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Evaluation of the Staying Put: 18 Plus Family Placement Programme: Final report

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Introduction

The Staying Put: 18 Plus Family Placement Programme was a pilot that ran from July 2008 to March 2011 in 11 local authorities across England. It aimed to improve outcomes for young people making the transition from care to adulthood and was targeted at young people who had 'established familial relationships' with their foster carers and offered them the opportunity to remain in their placement until the age of 21. The key objectives of the pilot were to:

- enable young people to build on and nurture their attachments to their foster carers, so that they can move to independence at their own pace and be supported to make the transition to adulthood in a more gradual way just like other young people who can rely on their own families for this support;
- provide the stability and support necessary for young people to achieve in education, employment or training (EET); and
- give weight to young people's views about the timing of moves to greater independence from their final care placement.

Key findings

- Eight authorities adopted a 'pure familial' model for staying put whereby young people remain with their former foster carer, with whom they have an established relationship, post 18. This model attempts to replicate the experiences of young people in the general population and adheres closely to the original tender specification issued by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).
- A 'hybrid' model was adopted by three authorities. This maximises the opportunity that young people can stay put by removing the pre-condition that young people have to have an established relationship with their carer prior to the age of 18 to be entitled to stay put. However, in practice, the management information system (MIS) data revealed that greater flexibility under the 'hybrid' model did not massively increase uptake of staying put placements.

- Most of the in-depth authorities (four out of six) required young people to be in (or actively demonstrating a commitment to being in) EET to be permitted to stay put. Some interviewees expressed concerns that strict EET criteria may exclude some of the most vulnerable young people from benefitting from an ongoing placement, thereby denying them further support to meet their needs and promote positive outcomes in the longer term.
- Pilot authorities opted not to include young people with disabilities who were eligible for adult services within the pilot; to avoid duplicating existing provision. However, the majority offered staying put placements to young people with disabilities who were below the threshold for adult services. This was identified as being important to address a perceived gap in existing provision for this group.
- Contrary to negative media coverage and public and professional portrayals of the care system, findings from the study highlight that many foster families offer a warm, nurturing environment, compensatory care and a secure base for adolescents.
- Foster carers and leaving care personal advisers identified that young people in the general population are not routinely ‘forced out’ of their homes when they reach legal adulthood and that they are not practically or emotionally ready to leave at 18; and require additional time to plan and prepare for their move to independence. Furthermore, the trauma that care experienced young people have suffered in childhood often renders them particularly vulnerable and means that it may take them longer to reach a stage where they are prepared and developmentally ready for independence.
- The majority of foster carers were willing to offer staying put placements. The most common reason for doing so was that carers viewed young people as ‘part of the family’. This sense of belonging was also a key factor influencing young peoples’ decisions to stay put.
- The most common explanation young people provided for not wanting to stay put was poor quality relationships with their carers or others in the placement. Other key factors were the desire to be ‘free’ and ‘independent’ or to return to live with birth family. Those who did not stay put tended to experience multiple accommodation changes.
- Findings highlighted a range of benefits of staying put, including the fact that it:
 - empowers young people and gives them greater control of the timing of their transition from care to independence;
 - means that young people are not penalised by virtue of their care status; they are offered the opportunity to experience transitions that are more akin to those experienced by their peers in the general population;
 - allows young people to remain in a nurturing family environment where they can mature and develop, prepare for independence, and receive ongoing support; and
 - offers continuity and stability to facilitate engagement in EET.
- Young people who stayed put were more than twice as likely to be in full time education at 19 compared to those that did not (55% and 22% respectively). In addition, a slightly higher percentage of those who stayed put were in full time training and employment at 19 compared to those that did not (25% and 22% respectively). This may reflect the EET criteria imposed by authorities, however it remains the case that 40% of young people that did not stay put were NEET for ‘other circumstances’ (i.e. not due to illness or disability) aged 19 ($p = <0.01$, significant).

- Once young people made the transition to adulthood their support networks contracted; over half (ten out of 18; 56%)¹ of care leavers revealed that they had a network of just three people who they could turn to for support and advice. This is of concern given the psychological challenges associated with making the transition from care to independence.
- The total estimated national social care cost of staying put per annum is in the region of two and a half million pounds (£2,675,921)² based on 530 care leavers staying put. Dividing this total national cost by the number of local authorities in England (152), this cost equates to an average of around £17,500 per local authority per year (based on between three and four care leavers staying put in each authority).

Aims

The overarching aim of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness and impact of the staying put pilots on meeting its objectives. The aims of the evaluation were:

- To explore the contribution staying put can make to promoting positive outcomes:
 - remaining in EET;
 - nurturing attachments to significant ‘parental’ figures; and
 - making the transition to adulthood in a more gradual way just like other young people who can rely on their own families for this support.
- Identify models of best practice of setting up and implementing staying put pilots.
- Calculate the unit costs of staying put and explore how these compare with standard leaving care provision and Right2BCared4 (utilising data from the Right2BCared4 evaluation).
- Consider the costs of rolling out the staying put pilot to other authorities.

Methodology

A mapping exercise and face-to-face interviews with managers responsible for implementing staying put in each of the 11 pilot authorities were undertaken during phase one of the evaluation (see Munro *et al.*, 2010 for the findings). In phase two in-depth work was undertaken in six authorities and included:

- Face-to-face interviews with 21 young people who stayed put and 11 who did not.
- Thirty one face-to-face interviews with young people’s current or former foster carers.
- Telephone interviews with young peoples’ leaving care personal advisers (14 personal advisers responsible for 18 in-depth cases).
- Focus groups and verification surveys (five focus groups and 15 verification surveys from five pilot authorities) to identify the time taken by social care practitioners to support young people in staying put placements.

¹ Missing data on four young people.

² Based on 530 care leavers staying put

- Scrutiny of quarterly returns submitted to the Department for Education (DfE).
- Analysis of MIS data to explore uptake of staying put and early outcomes.

Findings

Staying put or leaving care? Factors influencing the decision-making process

- Foster carers may decide they are unwilling or unable to maintain young people's placements post 18 and/or young people may decide they do not want to stay put. Data supplied by local authorities revealed that in 86% of cases, decisions not to stay put were 'young person led'.
- Thirty one out of the 36 foster carers, for whom qualitative data were available, were willing to extend placements for the young people in their care; 23 of these young people took up this offer. Four young people expressed a desire to remain with carers who were either unable or unwilling to offer a staying put placement.
- The most common explanation foster carers gave for offering staying put placements was the strong attachment they had to the young people in their care. This was also a key factor influencing young peoples' decisions to stay put. Other factors included: recognition that young people were not practically and/or emotionally ready to leave at 18; the benefit of additional time to plan and prepare for their move to independence; and the continuity and stability offered by staying put, which was seen to support young people's engagement in education.
- Five foster carers made the decision not to offer young people the opportunity to stay put. In three cases young people's behaviour appeared to precipitate these decisions. In two cases the carers expressed concerns about the young people's ability to develop the skills needed for adulthood if they were to remain in their placement for longer.

Staying put: contributing to providing young people with a secure base and nurturing attachments?

- Qualitative findings revealed that the majority of young people (15 out of 18; 83%) judged to have a strong and secure base within their current foster placement, opted to stay put.
- The majority (16 out of 19; 84%³) of young people who stayed put were close to their foster carers and would turn to them for help and support. Ten young people reported that they were not close to their foster carers and only three of these stayed put.
- Interview data revealed that the vast majority of young people were positive about their leaving care personal advisers and the support they received (27 out of 32; 84%), although those who stayed put were slightly more positive (19 out of 21; 90%) than those who did not (eight out of 11; 73%).

Pathways to independence

- Interviews with young people indicated that the majority (24; 75%) did not feel that the pathway planning process had assisted with preparation and planning for independence. Consistent with previous research, criticisms centred upon the bureaucratic nature of the process; which was seen

³ Missing data on four young people.

to serve the needs of the organisation rather than the young people concerned (Edwards, 2011; Munro *et al.*, 2011). However, eight young people (25%) were positive about the pathway planning process as it gave them more time to explore their educational aspirations, future plans and to prepare for independence.

- Data on transitions from care to independence were available on 22 young people (nine who had stayed put but moved to independence during the course of the evaluation and 13 who did not stay put). They took one of three pathways to independence. The 'direct pathway' which involved young people making the transition straight from foster care to independent living in a council or privately rented property. 'Transitional placement pathways' which consisted of young people living in one or more supported living placements before living independently. Such placements were intended to offer young people support as they acquired the skills that they needed to be able to secure and maintain their own tenancies in the future and thus acted as a bridge to independence (National Care Advisory Service/Catch 22, 2009). Some young people experienced 'complex pathways' marked by multiple moves and changes.
- Findings revealed that young people most commonly took either the direct (9; 41%) or complex (9; 41%) pathway from care to independence. The direct pathway was the most common pathway for young people who stayed put (six out of nine; 67%). In contrast the complex route was the most common pathway for those that did not stay put (six out of 13; 46%).
- Four (out of nine; 44%) of the complex pathways were precipitated by young people because they did not have a close attachment to their carers. All but one of the young people who experienced a complex pathway acknowledged that they had not been emotionally and/or financially prepared or ready to move when they were aged 18.
- 'Transitional placement pathways' were least common (four out of 22; 18%) and were confined to cases where young people were unable to stay put and thus had to make the transition to independence earlier than may have been in their best interests.

Organisational implications and the costs of staying put

- Foster carers did not receive specific training in relation to providing staying put placements; interview data revealed carers did not perceive this to be necessary. However, in a small number of cases leaving care personal advisers raised concerns that carers were overprotecting those in their care and intervened to ensure that young people had sufficient opportunity to develop the skills needed for independence.
- The financial contributions that children's social care made towards placement costs ranged across authorities. Contributions towards placement costs from young people were dependent upon their circumstances and the financial arrangements in place in each authority.
- Some authorities continued to pay carers the same amount that they had been paid prior to the young person turning 18. In other authorities, however, there was an expectation that foster carers would accept a lower level of remuneration on the basis that expectations upon them changed when the young person reached legal adulthood. Foster carers' views on these changes were variable, reflecting differences in their financial circumstances and perceptions of their role. In a small number of cases foster carers objected to reduced payments as they did not feel that their responsibilities had diminished. It should be recognised that some carers may not be able to afford to continue to care for a young person without adequate financial assistance.

- The annual cost to social care of providing a staying put placement is calculated to be £14,278 (this includes all the activities to support a young person in their staying put placement and placement fee/allowances from children's social care). In comparison the annual costs to social care of providing a local authority foster placement to a young person aged under 18 is £25,828 (Ward, Holmes and Soper, 2008)⁴.

Implications for policy for practice

- A key factor influencing both foster carers' decisions to extend placements and young people's willingness to stay put was the quality of these relationships and the extent to which secure attachments had been established. This highlights the importance of effective care planning and matching.
- Requiring young people to have an 'established familial relationship' with their foster carers and/or to be in EET may deny some young people the opportunity to stay put, in particular those who have experienced placement instability and/or have complex needs.
- MIS data revealed that removing the requirement to be in a long-term foster placement (where young people have an 'established familial relationship') with their carer, did not lead to a significant rise in the numbers staying put. On this basis local authorities could adopt a more flexible and needs led approach without bearing significant additional costs. It would also allow young people to be active agents in the decision concerning when to make the transition from care to independence rather than imposing an 'age related' rather than 'needs led' transition upon them (see Munro *et al.*, 2010 for further discussion).
- Support networks play a part in promoting resilience and assist young people to cope with change, yet support networks contracted once young people had left care and moved to independence. Care experienced young people who were involved in the study as peer researchers suggested that authorities should be more proactive in encouraging foster carers to remain in contact with, and offer ongoing support to, former looked after children. The majority of foster carers were happy for young people to stay in touch but often expected those who had been in their care to get in touch with them. Given past hurt and rejection young people may not feel entitled or able to do this. This raises questions about what more could be done to support the continuation of positive and supportive relationships.
- Fee and allowance payments to foster carers varied between authorities as did the sources of this income. It would be valuable to outline minimum allowances for carers and expectations concerning the contributions from social care, housing and other agencies.
- Not all young people want to remain in care longer, irrespective of what professionals and foster carers perceive to be in their best interests. It is important that packages of support are available to meet the needs of those who opt to make the transition from care to independence before they reach legal adulthood, particularly given that these young people may be most vulnerable and have the most complex needs.

⁴ Figures inflated to 2010-11 using PSSRU inflation indices (Curtis, 2010).

Cconclusion

A range of benefits to staying put were identified and the consensus was that it provided a framework to maximise the likelihood of young people making successful transitions to adulthood and mitigated the risk of young people's circumstances deteriorating. Those in staying put were significantly more likely to be in full time education at 19 than their counterparts who did not stay put. A higher proportion of young people who stayed put were also pursuing higher education than those who did not. Higher educational attainment should yield cost savings in the future as these young people are in a position to earn more and pay more taxes and be less likely to be reliant on State support later in life. Qualitative data on a small sample revealed that those who did not stay put were more likely to experience complex transition pathways and housing instability after they left care. This is costly to the public purse but also has wellbeing costs for the young people concerned. Research from the US suggests that the costs of staying put may be offset over time by improved outcomes:

If states adopt a policy of allowing young people to remain in foster care until their 21st birthday... the potential benefits to foster youth and society will more than offset the cost to government (Peters et al., 2009, p.9).

References

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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

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