



7 Good practice in... working with care leavers

Introduction

Children and young people who have been involved in the care system experience some of the poorest outcomes of all young people in the UK.

For many, the disadvantages they face persist throughout their lives which can be detrimental for individuals, families (including the next generation), communities and society as a whole.

The guide provides advice, practical examples and sources of further information and support if you are looking to engage and support this group through your youth project. It is based on findings from research carried out by GEN Consulting and Wavehill Consulting.

This guide outlines some approaches to working with care leavers that worked well for projects funded through the Big Lottery Fund's (BIG) Young People's Fund (YPF). It also draws on wider evidence from organisations involved in supporting young people in care and care leavers.

Children in care and care leavers – the issues

There are a number of complex issues affecting children and young people in care. Some may have been abused or neglected, while in other cases families may have been struggling to cope for a variety of reasons.

Care arrangements also differ. Children may be looked after in a residential setting, by foster carers, by other family and friends or by adoptive parents.

Whatever the reasons for being in care or the specific care arrangements, children and young people in these situations are highly vulnerable.

Many young people are leaving the care system without the knowledge, skills and resources to move successfully into adulthood. Many also experience inadequate follow up and support after leaving the care system. As a result:

- ▶ School attainment and progression to positive

post school destinations is below average for care leavers.

- ▶ Care leavers are more likely to experience homelessness and unemployment and to be living in poverty.
- ▶ Care leavers often experience loneliness and social isolation and poor mental health.
- ▶ Care leavers are more likely to become involved in drug and alcohol misuse, and risk taking behaviour.
- ▶ One quarter of adults in prison have been in care and 40 per cent of young offenders were in care as children.
- ▶ One in seven young women leaving care are pregnant or already mothers.

Instability in care arrangements is one of the major issues facing children and young people in care. Many are forced to make lots of moves during their time in the system. This can have a negative impact on their education and their ability to form and maintain relationships with positive adult role models and their peers. This inevitably has a lasting impact into their adult years (and longer term effects).

Improving support for children and young people in care and care leavers is a policy priority across the UK:

- ▶ **In England and Wales:** the Every Child Matters framework enables local authority children's services to act earlier and more decisively when children are in unacceptable conditions. This includes intervening to prevent a situation deteriorating to one which is unacceptable.
- ▶ **In Scotland:** Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) ensures children's services work together to plan and deliver support which is in the best interests of the child. This includes producing a single plan for a child and appointing a Lead Professional to make sure a range of support is effectively delivered, monitored and reviewed.

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- ▶ **In Northern Ireland:** Care Matters Northern Ireland: Building a Bridge to a Better Future provides a strategy for supporting children in the care system and providing a smooth transition to adulthood which enables young people to achieve their potential.

Children in care and care leavers – a shared responsibility

Regardless of care arrangements, there are basic needs that all children and young people require. These include:

- Security
- Safety
- Positive regard
- Support
- Boundaries.

For children in care, it is the responsibility of the state to make sure they have everything that a good parent should provide. All those who are involved in providing care, support and services to children and young people, whether formally or informally, have a role to play.

Youth workers are ideally placed to contribute in providing this type of support to young people, to add value to statutory services and enhance the experiences of children in care and care leavers.

Getting it right!

Supporting the transition – developing skills for independent living

Instability, multiple moves and a lack of positive adult role models throughout adolescence mean that young people can lack the skills they need to make a positive transition to adulthood. This includes practical skills such as:

- ▶ Cooking and managing a home.
- ▶ Budgeting and managing finances.
- ▶ Understanding benefits and entitlements.
- ▶ Sustaining a tenancy.
- ▶ Undertaking independent travel.

- ▶ Searching for a job and preparing a CV.
- ▶ Looking after personal appearance.

Young people value activities that can help them develop these skills.

The importance of an ‘individual’

Children in care and care leavers consistently report on the importance and significant difference that one person can make. This person may be a teacher, a care worker, a carer or a project worker:

What matters is...

...you show an interest, you believe in the young person and you persevere...

In successfully engaging and supporting young people in care and care leavers, the skills and personal attributes of staff are highly significant. You must:

- ▶ Show respect and understanding
- ▶ Be non-judgemental
- ▶ Respond to issues in a personal way
- ▶ Show that you are committed
- ▶ Don't give up.

In many ways this is similar to working with other disadvantaged young people.

Many of these young people have experienced unstable childhoods and they lack strong adult role models who have been in their lives consistently.

Skilled project workers, who work with young people in a safe, welcoming and informal setting, are ideally placed to provide the practical and emotional support these young people often crave.

Young people who have lacked stability can be very challenging to engage. They may be uneasy about developing relationships that they fear may not be long lasting and it will take time and perseverance from you to gain their trust.

You must be resilient, show that you understand the issues young people are facing, and be motivated not to give up.

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Case Study Example 1

Country: Scotland

Project: Chill Out Zone (COZ)

Organisation: Children 1st

COZ is a healthy living centre in Bathgate, West Lothian. BIG's funding allowed the centre to develop activity programmes for specific groups of young people. This included young care leavers who took part in a programme of organised activities to develop skills for independent living including, cooking, money management, navigating the housing and benefits system, employability and job search skills.

One young person who had attended COZ for six years shared his experience. When he first attended he had just left school and was living in hostel accommodation. He did not feel he had the practical support he needed to move on with his life, to find accommodation or employment.

From the start he felt comfortable at COZ and happy to talk to project workers. He had not been able to confide in anyone before. He felt one of the most significant benefits of COZ was the emotional support provided by staff. Although it took time for him to fully open up to project workers he became comfortable and confident in asking staff for help and speaking to them about personal issues and concerns. He said:

"I thought it was normal to hide your feelings and keep things to yourself....this has made a huge difference and made life much easier. It [having someone to talk to] is a huge relief".

COZ assisted him to find his own home by working with Through Care After Care. He also took part in cooking sessions, learning to make simple, healthy meals within a budget and has received practical and ongoing support to manage his finances.

He now has a very positive outlook on life, much of which he attributes to COZ. He is living in his own home, is in a stable relationship and is actively seeking employment. He still attends COZ regularly to help with his search for work and other issues that arise.

For more information see:

Evaluation of the YPF Year 5 (2011)

Or

www.children1st.org.uk

Importance of a positive peer group

Many young people in care report that they not only lack a positive adult role model but also lack friendships, and contact with a supportive peer group.

This tends to be a result of their chaotic and transient upbringing. Young people in this situation are frequently affected by:

- Loneliness
- Social isolation
- Depression
- Difficulty forming and maintaining relationships.

If your project can bring young people together to take part in fun and enjoyable activities in a relaxed environment this can help young people in care and care leavers to overcome these challenges.

You can bring together young people who have similar backgrounds or young people with different backgrounds. Both approaches have advantages:

▶ **Working with young people with similar backgrounds.** If you choose to bring together young people with experience of the care system, you can provide specific, targeted activities that address the unique needs of this vulnerable group.

This allows young people to form relationships with peers who are in a similar situation to them.

This mutual understanding can help young people to relax, open up, learn and share experiences in the company of people they can relate to.

▶ **Working with young people with different backgrounds.** If your activities bring together young people from different backgrounds and with different experiences, each group has the chance to share their experiences and learn from the other.

This can develop empathy, an ability to recognise and respond to the emotions of others, mutual understanding and respect.

It can help to raise hopes and aspirations and

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engage young people in positive activities, including learning.

It is also an opportunity for young people in care and care leavers, to simply be young people and enjoy the company of others.

In supporting young care leavers to establish positive peer relationships, you may also consider one to one, 'mentoring' or 'buddying' activity. Again you may wish to pair young people with similar experiences or young people with different experiences.

There is no right or wrong approach. The approach you decide to take will ultimately depend on the specific:

- ▶ Aims and objectives of your project.
- ▶ The needs and desires of the young people you are supporting.

When bringing together young people you should work closely with them to assess and reassess their needs, to ensure that activity is meeting these needs and promoting positive development.

For example in a one to one situation it may be beneficial to pair young people who have shared experiences. On the other hand, one or both, young people may find it distressing or unhelpful to share these experiences with a peer. It may not be effective in moving them on.

A flexible, tailored and individual approach is always needed when working with vulnerable young people, particularly those with experience of the care system.

Your approach must be centred on the needs and circumstances of the young person rather than be led by the project, the staff or targets and timescales imposed by funders.

Opportunities for active involvement

Young people who have been in care often feel that they lack control in their lives and that they have no influence over what happens to them and how they are treated.

Opportunities for young people to be actively involved can empower them, provide a sense of ownership and increase self-esteem and self confidence.

Through active and meaningful involvement in the design, development, management and evaluation of project activity young people who have been in care are given the chance to develop key personal, social and employability skills that their situation may have denied them in the past.

There are a variety of ways you can actively involve young people who have experienced the care system.

Young people could be involved in operational aspects of project activity or in a more strategic role. For example:

- ▶ **Operational involvement:** Young people can provide feedback on project activities and should be asked for their views on other activities that they would like to take part in and activities that would meet their needs.

Where young people wish to be more involved, you can provide them with training and support to help them develop and deliver activities. For example, young people may design sessions on cooking and skills for independent living. They can demonstrate and share recipes and support others to take part.

Young people can also be involved in the managing activity. This may involve greater responsibility for planning and for organising a programme of events or sessions, in seeking and gathering feedback from participants and in managing budgets for project work.

- ▶ **Strategic involvement:** Young people involved at a strategic level can use their experiences to guide policy and practice – they have first-hand knowledge of the care system and, where they are willing and able to share their experiences, they are best placed to help develop services and projects that best meet their needs.

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Strategic involvement can take place at the project level or at a wider local, regional or national level.

For example, with support from YPF, the Chill Out Zone supported young care leavers to be involved in the 'Have Your Say' forum.

The forum was a platform for care leavers to share their experiences and work with the local authority the Children's Rights Worker and others involved in children's services to bring about positive change.

Further information and advice on how you can get children and young people actively involved is included in the guide '2-Good Practice in Active Involvement' that accompanies this series.

Where can I find out more?

There are many sources of information and support if you are looking to engage young people who have experience of the care system in your project.

National policies

If you would like further information on national structures and policies supporting the active involvement of children and young people see:

England and Wales:

Every Child Matters (ECM)

Care Matters: Time for Change

Scotland:

Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)

Northern Ireland:

Care Matters Northern Ireland: A Bridge to a Better Future.

Ways of involving young people

Participation Works

Visit: www.participationworks.org.uk

The National Youth Agency – Hear by Right

Visit: www.nya.org.uk

Northern Ireland Participation Network

Visit: www.participationnetwork.org

Statutory services and support for care leavers

If you would like more information about care leavers and services to support young people leaving care this can be found at:

Department for Education: Children and young people (children leaving care)

The National Care Advisory Service: Northern Ireland: DHSSPSNI-Childcare (Leaving after care)

Visit: www.leavingcare.org

Scottish Government: These Are Our Bairns: a guide for community planning partnerships on being a good corporate parent.

Visit: www.scotland.gov.uk

Other organisations supporting young people in care and care leavers

If you would like to get in touch with other organisations which provide services and support to young people in care and young care leavers see:

Action for Children:

Visit: www.actionforchildren.org.uk

Barnardo's:

Visit: www.barnardo's.org.uk

Children 1st:

Visit: www.children1st.org.uk

Care Leavers Association:

Visit: www.careleavers.com

If you would like information about the national evaluation of the Young People's Fund contact:
BIG: 0845 410 2030

Copies of the YPF evaluation reports and supporting documents are available online from BIG at:

www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/eval_ypf