



**A Care Leaver's Foundation Event
Sponsored by Prospects**

'Keep Dreaming'

**A Report from Care Leaver's Week in
Wales**

Hosted by Helen Mary Jones AM

Chair of the National Assembly Children and Young People's Committee.

**Thursday 9th December 2010 11:00am to 1:30pm
Senedd building, National Assembly for Wales, Cardiff Bay**



Message from Prospects

Ensuring that Care Leavers receive the necessary and consistent level of support is not a new issue. The report of the Waterhouse Tribunal of Inquiry “Lost in Care” published in June 2000 made this recommendation - “When they leave the care system, young people need continued support and guidance if they are not to end up, as so many do now, unemployed, homeless or in prison”. It added that most responsible and caring parents would not leave their children to live independently without support at 16, or even 18, and we should not accept it for children and young people who are looked after by Local Authorities which feels such an obvious statement.

10 years on and one feels that whilst many aspects of care have improved and developed there are still significant variances in the experiences of Care Leavers in terms of the level of support and help they have actually received. Care Leavers need a consistent and predictable level of support which should not be dependent on the geographical area that they are in. This will require the Welsh Assembly Government to lay down a national requirement, which imposes clear and non-negotiable responsibilities on local authorities to provide their consistent support to Care Leavers. As such there is a need to recognise that providing resources to meet the needs of our Looked After Children is an investment in not only their future but also ours. Like any investment the return is not always immediate and there is a case for paying longer in order to achieve a greater yield and return.

Steve Elliott
Director, Prospects

‘Keep Dreaming’

On 9th December 2010 Voices From Care and ALeap held a belated event celebrating Care Leaver’s Week in Wales. The event was sponsored by Prospects and the Care Leaver’s Foundation, and was hosted in Ty Hywel by Helen Mary Jones, A.M. The event was chaired by Neil Edge, a young person from Rhondda Cynon Taff.

The day was prepared by members and staff at Voices From Care and by colleagues from ALeap. It was decided that important themes for the day were: **having a plan, education, housing, mental health, ambition**. These themes built on the research project undertaken by Voices From Care and Cardiff University, **‘How Was Your Day?’**, Learning from experience: informing preventative policies and practice by analysing critical moments in care leavers’ life histories (June 2010).

After some opening speeches and remarks to set the scene, the participants divided into groups to look at the key issues for care leavers and where changes are needed. The groups considered what was needed to make change happen and who needed to be involved.

Key Messages

There were several key messages emerging from participants on the day. There seems to be growing recognition that the expectations on care leavers are high and that many care leavers struggle as they move into independence. There was recognition that learning to live independently is part of a process and that like many other young adults care leavers will make mistakes and will need support. Whilst the support that some young people spoke of receiving was a high quality and felt tailored to suit their individual circumstances and needs, this was not the experience of all young people. There was the concern that quality leaving care services are not being delivered consistently across Wales. Participants wanted services which gave ‘second chances’ and did not take a punitive approach. As one young person said, ‘Being made to starve does not help you

learn'. Participants wanted care leavers to have equality across Wales in terms of entitlements, and to have equal access to advocacy.

There was concern that the requirements of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 are still not being met and yet there were no evident sanctions for non-compliance. Participants wanted care leavers across Wales to be supported to meet at intervals and to input their experiences into the development of legislation, policy and practice. The message was that the achievements of care leavers must be celebrated and a positive image promoted, with the development of schemes for care leavers to act as mentors for other care leavers.

Key Issues

Corporate Parents

Corporate parents need to accept responsibility on behalf of society for improving outcomes and the quality of life for care leavers. Councillors need continuous education and influencing on the range of issues for care leavers. They must know who the care leavers in their area are by meeting with them as a group.

There must be an investment in supporting care leavers up until the age of 25 years old what ever their circumstances – with services being able to be flexible in their approach. Some care leavers may engage well, but other care leavers may be more cautious but still need support. Services need to be able to work with a range of young people.

The corporate agenda and social work practice on the ground need to have closer links so that the corporate agenda is informed and realistic. Initiatives linking council members directly to service users need to be promoted.

Leaving Care Teams

Young people need a response which suits their individual circumstances and this response will be more effective if delivered by a person known to them. Continuity of staff is essential.

Leaving Care Teams are often the first port of call for care leavers in times of trouble as there is not a high turnover of workers and the teams have a single focus. Young people can feel like they belong.

Alternatively some young people reported feeling like just a number.

Personal Advisors and Social Workers are not always accessible to young people. The remit of Personal Advisors needs to be strengthened, and their availability to support young people developed. The good practice in some areas of offering a very supportive, personalised service must be replicated in all areas.

Leaving Care Teams should have the resources and be operated in such a way that means that they are able to visit young people and respond within a reasonable time to phone calls and contact from young people.

‘It’s a big thing, becoming a social worker, taking on a young person’s life – I would say is as important as someone who’s going to adopt or someone who’s going to foster because you become a part of that person’s life and you can’t just walk in and walk out....’ (**How Was Your Day?**, June 2010)).

Identity

Children and young people lose possessions as they move between placements and between accommodation. A physical reminder of a person's history is important and helps to form a person's identity. Contact with birth families and foster families is still important, and young people may be going through a time of reflection and change where they need to have support in terms of their identity. Leaving Care services should not just focus on housing, budgeting etc but should be available to support young people in areas of identity and emotional resilience. There needs to be more thought to the life long implications of separation and loss for children in the care system. Rights to contact for children and young people need to be strengthened. Care leavers must be practically and emotionally supported with contact with their siblings.

All foster carers should have a laminating machine to preserve paper documents, pictures photos. All young people must have memory boxes or a similar facility and be encouraged to preserve their memories. This need continues, and even strengthens as young people become care leavers and move into adulthood and independence.

'Not knowing' about aspects of their past, such as why they came into care, why they moved away from early foster carers, or information about their birth families was missing for very many of the participants. Several had sought information from case files. For some of these, this was a straightforward process, several others had battled for access, and one participant deliberately declined to look at her file as she felt that her birth family would be unfairly portrayed. It was striking how many gaps there were in young people's information about their pasts and how few material possessions they had in the form of photographs and family mementos.' (**'How Was Your Day?'**, June 2010)).

Transition

There is a lack of co-operation between authorities and between children's and adult's services, which impacts negatively on some of the most vulnerable care leavers. Where it is identified that young people who are care leavers may require the support of adult services, robust policies and procedures must be in place to facilitate timely assessments and planning. Arrangements for assessing the needs of more vulnerable care leavers need to be strengthened. Children and adult services must have a duty to co-operate, and both acknowledge that co-operation is needed in terms of a corporate parenting role.

A young person should know in sufficient time if they are eligible for adult services and Pathway planning should not be hindered by lack of co-operation and bureaucratic processes. This must apply across local authority borders.

Foster Care

Being in foster care is not a one-way process – young people may become a part of a family and they contribute to families.

Foster carers should be more aspirational for young people – the system should encourage and support foster carers in these aspirations. The on-going support of foster families for care leavers should be promoted, facilitated and celebrated.

There needs to be thought given to how foster carers manage keeping in touch with care leavers. Any approach would need to be flexible – for some care leavers a more formal arrangement might suit, others would be more suited to an informal arrangement. Any impact and implications for foster carers would need to be considered and foster carers supported, practically and financially, for this role.

Education, Training and Employment

It is essential that care leavers are strongly encouraged and supported to remain in education and / or employment or training. Engagement is the key to a brighter future. There is a need to look at individual support needs and to think creatively and resourcefully.

There should be a national resource for young people and professionals on educational matters and entitlements.

There are examples of very effective supported employment and work experience schemes for care leavers run by local authorities and large companies. These schemes should be promoted, and awards given for excellence. Many care leavers are concerned about how engaging in voluntary and short-term paid work affects receipt of benefits. Care leavers in these circumstances need advice and understanding from professionals, and they need the system to be applied in a way that care leavers are best placed to gain from experience of the workplace.

Living independently

Young people often leave care without the skills for living independently.

‘I signed two pieces of paper to say I agreed to live in this property. She sat down for ten minutes saying about the rules; what I can't do, what I must and what I need to prove to, to be a good tenant. And she never showed me how to use the gas, the electric, nothing. So the electric was working, I found that out myself. The washing machine, all this I had to figure out myself and I'm only 17.’ (**How Was Your Day?**, June 2010)).

Care Leavers often do not have all the essential documents they need in life. On-going support and opportunities to develop independence skills must be available to care leavers.

Young people must have all the following when they leave care:

- Birth certificate
- Passport
- Help towards driving lessons
- Bank account
- Access to some kind of savings – a good parent would encourage their child to learn to and practice saving money. They may add to these. Savings can provide a safety net for young people and give them choices. Savings may not be spent as wisely as adults might like – this can also be an important lesson in life.

Leaving Care Teams should have access to specialists in financial advice and housing advice.

Young people should be supported to access on-going training and support in independent living skills. Young people leaving care should be enabled to acquire and strengthen independent living skills over time, like other young people might. Leaving Care Teams should be more equipped to provide this kind of facility.

Leaving Care Teams should be able to support young people as they develop their self-esteem and confidence – they should have access to resources which help young people develop and grow into adulthood.

Housing

Housing options for care leavers are still limited. The role of corporate parents in supporting care leavers' with housing should be strengthened. Barriers to increasing housing options need to be removed.

Corporate parents should help young people to access private rented housing by providing bonds and acting as guarantors if needed, and by helping out with first month's rent.

Young people in supported housing must not be penalised if they gain employment - they should be assisted with the support costs of their housing.

An end to the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation for care leavers. Other provision must be found to accommodate care leavers who find themselves without accommodation.

The tax threshold for supported lodgings providers should be increased.

Finances

Care Leavers should be able to be supported by extra money, where this is needed in a crisis and for unexpected situations. There should be more acknowledgement that many care leavers are struggling in poverty and more acknowledgment of the implications of this for their health, well being and future opportunities.

Signposting is not always enough.

Voices From Care would welcome any comments on this report. Please contact Carol Floris at 02920 451431 or at info@vfcc.org.uk.

**For the full report 'How Was Your Day?'
report <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/research/research/researchprojects/learningfromexperience/index.html>**