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Supporting Care Leavers Transitioning to Adulthood Evidence Review

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Abstract

Care leavers face additional barriers as they transition out of care to adulthood. This evidence review examines a) what supports positive transition to adulthood for care leavers, b) mechanisms to aid a multi-disciplinary whole-system approach, and c) how assistance can be co-produced to ensure care leavers needs are met. The evidence demonstrates the importance of psycho-emotional readiness, with care leavers requiring support to experiment with adulthood; relational support that is consistent, flexible, and builds trust; and material assistance including housing to offer stability. More evidence is required to understand how to promote a whole system, multi-disciplinary approach, though key mechanisms include dynamic leadership, and collaboration with alignment of values, priorities, and objectives. Finally, whilst co-production is recommended, it needs to be authentic and come from a genuine place of care to be effective.

Keywords: care leavers, transitions to adulthood, co-production, whole system response

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Introduction

Transition to adulthood is no longer synonymous with reaching a set of normative milestones – living independently, getting a job, having a family – but instead is a more complex and multidimensional process (Pearson et al, 2020; Medforth and Boyle, 2023). It can be a challenging time for young people trying to navigate a period of significant change and uncertainty (Furlong, 2016). Young people leaving care often experience additional barriers as they transition to adulthood (Harrison et al, 2023). This has been described as ‘accelerated and compressed’ as care leavers take on responsibilities of adulthood at an earlier age compared with their peers who often remain living at home well into their twenties (Stein, 2012, p400). Furthermore, the withdrawal of state support has been referred to as a ‘care cliff’, with care leavers expected to live independently (Palmer *et al*, 2022) and enter ‘instant adulthood’ (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019).

Care leavers often experience adversity prior to and during care placement and this can impact their functioning in later life (Melkman and Benbenishty, 2018). Young people become looked after for a variety of reasons, though this is often the result of abuse and neglect, with the former including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (NICE, 2021). Young people having multiple placements can also result in instability and can affect attachment (Sanders, 2020). Furthermore, there is a high incidence of mental distress amongst young people living in care, and negative past experiences often result in trauma (NICE, 2021).

Transitions are important in shaping outcomes for care leavers in later life. Literature on transitions for care leavers demonstrates increased incidence of adverse outcomes. Precarity in multiple aspects of young care leavers lives can result in poor outcomes regarding housing, education, and employment, amongst other domains (Glynn, 2021). Care leavers, for example, have higher rates of homelessness, more involvement with the criminal justice system (Laming, 2016; HM Prison and

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Probation Service, 2023), are more likely not to be in education, employment or training (Harrison et al, 2023), and are more at risk of sexual exploitation (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019) compared with their peers.

So, care leavers often face multiple disadvantage and experience adversity, yet have increased responsibility and lower levels of support (Alderson et al, 2023). This underlines the need to identify what works to support positive transitions to adulthood.

Policy context

There are different policies to support care leavers across UK nations. In Scotland, a young person can remain in their placement until the age of 21 under ‘Continuing Care’. Aftercare may also be available up until the age of 26, which involves the provision of advice, guidance, and assistance (Scottish Government, n.d.a). Care leavers in England are entitled to support from a Personal Advisor up until the age of 25, and young people can remain in foster care until the age of 21 through the ‘Staying Put’ policy (Foley et al, 2023).

In 2016, a root and branch review of the care system, ‘The Promise’, was undertaken in Scotland. It sought the views of young people and families with experience of the care system, as well as people working in practice in both paid and unpaid capacities. It aimed to provide a roadmap to fundamentally change the care system so that children feel ‘loved, safe, and respected and realise their full potential’ (Independent Care Review, 2020). This includes an ambition to better support care leavers entering adulthood to be independent and stable, yet able to stay at home or return home for support when required.

Similarly, an Independent Review of children’s social care was initiated in England in 2021, with the final report stating that ‘disadvantage faced by the care experienced community should be the civil rights issue of our time’ (MacAlister, 2022, p5). It recommended care experience being a protected characteristic, alongside five ambitions to ensure people with care experience can have ‘loving relationships;

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quality education; a decent home; fulfilling work and good health as the foundations for a good life’ (MacAlister, 2022:6). To achieve this, the Review underpinned the need for a whole system response at national and local level, encompassing a range of different sectors and agencies.

Methodology

This evidence review aims to address how care leavers can be supported as they transition to adulthood. It identifies mechanisms needed to support care leavers to achieve positive outcomes, considers how wider agencies can be engaged to provide a whole system response, and examines how supports can be co-produced with care leavers. This review synthesises outputs from the Exploring Innovations in Transitions (EXIT) study and supplements this with six evidence reviews. The EXIT study was a collaboration between researchers across four universities in England and a team of peer researchers, encompassing young people with care experience. The EXIT study aimed to understand what works and doesn’t work in innovations to support care leavers.

Five databases were used to search for evidence reviews. Search terms focused on care leavers (eg. ‘care leavers’ ‘leaving care’, ‘transitioning from care’), transitions (eg. ‘transitions to adulthood’, ‘ageing out’, ‘emerging adulthood), and evidence syntheses (eg. ‘systematic reviews’, ‘meta analysis’, ‘literature review’). Evidence reviews were primarily focused on the UK, though those based on UK and international literature were also included. A total of nine evidence reviews, two qualitative approaches, and one case-study were included. The quality of the included items varied: five were high quality (minor limitations), four were medium quality (some important limitations), and three were of low quality (major limitations).

Defining concepts

- Care Leavers

In the UK, care leavers are defined as young people leaving care who are transitioning to independence (Munro and Stein, 2008), though the parameters of

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this vary across nations. In England, the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 describes a care leaver as a young person who has been in care for 13 weeks or longer by the time they reach their sixteenth birthday. In Scotland, a care leaver is a young person over the age of sixteen who is no longer looked after; this applies regardless of placement type which includes foster care, kinship care where people reside with family members, and residential care (Scottish Government, nd.b).

- Transitions to adulthood

Transitions to adulthood are contested and combine factors relating to both structural context and individual agency (Furlong, 2009). For instance, ‘emerging adulthood’ has been proposed as a distinct life stage characterised by significant change and ambiguity with opportunities for ‘personal freedom and exploration’ (Arnett, 2000). However, this understanding has been challenged for over-emphasising personal agency and failing to attend to structural determinants impacting transition, hence placing individual responsibility on young people to overcome structural disadvantage (Pearson et al, 2020). Evans (2007) work on ‘bounded agency’ demonstrates how young people’s decisions are impacted by their past and present experiences of the wider contexts within which they are embedded, thus attending to both structure and agency.

Depictions of adulthood as a fixed, static construct have been critiqued for being inattentive to the complexity and diversity of experience, and subsequently reconfigured as ‘non-linear, fragmented, multidimensional and extended’ (Pearson et al, 2020). Glynn (2020) developed a theoretical framework to describe core components needed for young people transitioning out of care, encompassing material (housing and food) and psycho-social needs (self-esteem, to be loved and respected). Cameron et al (2018) emphasise the need for transition to be understood as a form of interdependence as opposed to independence as young people continue to require support after leaving care.

- Co-production

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There is a lack of consensus on what co-production constitutes, with no prescribed methods to operationalise it (Flinfers et al, 2016). It does, however, require a shift in power to reformulate relations between people who provide services and people who use them (Scourfield, 2014). Involve (2024) defines co-production as

‘a way of working where service providers and users, work together to reach a collective outcome. The approach is value-driven and built on the principle that those who are affected by a service are best placed to help design it’.

For IMPACT, co-production in social care involves ‘people who draw on care and support and carers working with professionals in equal partnership towards shared goals’ (IMPACT, 2024). Hence, several key tenets are evident relating to both the process - collaborative partnership working, distributed power where people with lived experience have voice, and reciprocity and mutuality (Heaton et al, 2015) - and outcomes, such as services being more likely to meet the needs of users (Needham and Carr, 2009).

Theme 1: Supporting care leavers transitioning to adult services

It is important to reflect that care leavers are not a homogeneous group; people are unique and have different experiences, needs, and wants (Johnson et al, 2024; Smart and Alderson, 2020; Lynch et al, 2021) so these findings must be interpreted in light of this. The following section outlines the need for psycho-emotional, relational, and material support to assist care leavers as they transition to adulthood.

- **Psycho-emotional readiness**

Care leavers face additional challenges as they transition out of care towards adulthood. As opposed to being a gradual process, care leavers experience a ‘sudden exit’ (Baker, 2017, p40) as they face significant responsibilities and enter ‘instant adulthood’ (Atkinson and Hyde, 2018). Transitions represent as a form of interdependence, where young people continue to require support as they negotiate

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the space between dependence and independence (Atkinson and Hyde, 2018). This is often accompanied by a lack of support and can be psychologically distressing for young people who are unprepared for such abrupt change (Atkinson and Hyde, 2018). This is exacerbated by the fact that leaving care is often directed by age, as opposed to readiness (Atkinson and Hyde, 2018; Baker, 2017, which can result in care leavers struggling to cope and mental distress being experienced (Atkinson and Hyde, 2018).

There can be a divergence between expectations of leaving care and the realities of adulthood. The coexistence of increased control and responsibilities can create a sense of ambivalence, with uncertainty about the future and financial precarity being notable barriers (Baker, 2017). Atkinson and Hyde (2018) highlight issues with a lack of emotional/psychological support to assist young people’s transitions, with supports often narrowly focusing on practical assistance (Atkinson and Hyde, 2018). Young people want flexibility and support to ‘experiment’ with independence and require sufficient preparation, including intensive support from the outset, to ease the transition process from being negatively experienced (Atkinson and Hyde, 2018).

- **Relational support**

The literature underpins the importance of relational supports to aid young people as they transition out of care (Baker, 2017; Lynch et al, 2024; Alderson et al, 2023; Atkinson and Hyde, 2018; Feather et al, 2023). Care leavers often experience insecure relationships or relationship breakdown and can have limited connections outside of formal support (Alderson et al, 2023). This can contribute to feelings of isolation and loneliness, and can negatively impact mental health (Baker, 2017). Lynch et al (2024) demonstrate that developing supportive relationships can be empowering and can have a positive impact on mental health by promoting understanding of mental health, reducing loneliness, and instilling confidence and self-esteem (Lynch et al, 2024).

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Relational supports can include volunteering, peer support, and formal relationships, though there needs to be adequate time, resource, flexibility, and continuity for good quality relationships to develop (Alderson et al, 2023; Prendergast et al, 2024). Feather et al (2023) echo the need for relational, social and emotional support, including through a dedicated link worker and peer support. Peer support was associated with more equal power relations as people were assisted by others with care experience, and this was found to be a valuable source of guidance as people transitioned to adulthood (Feather et al, 2023).

Mistrust can also be commonplace, particularly for care leavers with difficult past relationships, or who are concerned about information sharing with their parents (Prendergast et al, 2024; Baker, 2017). Trust can be fostered by working flexibly, proactively, and collaboratively to support the young person to meet their needs and have autonomy to live in a way that they choose (Prendergast et al, 2024). Feather et al (2023) underpin the importance of continuity for relationships, but also identify the value of having a dedicated worker allocated at point of transition due to not being associated with prior (negative) experiences of care.

Professional relationships need to come from a place of care, with inauthentic, contractual relationships, particularly notable in corporate parenting models, being rejected by care leavers (Atkinson and Hyde, 2018). It is important that relationships are genuine and consistent (Atkinson and Hyde, 2018), attentive and responsive to care leavers needs, and not time bounded (Alderson et al, 2023; Prendergast et al, 2024).

Evaluation of the House Project demonstrates the importance of relationships between young people and professionals - described by one person as ‘professional friendship’. Relationships were also strengthened at a peer level, with young people in the NHP community developing connections. For example, engagement with the Care Leavers National Movement (a movement established by the House Project’s steering group) enabled young people to form relationships and helped to reduce isolation and loneliness (Lynch et al, 2024).

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Care leavers also seek out support from familial networks, including birth parents, siblings, and extended family, as well as through friendships (Baker, 2017; Feather et al, 2023). The impact of this, however, can vary, with care leavers reporting positive reconciliation as well as relationship strain, and a shortage of supports to aid familial relationships has also been identified (Baker, 2017).

- **Material support**

Care leavers often struggle to find suitable accommodation and sometimes experience homelessness (Häggman-Laitila et al, 2018). Having multiple previous addresses and low economic resources can make it difficult to secure housing, particularly in the context of a poor quality, over-priced housing market (Häggman-Laitila et al, 2018). Financial responsibility can also be challenging for care leavers trying to survive independently on a low income, with insufficient budgeting skills and support to manage their money (Baker, 2017; Häggman-Laitila et al, 2018). Having adequate material resources – a home and money to live on - is therefore critical for successful transition to adulthood (Baker, 2017; Lynch et al, 2024).

Accommodation innovations include people living with foster carers for longer, enhanced support for care leavers as they transition to adulthood, and the provision of accommodation (Alderson et al, 2023). The House Project, for example, aims to foster stability by providing young people with a property to live in and support to decorate to create a sense of home (Lynch et al, 2024). This is accompanied by practical support to help people maintain their tenancies, including managing bills, cooking, and cleaning (Lynch et al, 2024). Having a secure home can provide a foundation from which care leavers can then flourish (Lynch et al, 2024).

Intersectional benefits were reported in Alderson et al’s (2023) evidence review, which demonstrates that aside from improving housing outcomes, these can also generate positive impacts relating to education, employment, training, as well as psycho-social benefits of improved sense of belonging and connectedness.

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Theme 2: Whole System level change

Häggman-Laitila et al (2018) underpin the need for a holistic, multi-agency response to ensure that care leavers complex needs are met as they transition to adulthood. Lynch et al (2021) highlight how an outcomes focused climate has resulted in a reduction in the use of process evaluation, which inhibits understanding of mechanisms of change needed to spread and scale innovation for care leavers in complex systems (Lynch et al, 2021). In a time limited context, Commissioners’ interests in evidencing outcomes likely takes priority, restricting valuable learning around how and why change happens (Lynch et al, 2021). Furthermore, Prendergast et al (2024) identify a gap in evidence on the perspectives of people supporting care leavers, underpinning the need for further research to understand how organisations can better work together (Prendergast et al, 2024).

Despite this, literature does identify mechanisms to promote the uptake of a multi-agency approach to innovation (Alderson et al, 2023; Lynch et al, 2023; Johnson et al, 2024; Kerridge, 2023). Collaboration requires partnership commitment and alignment of values amongst local authorities and other agencies (Alderson et al, 2023; Lynch et al, 2024). Business cases can be used to set out benefits, including potential cost savings, which can help to promote sustainability of innovations beyond the pilot phase (Johnson et al, 2024). Shared leadership and partnership working are required to promote availability of resources such as funding and housing (Lynch et al, 2024).

Innovations should also be adaptable so that they can generate interest amongst different stakeholders (Alderson et al, 2023). Multi-agency support can benefit care leavers and can also help to meet the strategic priorities of the agencies involved in the provision of support. In the House Project, for example, Children’s social care services benefited through the House Project meeting corporate parenting duties; care leavers maintaining tenancies benefited the local authority and likely generated financial savings by reducing high-cost placements (though this is not substantiated

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by a cost-benefit analysis) (Lynch et al, 2024). Furthermore, high profile interest at government level can help to secure strategic level buy-in (Alderson et al, 2023).

Another projected called ‘Preparation for Adulthood’ (PFA) was included in the EXIT study and identifies key lessons for whole-system innovation. Emerging in a context of increasing costs for adult social care and poorly coordinated services, PFA was initiated to meet additional needs amongst care leavers who were unlikely to meet the threshold for statutory services. It was originally set up as a whole-system service aiming to empower young people, build capacity, and reduce demand and costs to adult services (Kerridge, 2023), however, has undergone significant change since its pilot phase, including service restructuring and changes to funding source (Kerridge, 2023). Kerridge (2023) identified key transferable mechanisms to promote whole system innovation: dynamic leadership, collaboration, maximising data use, planning, and identity development. Dynamic leadership needs to flexibly adapt to context, priorities and objectives must align across partners, with clear business planning and ring-fenced funding, data use should be maximised, including ensuring that outcomes align with different stakeholders, planning should be focused on the longer term, and there needs to be a clear values-based identity and mission statement that people can relate to (Kerridge, 2023).

Theme 3: Co-produced supports

Evidence underpins the value of co-production and its importance in shaping supports for care leavers. It can give voice to care leavers who are often marginalised, promote the creation of more suitable services that meet their needs, nurture new skills and confidence, and provide opportunities for involvement in decision-making processes (Pound and Sims-Schouten, 2022; Prendergast et al, 2024; Smart and Alderson, 2020; Johnson et al, 2024; Alderson et al, 2023). This is reinforced by Alderson et al (2023) who highlight the importance of young people being involved in shaping strategies to enhance engagement with education. Similarly, Johnson et al (2024) highlight a disconnect between perceptions of what policy makers and local authorities perceive as important versus what care leavers

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view as important. Co-production therefore has potential to benefit care leavers engaged in this approach, as well as more broadly across the care leaver population, by ensuring that services are grounded in their needs, though this requires authenticity to be effective (Johnson et al, 2024).

Levels of involvement vary, and genuine co-production necessitates significant investment of time and resource (Lynch et al, 2021). Johnson et al (2024) highlight problems with exploitative involvement, where care leavers narratives are co-opted to bolster support for innovation. Although using people’s stories can be a powerful way to enact change by gaining leadership commitment, misrepresenting people’s experiences can disenfranchise care leavers (Johnson et al, 2024). This not only obscures the evidence base, but also represents a form of misrecognition for care leavers. This is particularly problematic given that care leavers often feel powerless and abandoned (Alderson et al, 2023).

Another issue highlighted in the literature is the need for diversity in co-production. Care leavers are not a homogenous group, though they are often treated as such (Johnson et al, 2024; Smart and Alderson, 2020; Lynch et al, 2021). It is important that a range of voices are included, not only the most confident (Pound and Sims-Schouten, 2022), including people who experience mental distress, asylum seekers, and people at risk of involvement with the criminal justice system (Lynch et al, 2021). This requires attentiveness to the barriers experienced by care leavers and adopting approaches to meet their needs, such as fostering a safe environment where care leavers feel comfortable to contribute (Pound and Sims-Schouten, 2022).

One exemplar in the literature is the House Project’s framework for supporting care leavers, with co-production being a core component of its design (Lynch et al, 2024). The original project was co-designed with young people and each local project is co-produced, including through the creation of a brand identity. Further, care leavers from local house projects contribute to the care leavers national movement (CLNM) which was established by the National House Project young people’s steering group (Lynch et al, 2024). Involvement in the CLNM includes conference attendance, peer

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research, expert advisory roles, and campaigning (Lynch et al, 2024). This was valued by young people who commented on the sense of ownership this conveyed, and in promoting confidence and self-esteem (Lynch et al, 2024).

Conclusion

This evidence review focuses on how to support care leavers as they transition to adulthood. It summarises outputs from the EXIT study and supplements this with six evidence reviews. Core components were identified to support transitions: psycho-emotional, relational, and material assistance to provide a sense of safety and security, whilst facilitating interdependence. Further, multi-agency support is required to meet the complex and diverse needs of care leavers, and can be promoted through dynamic, responsive leadership, and collaboration based on shared values and priorities. However, more evidence is required, with a need for more explicit research on mechanisms that can support a whole-system response. Finally, supports should be co-produced with care leavers to increase the chance of them being both acceptable and usable, as well as providing opportunities for skills development and meaningful involvement in decision-making. However, this requires authentic engagement, with tokenistic involvement undermining the potential value of co-production.

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