher rates of school disruption, such as exclusions and truancy, compared to school children generally.
- Like other young people in care, our sample of young people in and leaving care fell far behind other school leavers in terms of academic attainment.
- In this research young men and those who experience placement instability in care continue to do less well in terms of education attainment on leaving school.
- The link between attainment and future EET outcomes was reflected in the study sample. None of those who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) had achieved the national indicator of attainment of 5 A*-C grade GCSEs.
- While our data reflects existing evidence that care experienced youth do worse in participation in post-16 EET than young people generally, young people in the our study

appeared to be doing slightly better than other young people in and from care nationally. A higher percentage of young people in this study were engaged in further education and fewer were NEET. Most (80%) of the young people in this study were considered by their lead professional to be doing well in their EET activity.

- Education engagement or success was the most prominent indication of personal achievement, highlighted by young people in our study sample. This was particularly so when young people felt they had overcome difficulties to ‘*make it*’.
- Our analysis showed that the facilitators for education participation include young people’s own motivation and determination, choosing the right course, as well as emotional, practical and financial support from corporate parents and family and friends.
- The main barriers to participating in education included a lack of support, personal difficulties, the cost of tuition fees and a lack of financial resources.

Disruption to young people’s education

Education disruption and leaving school with few or no qualifications is a consistent finding in research and practice evidence for young people in and leaving care.

School disruption and attainment

Education	% Study sample	% All school children
Truancy	24% (145)	15%
Fixed exclusion	17% (101)	4%
Permanent exclusion	9% (49)	1%
Achieved 5+ A*-C GCSEs	15% (32)	80%

There is far greater understanding of the barriers to education participation and attainment for young people in care. Uncertainty and instability in young people’s home lives, the impact of past and ongoing trauma and difficulties, the legacy of early disadvantage (a predictor of poor attainment for all school children) and the prospect of moving out of care, which for those who continue to leave their care placement at 16 and 17, coincides with key stage 4 studies and exams. These can all play a part. The challenge for corporate parents is to provide support to overcome these obstacles and ensure that looked after children and care leavers have the same educational aspirations, experiences and opportunities as any other child. To do this, we need to understand why looked after children are more likely than other school children to be excluded from school. Our study showed that looked after young people are far more likely than others to truant and be excluded.

Messages for corporate parents

- Corporate parents should consider: How can the role of Virtual School Head and designated teacher impact upon levels of truancy and exclusion? What can be done to reduce or find alternatives to excluding vulnerable young people from participating in education? Corporate parents also need to tackle the causes of truancy by developing strategies to reduce disengagement.

Many of the young people in our study highlighted academic successes as their greatest achievement. School, therefore, offers a real opportunity to help those in care to have the same experiences, aspirations and chances as any other child.

Young people's best achievement: a peer research analysis

- Young people were asked to tell us about their best achievement to date. A content analysis carried out by peer researchers suggested that achievements tended to fall into the following range of categories, listed in order of prominence.
- Academic (n=191 cases), Vocational/training (n=155 cases), Relationships, including being a parent, social, familial (n=94 cases), Sport (n= 67 cases), Independence, e.g. own flat (n=58 cases), Jobs/work (n=36 cases), Sorting self out, e.g. overcoming drug issues (21 cases).
- In some cases young people were unable to cite any best achievements: Don't know/none (n=31 cases),
- These areas were further collapsed into three broad themes
 1. educational/vocational, 2. personal and 3. recognition.

The most common theme was educational and vocational achievements. Young people talked about completing their school studies or further education and training courses and acquiring qualifications 'finishing my first year at college' 'and to have achieved my 3 A levels at the highest grade'. For some young people, their education achievements had involved overcoming difficulties:

'Getting back into school after being expelled for 3 years'

'My maths GCSE, I initially struggled but caught up'

'Completing high school while in the middle of a rough patch'

Young people also identified a range of achievements that appeared to meet personal goals and targets. These could relate to renewing or forming new relationships with family, friends and partners. Reaching an important stage or status in their life, such as 'getting a girlfriend', becoming a parent and beginning their own family 'my two children and my house' and 'being a mum to my baby'. Becoming independent, moving on from care and setting up home also gave a sense of fulfilment:

'Getting my own house' 'My own place'

'Becoming independent and having my own flat'

'Becoming independent and knowing what I want in life'

For some young people the acknowledgement of having overcome difficult family circumstance was foremost;

'It's hard to live without parents but I have managed'

'I had to be brave when social services refused to let me go ... with my [parents]'

'Not getting caught up in trouble because I grew up around bad influenced people, I am proud I am good and achieving in education'

Achievements also included personal attributes such as growing up, 'being more mature, see everyone's point of view' or addressing and overcoming types of behaviour or problems.

'Being able to control my anger over the past year or so'

'Getting my life back on track'

'Not getting nicked and not absconding from residential, it's amazing how much I've come on'

'I turned my life around because I was a drug addict'

A third category related to recognition, for example receiving awards for activities, behaviour and sporting successes:

'Acknowledged two years in a row... for good people in the community'

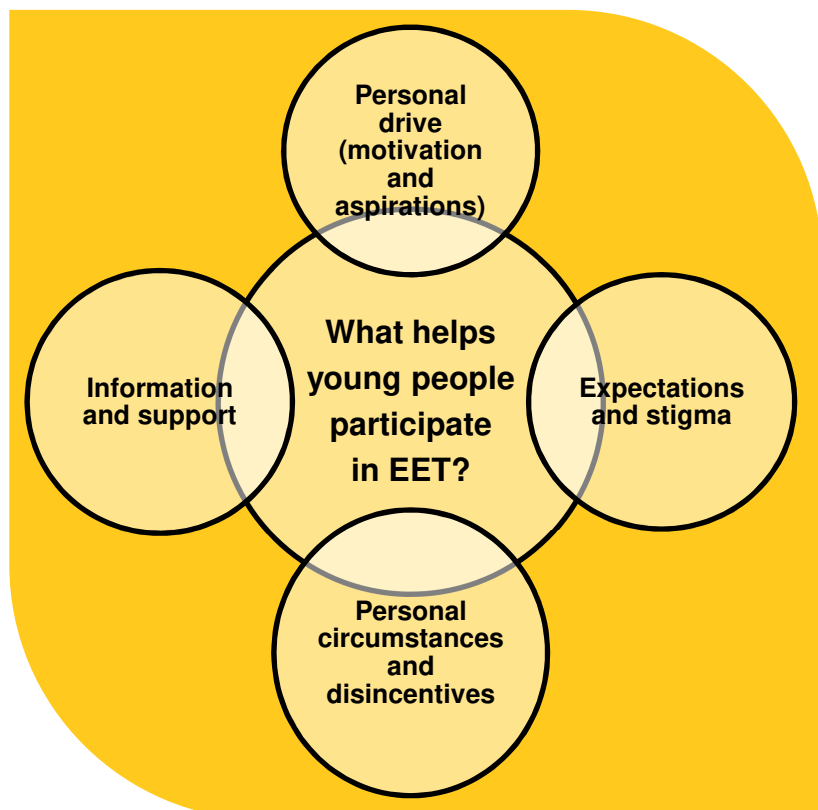
Playing rugby for the county'

- *'I was the first girl champion in my club'*
- *'My Princes Trust [award] a real confidence boost'*
- For some, 'getting a smart phone' and 'making awesome spaghetti bolognese' were amongst their many achievements. Only a small number of young people were unable to identify any achievements.

What helps young people participate in EET?

To examine further some of the barriers and facilitators to participation in EET young people and lead professionals who took part in year 2 follow up were asked for their views on what has or might help. In addition, two focus groups were held with the young person's reference group and a group of area research co-ordinators (ARCs) from four of the participating LAs, to explore barriers and facilitators to participation.

Often, barriers and facilitators were 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 was carried out by members of the research team and the young people's analysis group and a number of key themes emerged.

Personal Drive (motivation and aspirations)

Having the motivation to do something and a determination to succeed was seen as an essential driver in achieving positive outcomes. There was also the acknowledgement that without self-motivation, support from professionals might prove fruitless. Where young people were struggling, this was sometimes attributed to a lack of motivation, self-belief or encouragement;

' 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' (young person)

Lead professionals also pointed out the importance for young people to be motivated, either by the encouragement of carers, friends, tutors or other professionals or by interesting opportunities.

Combined with motivation was choosing the right course; something that will appeal to young people's interests and motivate them to sustain participation. Young people warned against taking on a course for other reasons, such as financial incentives. The consequences of accepting or choosing the wrong course was noted in young people's reasons for dropping out of education.

Expectations and stigma

Related to the above themes, was the impact of others' expectations of care leavers, whether this involved having high expectations and aspirations for them or conversely low expectations, which could amount to young people being stigmatised.

One young person who was in their second year of University told us 'for me it was my foster carer that has drilled it into me that I am capable of doing what I want to do.' (Young person focus group) Another told us that challenging the negative stereotypes and wanting to be the same as others had motivated her to apply for university.

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

Some [young people] don't have that support...to build that level of aspiration... we were trying to get [young person] into somewhere to get some experience and the foster carer... on jobseekers said 'what, you are going to go out the house for that?', I thought like you're just fighting a losing battle,...it's like a culture thing, well, I'm not going to work, I'm going to go on jobseekers' (Area research co-ordinator).

'There's a lot of companies, [where] the stigmas for being in care is still there 'ooh well, I'm risking some money, I want somebody stable not somebody like that', so it's trying to overcome that as well' (Area research co-ordinator).

challenge a lack of aspiration and negative stereotyping from carers or employers.

Personal circumstances and disincentives

Obstacles to young people participating in EET and also sustaining participation related to their own personal circumstances as well as wider societal factors. For some young people, coping with personal troubles such as bereavement, family problems or difficult circumstances prevented them from continuing participation or taking up EET opportunities. In discussing reasons for dropping out or ending their course prematurely, problems associated with health and risk behaviour were also apparent.

Becoming a parent was highlighted by several young people who had struggled with their education, though some young people also felt strongly that parenthood should not be a barrier to participation,

Focusing on more immediate ‘priorities’ such as addressing difficulties could prove a diversion from EET. The need to find stable accommodation and setting up home were also highlighted as distractions to participating in EET for care leavers. Other obstacles to participation and reasons for drop out included having to travel a ‘distance from home’ and the cost of meeting ‘travel expenses’ or ‘childcare costs’. Young people and lead professionals also referred to the financial disincentives of participation, whether this was the high cost of university fees or low paid apprenticeships or employment, perhaps directed at young people living with family but which prove difficult or unaffordable for those young people living independently.

This demonstrates the need for providing extra support, where required, to help young people find and maintain EET opportunities in the course of personal, social and financial challenges.

‘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, you know, they have got all sorts of people staying at their houses, they have got mental health issues, you know 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?’

(Lead professional)

‘We were told to push apprenticeships but our young people normally get to like 18 or 19 and they ...move into their own place and are finally ready to do an apprenticeship and they just couldn’t afford it, they would be worse off so we find that’s a real barrier and we have had young people who have been offered an apprenticeship and then had to turn it down which is like ... not what you are trying to promote because they would be better off staying on job seekers allowance than doing an apprenticeship.’

(Area research co-ordinator)

Information and support

There was evidence of a good extended corporate parenting approach to addressing young people's needs, but in instances when they were unsupportive they presented a barrier to young people doing well in EET.

'You need positive reinforcement when you do something good – to be proud of your achievements but that it is also needed when you are at your lowest ebb'

(Young Person focus group).

Lead professionals highlighted the positive impact of specialist staff joining the leaving care team. Other examples of good corporate parenting included the introduction of dedicated support workers within education settings. Conversely there were concerns over the impact of cuts to specialist EET information and services, such as closure of Connexions'.

Lead professionals and young people commented on the importance of co-operative and supportive foster carers, benefits advisors teachers, tutors and employers in helping young people to sustain participation in EET.

A lack of financial support was also noted 'as a barrier to participation. Several workers highlighted the impact of rising education fees and reduced funding options. There were also worries about the impact of austerity measures by young people and workers alike.

Messages for corporate parents

- Research has shown that the strongest predictors of education performance are social background and parentingⁱⁱⁱ and that those from disadvantage backgrounds and who have experienced poor parenting tend to do less well. Taking this and the higher likelihood of school disruption into account most looked after children might be considered doubly disadvantaged when trying cope with the demands and pressures of school exams. Corporate parenting needs to address this through high quality compensatory parenting – providing attachment and stability, to enable young people in care to overcome early obstacles to educational success.
- In supporting young people to overcome early disadvantage, it might be useful to consider poor education attainment at the point of leaving school as a delay in young people's education trajectory. In this sense, young people's progress or 'outcomes' in education can be reframed as interrupted rather than unsuccessful. Whilst this highlights the absolute importance of continued support through the PA to 25 function, and for 'second chance learning' options and the level of resources and support necessary to enable young people to make the most of options in the early years after leaving care, it should of course not let corporate parents off the hook in ensuring that looked after children and young people have the same opportunities to succeed and excel in exams as other school children.
- Corporate parents, like any other good parent, need to enable the children in their care to make the most of their education opportunities; to have good attendance, avoiding truancy and exclusions and once there, engage with all that school has to offer. They should also ensure that young people receive the help they need to be well prepared for and see through their qualifications.

- The picture for participation in EET after school is on the surface a positive one for our research sample. The challenge is to support young people to sustain participation by finding the right course to suit their needs, ensuring they receive emotional and practical support to enable them to address personal difficulties that might threaten attendance, 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 prospects. 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, sometimes based within the team can facilitate increased opportunities for young people.

Health, wellbeing and risk

Headlines: Health

- Most young people in the study were considered to be healthy and most did not have physical, learning or mental health difficulties. Nevertheless, a sizable minority had additional needs - over third (36%) of young people were described by their lead professional as having at least one physical, sensory, learning and/or mental health difficulty.
- Two-fifths (40%) of young people were considered to have problems with emotional and behavioural development, including low mood, depression, psychological disturbance, self-harm and suicide attempts.
- Around one in 10 were considered to have mental ill health, with those aged 16 and over being twice as likely as 13-15 year olds to have mental health problems.
- The link between past events and mental and emotional health was evident in young people and lead professionals comments.
- A measure of subjective wellbeing suggested that overall, young people were generally positive about their lives. The aspects they were least happy with where their family and the area they lived in.
- Care leavers appeared to have a lower feeling of overall wellbeing than those still in care and overall wellbeing differed significantly across the study local authority areas.
- Levels of involvement in risky behaviour appeared high in comparison with the general population of young people (e.g. running away, offending, drug and alcohol use). Around one in ten demonstrated mid to high level involvement with risk behaviour at time of interview. Risk behaviour demonstrates vulnerability, can compromise health and personal safety and is a predictor of poor progress in other life areas including housing stability and participation in education, employment and training.

Young people’s general health and impairments

The types of difficulties reported provide some indication of the issues that impacted upon young people’s day to day lives and included speech impediments, asthma, epilepsy, and physical and mobility difficulties such as curvature of the spine. Problems related to obesity and eating disorders were also evident as were sleeping problems. In fact, around four in 10 (43%) young people reported problems eating or sleeping^{iv}. In our study there was also evidence of multiple health problems and 5% of young people were identified as having two or more health related difficulties, for some young people this led to a high level of need.

Lead professional data on young people’s health, mental health and impairments.

Difficulty	Present (n)
Physical disability	3% (9)
Sensory impairment	3% (9)
Chronic health problems	2% (8)
Mental health problems	14% (48)
Diagnosis of ADHD	9% (31)
Other learning disability	13% (46)
Other diagnosed difficulty	7% (23)
Statement of SEN	15% (57)

Young people’s emotional and mental health

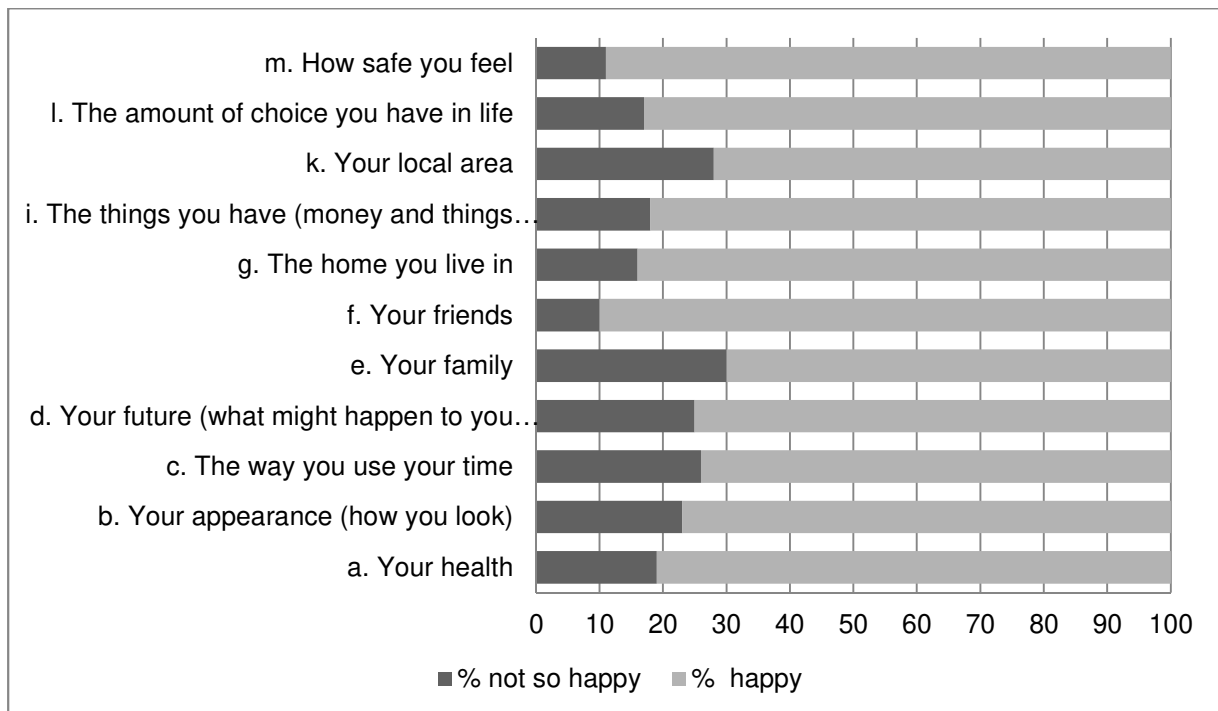
We found that many young people in and from care are vulnerable to difficulties related to mental ill health and risk behaviour. Such difficulties increase their vulnerability to poor progress and complex needs as they make the journey into adulthood.

Emotional and mental health difficulties constituted the most common health issue identified by lead professionals. Around 14% (n=48) of young people in the sample were identified as having mental health difficulties, however, it is likely that the true extent of mental ill health is more accurately reflected in wider emotional and behavioural issues evident within the sample. For example, lead professionals’ reports suggested that two out of every five young people (40%, n=157) had problems related to their emotional and behavioural development^v.

Young people’s subjective wellbeing

Our study, gathered information on subjective wellbeing from all young people participating in the snapshot and follow-up interviews, our work contributes to closing the gap in our knowledge within this area. Young people were asked to fill out a self-completion checklist^{vi} on how happy they were with key aspects of their lives. The checklist replicated measures used by The Children’s Society (TCS) survey of wellbeing in the general population of five to 15 year olds^{vii}, and included 13 items. Young people were asked to score each item on an 11 point scale (0 = not at all happy to 10 = very happy). The maximum score per item was, therefore, 10.

The proportion of young people who are unhappy & happy with each life domain



Influences on overall wellbeing included:

- Local authority area - Young people’s wellbeing score was significantly lower in some of our study local authority areas, whilst, on average, young people from two areas in particular appeared to have a higher sense of overall wellbeing.^{viii}
- Girls within our sample tended to have a lower sense of wellbeing than boys (p=0.000^{ix}), which reflects findings from research on young people in general.
- The care leaver group had lower overall wellbeing than young people still in care (p=0.000).

Difficulties and risky behaviour

We also looked at broader lifestyle issues that might suggest a risk predictor for future progress. There was evidence that around one third of young people in our study had experienced or was continuing to experience risky behaviour.

- One fifth (20%, n=126) of young people in our study said they had used drugs in the past three months^x and around one third (34%, n=196) reported problem alcohol use.
- Just over one quarter (26%, n=151) of young people reporting that they had been in trouble with the police in the three months prior to interview. In addition, lead professional data on past and current offending suggested that around one third (36%, n=134) of young people had been involved in offending at some point.
- One fifth (22%, n=119) of young people aged 13–22 years, reported running away in the three months prior to interview. Information from lead professionals on past evidence of young people running away suggested that almost twice as many, amounting to around two in five young people (39%, n=131) had run away at some point in their lives.
- Almost one quarter (23%, n=134) of young people were involved in two or three risk behaviours during the three months prior to interview.

Number risk behaviours reported by young people

	Frequency (n)	Percent %
No risk areas	308	53
One risk area	137	24
Two risk areas	76	13
Three risk areas	58	10

Support to meet young people’s health needs

Young people often valued the help they received from their lead professionals, which included emotional and practical support with health, wellbeing and difficulties, demonstrating the holistic nature of the lead professional role.

Having good relationships with health professionals and services and specialist workers attached to the social work or leaving care team could assist workers in accessing the range of support needed and valued by young people to address health and risk related difficulties.

There was some evidence that at times Lead Professionals struggled to access CAMHS and Adult Mental Health Teams, due to long waiting lists or differences of opinion about the level of need or eligibility criteria.

The difficulties in accessing relevant mental health support was reflected in the policy survey of leaving care managers, adult mental health services were most likely to be rated as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’ corporate parents. The wider survey found that adult mental health services was the least likely service to be rated as a ‘good’ or ‘very good’ corporate parents (13% of respondents). Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) meanwhile received more positive ratings (63% good or very good) as corporate parents. CAMHS were also more likely to have joint working agreements (44%) compared to adults mental health services (9%).

Messages for corporate parents

- Corporate parents have a responsibility to be aware of and address the health and wellbeing needs of their children and young people. This requires early identification of physical and mental ill health and additional needs related to physical or learning impairments and involvement in risk behaviour. This can best be achieved through holistic and ongoing assessments; however, it requires support from a range of sources including carers, family and lead professionals as well as specialist services.
- Developing joint working protocols and the inclusion of specialist workers within the social work or leaving care team can smooth access to a range of support services and professionals to address young peoples' immediate and longer term needs.
- Our study, together with existing research suggests an increased risk of onset of mental ill health during the late teenage years for young people who have experienced childhood trauma. This can often coincide with the transition from care, which itself can prove stressful and detrimental to young people’s overall wellbeing. This suggests a need for more detailed explorations of the complex area of mental health and wellbeing to understand how the various facets of care experienced young people’s lives interact.

The impact of early experiences, in-care experiences as well as the potential for distress and uncertainty on leaving care will all play a part and unpicking this will be essential to understanding what support is needed and when

- Our findings add further weight to the need for appropriate and accessible support to address emotional and mental health needs at this significant interchange in the lives of young people leaving care. Leaving care assessments and pathway plans could place more focus on both physical and mental health as well as the wider lifestyle and wellbeing needs. Equally, we have seen that access to specialist mental health services for those aged 18+ continues to be a challenge. It is necessary for more effective and efficient routes into and between CAMHS and adult mental health services to ensure that young people can access support to meet their needs.
- Proposed developments related to addressing young people's mental health and emotional needs, such as the review of the statutory guidance on promoting the health and wellbeing of looked after children, the increased focus on health in the new Ofsted inspection framework and wider initiatives such as Closing the Gap, to examine both physical and mental health services focused on the 15-24 year age group in general have the potential to smooth the pathway to accessing relevant support.

Concluding comments

Our research shows that many young people in care and care leavers the study were doing well. Most were happy with their accommodation, a relatively high proportion of young people were in some form of education including those who had left compulsory schooling, testing out further and higher education options to varying degrees of success, and the majority of young people reported a positive sense of overall wellbeing, being particularly happy with their friendships.

For some, however, the picture was not so positive. We found evidence of high need related to mental ill health and emotional difficulties, examples of high levels of involvement in risk behaviour such as substance misuse, running away and offending and it was apparent that school disengagement, whether through truancy, exclusions or poor attainment continued to exceed levels found within the general population of school children and young people, placing those in and from care at a disadvantage in terms of reaching their educational and future employment potential. In addition, for a relatively small group there was evidence of accommodation instability with 30% having lived in three or more places in the year prior to interview. Young people's personal experiences and characteristics clearly made a difference to how well they were doing. Care leavers in particular appear to be faring less well than those still in care.

Alongside this we found evidence of good corporate parenting, where young people talked of the support they had received from a range of members of the corporate family, including carers, lead professionals, education and training providers, housing support worker, specialist workers such as health or drug and alcohol services and their own friends and family. There were also examples of effective joint working, where agencies came together

through joint protocols or basing specialist workers within social work and leaving care teams to provide a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary support network to address individual need.

However, there were also examples of inadequate corporate parenting where young people felt let down by the lack of support or access to services, echoed by some lead professionals. For example, many felt that increased administrative work prevented them from spending quality face to face time with their young people. Lead Professionals also noted in particular, the continued frustrations of negotiating timely and appropriate support for young people with mental health and emotional difficulties. Waiting lists and incongruent thresholds for young adults accessing CAMHS and Adult Mental Health services featured strongly, as did the interminable challenge of supporting young people to engage with support services.

‘For us it’s about being accessible, being more proactive and befriending to the point where trust is earned. Good parents are those that nurture to independence. We must never lose sight of the issues and barriers that living in care produces’.

For more information on the study and Catch22 go to www.catch-22.org.uk

Endnotes

ⁱ DCSF (2010) Care Matters: Budget Holding Lead Professionals (BHLPs) with Looked After Children in England, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151655/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RB225.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Pearson Chi-Square Test $p = 0.000$

ⁱⁱⁱ Schoon, I and Bartley M (2008) 'The role of human capability and resilience' *The Psychologist*, 21, 1 24-27

^{iv} 17% reported this problem was 'a bit like me', 13% 'quite like me' and 13% 'just like me'.

^v Using a scale of 1 (serious problems exist) to 4 (no problems) for emotional and behavioural development, Lead Professionals rated 31% of young people '2' and 9% '1' indicating serious difficulties.

^{vi} The majority of young people completed the checklist themselves at the end of their interview with a peer researcher. Research notes suggest that in a minority of cases, where young people expressed difficulties with literacy or for whom English was a second language, the checklist was administered by the peer researcher. There is no evidence to suggest that this has had any adverse effects on overall results.

^{vii} Rees, G., Bradshaw, J., Goswami, H. and Keung, A. (2010) *Understanding Children's Well-being: A national survey of young people's well-being*, The Children's Society, London

^{viii} A comparison of means using a Kruskal Wallis Test, reported a significant association between overall wellbeing and local authority area ($p=.014$) based on 544 cases.

^{ix} Mann Whitney U test for comparing overall wellbeing scores by 1. gender – showed a significant difference between boys and girls, with means of 81.79 for girls compared to 89.20 for boys ($p=0.000$) and 2. a significant difference in wellbeing between those in care and care leavers - means of 80.98 for care leavers compared to 91.06($p=0.000$).

^x Young people were asked to indicate whether in the past three months they a) drank a lot of alcohol and b) used drugs by responding not like me, a bit like me, quite like me and just like me. The latter three responses were used to indicate the percentage reporting substance use.