

Policy Briefing on Keep on Caring: Supporting Young People from Care to Independence, July 2016

Summary

Keep on Caring outlines the strategic plan proposed by the government to better support care leavers as they transition into adulthood. The document emphasizes the role of government as corporate parents responsible for ensuring positive outcomes for young people. The strategic plan focuses on 5 key outcomes:

1. All young people leaving care should be better prepared and supported to live independently.
2. Improved access to education, employment and training.
3. Care leavers should experience stability in their lives, and feel safe and secure.
4. Improved access to health support.
5. Care leavers should achieve financial stability.

The strategy builds on several pieces of legislation, including the Leaving Care Act (2000), the Children and Young Persons Act (2008), the 2013 cross-government care leaver strategy, and the 2014 Children and Families Act, all of which gradually expanded the responsibilities of local authorities in supporting children and young people in care. These Acts resulted in the introduction of Staying Put, which allows young people to remain with their foster carers until 21. By improving how services are delivered and what support is provided, the strategy aims to accomplish the aforementioned 5 key outcomes.

Keep on Caring provides important demographic information about the changing care leaver cohort. From March 2014 to March 2015, 10,800 young people left care aged 16 or over, a 40% increase over the last decade. The document also mentions the lasting impact of circumstances that lead to a child being taken into care on care leavers' outcomes. For instance, care leavers are more likely to have Special Educational Needs (SEN) than other young people. Approximately 60% of children in care for 12 months have SEN versus roughly 15% of children in the general population. Likewise, care leavers are more likely to experience emotional health problems than young people in the general population. Further affecting the outcomes of young people in care are placement moves, which contribute to low attainment. In 2015, 14% of children in care obtained 5 good GCSEs, compared to 53% of non-looked after children.

With the odds stacked against them, care leavers are expected to live independently at an age much younger than many of their non-looked after peers. They have to manage finances and maintain a home without the support of their birth families. From March 2014-March 2015, 39% of care leavers ages 19-21 were Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), and of those care leavers, more than a third were NEET due to a disability or parenthood. The strategy hopes to empower government at all levels to help care leavers overcome any disadvantages they may have experienced.

The Strategy

An important theme within the document is the amount of variation in the quality of services provided by local authorities. The strategy offers 3 target areas to strengthen support for care leavers and reduce the impact of geography on young people's outcomes. The areas are:

1. *Developing new ways of supporting care leavers.*

This will be accomplished primarily through innovation within the delivery of services. The Children's Social Care Innovation Programme, which the government extended in April 2016 with a £200 million investment, will provide the foundation for many of the proposed reforms. The strategic plan suggests a Care Leaver Trust would more effectively deliver services and give frontline workers, such as social workers, more freedom and flexibility in designing services. Other potential reforms that would provide flexibility and customization in the delivery of services are City Deals to pilot new approaches and social impact bonds that allow social sector organizations to participate in payment by results contracts.

2. Making corporate parenting everyone's responsibility.

This area is geared toward ensuring local authorities prioritize the needs of children in care and support them as their own. The strategy introduces a set of corporate parenting principles for all departments so they understand their role as corporate parents and have a legal definition of what it means to be a good corporate parent.

3. Driving system improvement.

This area involves increasing awareness regarding best practices, holding local authorities accountable when support is proven insufficient, and gathering data. The strategy states that a new What Works Centre (WWC) will be established as a source of evidence-based advice. It also pledges to strengthen intervention efforts when councils fail to provide adequate services or protection for children and young people. Such intervention would involve providing expert guidance and support, and if that is not effective, oversight by a children's services commissioner who will determine whether a council has the capacity and capability to make the required improvements. To better inform the strategy and development of policy, the Department for Education is creating a national advisory group for care leavers between 16 and 25 years old.

Improving Outcomes

1. All young people leaving care should be better prepared and supported to live independently.

To ensure that all young people prepared to leave care, the strategy pledges to make corporate parenting everyone's responsibility. To aid young people in this transition, Keep on Caring offers the corporate parenting principles for local authorities, the care leaver covenant, an extension of the Personal Adviser until age 25, and mandatory publishing of local offers for care leavers. The strategy highlights Personal Advisers as an area for improvement. The government will conduct a review of the role of Personal Advisers and explore alternatives to provide young people with emotional and practical support. They would like to invest in approaches that would facilitate a care leaver's development of long-term relationships and social networks, such as supporting existing relationships with former carers and professionals.

2. Improved access to education, employment and training.

To improve access to education, training, and employment, the strategy suggests supported internship study programmes where the experience is tailored to the needs of the young person and an expert job coach is available for both the care leaver and the employer. It proposes expanding the current apprenticeship frameworks to provide incentives for employers who recruit care leavers up to age 25. The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills is funding the Learning & Work Institute (LWI) to support care leavers' access to further education (FE), employment and apprenticeships, and developing a guide for care leavers about FE paths, courses, and so on. The Director for Fair Access has agreed to 183 access agreements for 2016-2017, which include plans for universities to

spend over £745 million on improving access to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The government has funded a National Network for the Education of Care Leavers to provide higher education resources for care leavers, children in care, and their carers. A new Youth Obligation will be introduced in April 2017 to provide 18-21 year olds with an intensive three week period of work-related activities and support.

3. Care leavers should experience stability in their lives, and feel safe and secure.

To ensure that all care leavers experience stability and feel safe and secure, the strategy proposes that local authorities work with Housing Services to help care leavers remain in suitable accommodation or secure an appropriate independent tenancy. The document suggests that local housing authorities consult with Children's Services to consider the needs of care leavers when producing strategies to prevent and tackle homelessness. The 2016 care leaver strategy also proposes to extend continued support for young people in residential care through the Staying Close initiative, which would ease the transition into independent living.

The government identifies two groups of care leavers in particular under this outcome: care leavers in the criminal justice system and unaccompanied asylum seeking children. The strategy pledges to research why care leavers and children in care are over-represented in the criminal justice system. The Ministry of Justice will continue to use the National Care Leavers' Forum to explore ways to improve communication between the prison and local authorities and invest in workforce development for care leavers in the criminal justice system. To address the rising number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children in the UK, the government has introduced a national transfer scheme through the Immigration Act of 2016 and significantly increased funding for local authorities serving UASCs. The strategy suggests that pathway planning should take into account the child's immigration status, resolve immigration issues in a timely manner, and prepare for the future either in the UK or in their home country.

4. Improved access to health support.

The HM Government's dedication to improved access to health support is underlined by a £1.4 billion investment over the lifetime of the current Parliament to improve Child and Adolescent Mental Health services. Additionally, with the help of an Expert Working Group, guidelines for professionals working with care leavers and commissioners responsible for their care will be developed over a period of 18 months.

5. Care leavers should achieve financial stability.

To help young people achieve financial stability, the document recommends local authorities look at financial concerns for care leavers in a creative way, such as omitting care leavers from Council Tax until they reach age 22. Another area of financial concern for young people is housing. The central government is researching the impact of extending the exemption to the shared accommodation rate (the lower rate of Housing Benefit) to age 25. Presently, care leavers are only exempt up to age 22 and are often forced to move to cheaper property once they age out, potentially disrupting any stability they may have experienced. The government's review of the Personal Adviser role will include an assessment over whether they are equipped to help care leavers access benefits and manage money, as well.

Comment

The strategy is comprised of several proposed improvements to ease care leavers into adulthood more efficiently. The HM Government's strategy shifts significant responsibility onto social workers,

Personal Advisers, and local authorities, which makes use of existing resources and limits taxpayer burdens. However, many interesting innovations, such as providing social workers with the freedom and support to design services, would require governmental guidance to guarantee effective execution. Though the shift of responsibility would endow frontline personnel and stakeholders with greater power to affect change in the lives of care leavers, social workers and local authorities are very busy and may not have the time and resources to take on additional roles. The trusted adults that care leavers prefer for the role of Personal Adviser may not have the skills or qualifications to fulfil the new responsibilities set in the strategy. As a result, the central government should provide guidelines and identify trainings that may be beneficial to anyone filling the Personal Adviser role to reduce variations in mentorship.

A significant concern is the lack of detail in describing pathway planning for asylum seeking young people. Though the HM Government's strategy mentions the significance of an increase in unaccompanied asylum seeking children to the changing cohort demographics, it provides few steps to better serve UASCs as adults in the UK. The document focuses on supporting the local authorities responsible for unaccompanied minors entering the country. It names the national transfer scheme to distribute UASCs throughout the country and proposes increased funding to local authorities receiving large proportions of unaccompanied young people. The proposed solutions would lessen the burden on local authorities considerably. The strategy also suggests that local authorities provide guidance to UASCs so they can better prepare for their futures in the UK or in their country of origin, and relies on the 2016 Immigration Act to provide social care to those awaiting departure.

The strategy rightly dedicates multiple pages to steps that will ensure care leavers experience stability and feel safe and secure. Two key aspects of this are providing affordable and safe housing and keeping care leavers safe from harm. The latter includes preventing sexual abuse and exploitation, drug and alcohol misuse, and gang recruitment. The document lists several impressive measures to protect young people from harm, but does not outline how UASCs fit into this plan. To best serve one of the most vulnerable care leaver populations, the HM Government should extend a parity of services to unaccompanied asylum seeking young people to guarantee their safety.

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