

**RIGHT
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Peer Research
Summary Report 2011

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Acknowledgements

We would like to say a big thank you to all the young people that were surveyed and interviewed as part of the Right2BCared4 evaluation. Without them it would not have been possible to gather evidence to find more about young people's experiences of leaving care and what is working and what isn't. We are also grateful to the Department for Education for funding the study.

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This summary report was written by peer researcher Gary Edwards.

Main Report

Munro, E.R., Lushey, C., Ward, H. and NCAS (2011) *Evaluation of the Right2BCared4 Pilots: Final Report*. London: Department for Education.

FOREWORD

Over the past 18 months I have had the pleasure of working on the Right2BCared4 evaluation with the young people who have contributed to and written this report. Trained as peer researchers, they have all been engaged at each stage of the research cycle, from the design of research materials to analysis and write up of the findings. This report was written by them using the data they collected from young people; its production is a testament to their hard work, skill and commitment.

I am delighted to present this publication, which offers young people's messages on their experiences of navigating the transition from care to adulthood. Their stories offer a rich insight into the realities of moving from care to independence at a young age; and the challenges that this presents. The report also offers an insight into the services and support that make a difference to young people and what can be done to ensure that they are equipped and supported as they make the journey from care to adulthood.

Emily R. Munro

Assistant Director, Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University

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INTRODUCTION



This report presents findings from the Right2BCared4 pilot, which was funded in 11 local authorities nationwide. The findings are based solely on the views of young people, collected by peer researchers in interviews. The peer researchers involved were all care experienced young people who were trained in research methods so that they could be part of the evaluation process and explore five key themes that are important during the transition from care:

- **Relationships between key workers and young people**
- **Preparation for leaving care and independent living**
- **Pathway plans and reviews**
- **Current circumstances and anything else**
- **Improvements to the leaving care process**

The aim of the pilot was to help improve outcomes for young people leaving the care system. Young people leaving care have significantly poorer outcomes than their peers due to pre-care and care experiences that can have an impact on education, training and employment.

Young people in care leave the family environment of foster care or residential care at a much earlier age than their peers and this can have a huge impact on their future outcomes. The Right2BCared4 initiative is designed to reduce the number of young people moving to independence before the age of 18.

The aims of the pilot were to:

- Empower young people to participate meaningfully at each stage of the transition process.
- Enhance communication and relationships between social workers/ Independent Reviewing Officer (IROs) and young people.
- Implement robust review mechanisms that ensure care and pathway plans reflect the needs and wishes of young people.
- Improve the stability of final care placements and reduce the number of young people moving to independence before reaching age 18.
- Improve young people's self esteem (knowing that they would not be expected to leave care before age 18).
- Provide additional benefits and improved outcomes compared to more standard leaving care services.
- Provide value for money over and above the service provided in non-pilot local authorities.

To understand young people's experiences we didn't just get the views of those in the Right2BCared4 pilot authorities. We also went and interviewed young people from two non pilot sites (comparator local authorities) as well to get a bigger picture of what is working, and what needs to be improved. The report was developed by peer researchers in partnership with NCAS and CCFR, Loughborough University.

This report reflects the views of the young people who were interviewed. The Right2BCared4 stamp in the report is to represent the fact that no matter what the issue or what a young person is feeling, everyone in and leaving care has the Right2BCared4. The stamp is a sign of approval that you are important and that you are being listened to.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology gives an outline of the methods and techniques used during this evaluation. Two care experienced young people from eight local authorities took part in peer research training on Right2BCared4 with NCAS and CCFR, Loughborough University.

We were trained to undertake interviews; this included role playing, mock interviews and work to explore possible ways to deal with difficult situations. Following training we conducted a telephone survey and face to face interviews. These were very different; the survey included a number of closed questions ('yes' and 'no') and results were used to determine how many people agreed or disagreed with particular statements. The results of the survey are detailed in the main report (Munro, E.R., Lushey, C., Ward, H. and NCAS (2011) *Evaluation of the Right2BCared4 Pilots: Final Report*. London: Department for Education). Thirty three young people were interviewed, twenty five of these young people were from pilot authorities (76%) and the remaining eight (24%) were from comparator authorities. Fifteen (45%) said that they were no longer in care and 18 (55%) told us that they were still looked after. Most were either living in rented accommodation (13, 39%), foster care (10, 30%) or supported accommodation (7, 21%). We interviewed a lot more young women (23; 70%) than young men (10; 30%) and those taking part were aged between 16 and 19 years old. Most identified themselves as White (18, 69%). Finally out of the 33 that were interviewed, four young people indicated that they had a disability, seven told us that they were parents and six said that they were unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. The face to face interviews were a lot more in-depth as the questions were open and more varied. The findings presented in this report are just based on data from the face-to-face interviews.

We (the peer researchers) were all instrumental in helping design the layout of some promotional flyers/posters and working on questions to be included in the survey and interview topic guide. You can read more about this in the case study of a peer researcher in this report (see page 7).

After the interviews we all met up again at Loughborough University where the research team is based, as they wanted the peer researchers to be involved in the analysis of the research findings. We were involved every step of the way, which all the

young people appreciated as it was a new experience. We looked through the transcripts from the interviews as they were recorded and pulled out what we thought were the key messages. These were discussed and we also shared our experience of interviewing and suggested ways to improve the peer research process in the future.

In recognition for taking part in the research, the peer researchers were paid per interview and given a certificate from NCAS and CCFR and a written reference to include on our CVs, which looks very positive.

CASE STUDY

of a Peer Researcher

Hi, I'm one of the peer researchers for the Right2BCared4 evaluation. I'm 20 years old and heard about becoming a peer researcher through my personal adviser because I'd been involved in Children in Care Councils (which is where young people promote change around things that might be affecting them, or young people in general, and various other forms of training). I had never been involved in research but I knew this would be a good opportunity to develop my knowledge, so when I showed an interest in wanting to take part my name was put forward.

Training - part 1

The first stage was the training for conducting both a telephone survey and face to face interview and getting to know the other researchers that were taking part. While we were undertaking the training we were helping design how the surveys would look and what questions should be in the survey and interview guide to keep it young person friendly.

I found the training really interesting, participative, challenging and very 'young person' friendly and easy to understand as it was broken down in to sections. If I had any questions NCAS and Loughborough staff were only too happy to answer. I really enjoyed how we got to role-play to get used to doing interviews, which gave me an understanding of what to expect. It was really nice to meet other young people from different areas. I felt we all worked really well together and everyone was very supportive during the experience. It was interesting to hear how other local authorities do things and hear other people's point of view.



Phone interviews - part 2

Some of the challenges I faced while doing the telephone surveys were that in some situations the research and aim of the survey had to be fully explained to young people again. This might be because they were unable to recall specifics about the research or were not given all the information at the first point of contact. As such, I had to explain a bit more about the research than I had expected. Finding the right time to get hold of young people was also difficult and in some cases the language barrier made interviews harder as some young people had moved here from another country and English was not their first language. I overcame some of these challenges by being persistent, patient and where possible trying to get into the office to use the phone as much as possible.



What I would do differently would be to make sure the young people that are put forward to do a survey have the right information and reduce the time between young people agreeing to take part and me contacting them.

The advantages of phone surveys were that I didn't have to be as self-conscious or travel; there was a phone in the local authority office to use instead of my own and because I was persistent I felt it was more effective than sending surveys in the post because some people may not read or complete them.

Face to face interviews - part 3

What I enjoyed about the face to face interviews was going to a different local authority to conduct the interviews and hearing what the young people thought. The advantages of the face to face interviews were that the language barrier was easier to deal with in person as you could see people's expressions and body language. We were both more at ease and comfortable, which helped the interviewees to interact more. This is because during the telephone surveys we got a sense that some participants did not trust that we were who we said we were, whereas during the face to face interviews we were introduced to the interviewees by a member of staff from the young person's local authority. Using a Dictaphone to record the interviews was helpful and professional, however, the disadvantage was that it did make me feel a bit nervous and some young people didn't want me to record them. During some of the interviews I was sometimes uncomfortable with young people swearing but understood I was there in a peer research capacity, and needed to stay professional at all times. Some of the young people pulled out of the interviews at the last minute as well, so there weren't as many face to face interviews as I would have liked, but I still managed to get experience doing a few.

Possible things I would change would be to have a shorter set of questions for the interviews, to make sure there was real commitment from people who were going to be interviewed and for researchers to meet up more often during the evaluation.

After we had done the interviews we moved onto the analysis part of the evaluation, where we looked at all the transcripts from the face to face interviews. We pulled out all the key messages and powerful quotes and put these together in this peer researchers report.

The preparation and training I received was pitched at the right level and meant I knew what to expect. I felt both NCAS and Loughborough staff went through peer research training well. Overall, it was a fantastic experience and I was surprised how well the group worked together for a young group of people. There was the right amount of peer researchers, two from eight local authorities, this made it a good working group.

A big thank you to NCAS and CCFR at Loughborough University for training and supporting me throughout.



**RELATIONSHIPS
BETWEEN KEY WORKERS
AND YOUNG PEOPLE**



“My relationship with my social worker is really positive, I’ve not changed social worker all the way through”

(Edward, age 17, LAC, pilot authority)

Young people coming out of care may not have had a consistent parent or role model to encourage, support and show them the path to follow as they progress towards adulthood, which can be a difficult and stressful time. Good relationships with workers and carers are therefore essential and should be based on trust, communication, respect and understanding

A number of young people were positive about the support they received from their social workers/personal advisers, which is really encouraging.

“They do their best to sort the problem out... it is just advising really, like what action to take and they help do that, like now I have problems with finance, they are willing to help... they will phone them up as well, try to fight my case”. (Kinza, age 20, care leaver, pilot authority).

A message that came out of the research was that young people who have had the same social worker/personal adviser for some time felt they could be more open with them. Maintaining a positive relationship can help young people feel less isolated when living independently.

“It’s good because I met her when I was seven, because she used to work through my life really, bobbed in and out of life with them, so I’ve known her forever... 11 years. She knows me pretty well.” (Hannah, age 17, care leaver, pilot authority).

We found out that some young people want additional support when they were moving on to independence, as well as longer to get ready for this challenge. The research also revealed that there were mixed responses as to how often young people wanted to see their workers; this depended on the individual. Young people should be able to choose who they see more or less of. It is important that the young person’s wishes are central.

“A while ago my social worker referred me to CAMHS, which was definitely useful; I would have thought my social worker wouldn’t have been bothered. And she’s always letting me know that if I do need any help that she is there for the support.” (Chantelle, age 17, care leaver, comparator authority).

Young people want social workers/personal advisers to help build their self esteem and confidence. Even a seemingly small thing, like being on time for a meeting, was found to be important, as one young person commented:

“She would go the extra mile and come up out of hours to see if I had everything I needed” (Louise, age 19, care leaver, pilot authority)

Someone else said:

“I don’t think I need any more support than they are giving me at the moment because of the consistent level of support to help with my transition.” (Edward, age 17, LAC, pilot authority).

Most of the feedback from the young people we interviewed about their relationship with their key workers was very positive.



**PREPARATION FOR
LEAVING CARE AND
INDEPENDENT LIVING**

A small number of young people said the preparation for leaving care was not at the right pace and that the transition should be a process and not an event. The reasons why young people left care were varied; some of them just wanted to get rid of the label of 'being in care', for others this was the result of either a placement breakdown or becoming a parent. A few young people thought that their move to independent living was too abrupt.

"Well, it was one of the most upsetting and stressful experiences I've ever had in my life. Obviously, except from moving from my birth place. I was given two weeks' notice to have everything packed and ready to go."
(Paul, age unknown, care leaver, pilot authority).

Young people advised others to make sure they leave at the right time and that it is their decision to move to independence.

"Making sure it is the right time and the right decision"
(John, age 17, LAC, comparator site).

This is important so young people do not feel like they are chucked in at the deep end. Young people also wanted to know that support was available from a worker if they needed it. A small number of young people stated they were eager to leave semi-independence to live on their own and that they were keen not to have to answer to anybody. Moving into their own place seemed exciting at first.

"I was gagging to get out."
(Louise, age 19, care leaver, pilot authority).

However, a lack of preparation or understanding of what it was like to live on their own meant that some young people wished that they had not left supported housing or foster care so soon. Some young people did not realise just how hard it was really going to be living alone.

"Ain't got no one telling you what to do. It gets quite lonely though." (Louise, age 19, care leaver, pilot authority).

Young people welcomed preparation for living independently that was done over a period of time.

"The move was over two months so I felt prepared."
(Kinza, age 20, care leaver, pilot authority).

"... we were doing like cooking and things like that, I like it because it's really making me like move forward [ready for] when I get to living independent." (Lucy, age 18, LAC, comparator authority).

The findings also showed that more emphasis should be placed on finance and budgeting and what to do if you get into debt or have rent arrears. One young person mentioned that even though he had been prepared for this, he still felt it was a learning curve and that anyone who has never lived independently needs time to adjust.

"I had about four, five months to learn how to budget my own money before I was chucked in the deep end." (Paul, age unknown, care leaver, pilot authority).

Another described his wish for:

"Help with setting up bills, knowing when to pay them and what happens if you don't pay them. How to claim benefits, who to talk to if you don't have money for food."
(Jamie, 17, LAC, pilot authority).

The key points to highlight on the theme of preparation and transition to independent living are that placements end for many different reasons; a small number of young people are very eager to live independently. Those young people that felt they moved at the right pace considered that they had been prepared for what to expect in the future. Even when they had left care, young people wanted reassurance that somebody would still be there to support them when they may need this. Young people also said they should be allowed to be young people and should be allowed to make mistakes so they can learn from them as their peers do. They said this may put less pressure on them becoming independent a significant amount earlier than their peers who live at home with parents.

**"Ain't got no one telling you what to do.
It gets quite lonely though"**
(Louise, age 19, care leaver, pilot authority)

PATHWAY PLANS AND REVIEWS



Pathway plans look at the support that individual young people will need to live independently. The plan should make young people aware of what to expect when they move to independence and it should include information on: accommodation, education or training, jobs, money, cultural or identity needs and health and lifestyle. It should be a plan to help and guide young people and support them to have a successful future.

The majority of young people interviewed had prepared a pathway plan (22), however this meant that 11 of the young people interviewed were not aware of having a plan or had yet to complete it.

“I didn’t know what a pathway plan was or didn’t even know if I had one.” (Abdul, age 17, pilot, care leaver)

A couple of young people felt that the plans needed to be more in depth and tailored to each individual rather than based on a standard set of questions which may not be relevant in some cases. Young people should be involved at every stage of the pathway planning process. The focus of their pathway planning should be on planning rather than making final decisions about accommodation and financial support.

“It should be about what I want not what they want.” (Robert, age 17, LAC, pilot authority)

A few of the young people we spoke to wanted a higher level of involvement in the development of their pathway plans. So they understand what is going on and are involved in meetings.

“I need to ask more questions and get more involved myself, not expecting everyone else to do things, I need to be more active” (Kinza, age 20, care leaver, pilot authority)

Discussions about pathway plans should be directed to them rather than above them or as if they’re not there.

“Pathway plans should be made better; often people talk around you-about you which is really annoying, because you could be in the room and made to feel like a ghost.” (Grace, age 18, care leaver, pilot authority).

There were mixed views on whether pathway plans helped, as some young people said they just asked the same questions every time or the questions were too easy and should be aimed at someone younger.

“Sometimes they were just doing the same stuff over and over again, it gets boring. And you’d know, straightaway, as soon as you get to the review you knew what to expect” (Paul, age unknown, care leaver, pilot authority).

On the other hand some young people said it made them more focused and they knew what was going to happen to them.

“I know what I have to do to achieve it. Helped me to focus.” (Kinza, age 20, care leaver, pilot authority).

One young person mentioned that the pathway plan process helped her understand clearly what was going to happen next:

“Making like things clear. Like ages ago I weren’t sure what was going to happen, like what was going to happen after I turned 18, then after the pathway plan it was all clear” (Jade, age 17, LAC, pilot authority).

The importance of updating the plan was also identified:

“Update the pathway plan to keep it current and keep it fresh and keep it useful” (Edward, age 17, LAC, pilot authority).

Some young people wanted to be asked about who attends their pathway plan reviews; and others said the presence of certain staff was not required. Overall, those young people that participated in the interviews felt that active involvement in the preparation of their pathway plans was essential and felt that it should be about planning and not making final decisions with regards to accommodation etc. Many young people were positive about their pathway plans and said that they had made their plans for future clearer. However, some young people felt that the pathway plans were repetitive and needed to be tailored to the individual and some young people said that the plan needed to be reviewed and updated more regularly.

“Pathway plans should be made better; often people talk around you-about you which is really annoying, because you could be in the room and made to feel like a ghost.”
(Grace, age 18, care leaver, pilot authority)



**CURRENT
CIRCUMSTANCES AND
ANYTHING ELSE**



Young people were living in a number of different types of accommodation post 16. Some were still living in foster care, others were in semi-independent or supported housing, or council or privately rented properties. There were one or two young people placed in hostels.

Some young people interviewed stated that they didn't like hostels as they said some of the people they had to share with were drug users or alcoholics and this made them feel unsafe. For young people, hostels were a very different environment to a foster placement. Young people said that foster placements were like a family environment where they felt secure as they knew everyone in the household and had a good routine.

"I so prefer living in a family environment than living on my own." (Jasmine, age 18, care leaver, pilot authority).

Young people told us of the pressure of having to deal with new things, such as paying bills and applying for benefits, which created a certain panic amongst some young people who felt that they were not prepared.

"It's just the fact I wasn't ready." (Cathy, age 19, care leaver, pilot authority).

We found that the amount of choice some young people had about their accommodation was limited and they felt pressured to take the first thing that came their way.

"And like, if you said to them that you never liked the accommodation and then you said you never like another one, say if they had three accommodations and you never liked, you'd still have to pick at least one of them to live in. Because you've no other choice." (Paul, age unknown, care leaver, pilot authority).

They also needed extra support with moving to independence to give them the skills they needed to be successful.

"I felt rushed into independent living, looking back now I wasn't ready at all." (Jasmine, age 18, care leaver, pilot authority).

There were a couple of young parents we interviewed who did not feel that the accommodation presented to them was suitable for their current circumstances. Space and safety of the environments, as well as access to facilities for children, such as parks and playgrounds were issues.

"I hate it. It's too small, you can't even swing a cat in my kitchen. It's a nightmare trying to cook food, with two little ones running round" (Louise, age 19, care leaver, pilot authority).

Young people suggested that support from friends, family or mentors, who had dealt with similar situations in the past, was helpful and could help young people to cope with some of the pressures of living independently or with a young family. Some young people had a good experience of living independently as they were prepared properly on how to budget, put on cooking courses or just given more time to get ready.

"Before I left they put me on this course where they taught you cooking and things, which helped me move forward when I left care" (Lucy, age 18, LAC, comparator authority).

Three young people said they felt lonely and unsafe after they had left care because they did not have enough support from their family and friends or professionals.

"Lonely, I actually have no family at all, all I have is a boyfriend, it's quite lonely" (Hannah, age 17, care leaver, pilot authority).

The key points of this theme were that a few young people felt the quality of accommodation they were offered wasn't good. There was also talk of how limited the accommodation choice was in certain areas. Another issue raised by some young people who didn't have a good network of support was that they felt isolated and lonely.

"I so prefer living in a family environment than living on my own"
(Jasmine, age 18, care leaver, pilot authority)



IMPROVEMENT TO THE LEAVING CARE PROCESS



We wanted to ask young people what improvements they would make if they were in charge of the leaving care service. Young people suggested that more training is needed to cover things like making claims for housing benefits/council tax, cooking lessons, budgeting lessons and information on securing permanent accommodation.

The majority of young people were positive about the support they received from personal advisers. A handful of young people stated they wanted to keep the same personal adviser for longer so they could build up a good relationship, as this may be the only consistent person in their life. Young people can find it difficult if they have too many different professionals involved in their life:

“Keep the same social worker. Because some children will have quite a strong relationship with the social worker, and then like they have to move onto another...” (Jade, age 17, LAC, pilot authority)

For those young people who had a good personal adviser from the start, they created a bond that they wished to maintain even after they have left the care system. Two young people said that there should be more leaving care personal advisers, as they need to have knowledge about many different issues, for example, housing, benefits, health, crime, education and employment. Young people thought that maybe there needed to be more specialised workers.

“Everything should be improved, more leaving care workers because we only have two now. You need more with pathway plans. I don’t think I’ve seen one since I left care, and that was when I was 17, which is nearly three years ago.” (Cathy, age 19, care leaver, pilot authority).

One young person mentioned the availability of accommodation in their local authority needed to be looked at. Living outside the area, or not close enough to friends and families, can make it harder for young people, leaving them isolated and living in a new environment that they were not familiar with.

Young people talked about the need for training flats or taster flats before they moved to independence for real; this

would show them areas they need to work on and what they were good at.

“Going into a training flat, money. Help I suppose. Shopping, cooking would be alright because I’m quite good at cooking.” (Lisa, age unknown, LAC, pilot authority).

Young people felt they needed more structured support in terms of finance and independent living skills (cooking, cleaning, socialising etc). A few young people were sent to independence with nothing more than what they knew and/or what life had taught them, rather than having been trained and supported.

“So the social worker or the leaving care person should encourage young people to be in education or working. I know when I reached 17 when they let me live independently, live on my own, kind of just left me to that and like anything could of happened, so I think more structure and support for then.” (Jasmine, age 18, care leaver, pilot authority)

In conclusion, young people made varied comments as to how the leaving care process could be improved including the need for more continuity with workers. Other improvements suggested: were more available accommodation in the young person’s locality to avoid moves to other areas, and more preparation for independence through training flats or lessons and advice on budgeting, cooking, socialising and managing living independently as an adult.

“Going into a training flat, money. Help I suppose. Shopping, cooking would be alright because I’m quite good at cooking.”
(Lisa, age unknown, LAC, pilot authority)



The following concluding remarks and recommendations are based on findings from the face to face interviews and the perceptions and views of the peer researchers. We feel, as peer researchers, that one of the main messages we got from the research was that young people felt that they could only be honest with a personal adviser/social worker if they had been there for them for a long period of time. Young people said they would have built up a mutual respect, understanding and level of trust which would help them form important relationships. For some young people they also wanted to maintain these relationships when they had moved on to independence instead of having it cut like they were a deadline as this would make them feel less isolated. They also said they should be allowed to be young people instead of having to grow up so quickly when they might not be ready for the transition to independence. The majority of young people interviewed though said they had really positive relationships with their social workers and their leaving care workers.

We found that the young people wanted extra support when it came to building their self esteem and confidence to help them in every aspect of their life. So, maybe some extra support with gaining work experience and training would be a

big plus as this would help build up their confidence to get into work and to possibly look more into a young person's identity, which could help with building self-esteem. A minority of the young people interviewed said that when they got to the leaving care stage it felt too rushed. It was more of an event rather than a process which should be started from when a young person comes into the looked after system. So there should be minimal changes at vital points in a young person's life as unplanned moves can have a negative impact, for example when they should be concentrating on their studies. We also believe that training and taster flats would be ideal for young people as they said it would have helped to test the water first so they knew what they were letting themselves in for. The flats could be a good place for cooking lessons or any other life skills training that could be done on an individual basis or as a group.

The general feeling from the research gathered from the interviews was that those young people that had been placed with a foster family, where they were prepared at their pace and had the right support, would almost definitely make the transition to independence more effortlessly. In these situations the young person was also more comfortable in asking for help.



CONCLUSION

Some pathway plans were more about making final decisions about accommodation rather than it focusing on just planning for the future. Some young people also want more control over who is invited to their reviews and involved in the development of their pathway plans. They felt it should be on a 'need-to-know' basis and it would make them feel more comfortable in expressing themselves.

We [peer researchers] recommend that the pathway plans should be more tailored to each individual, as what works for one young person won't necessarily work for another. There should be a number of different approaches, with the young person's wishes and feelings at the forefront of everything.

We also found that there was a lack of choice for some young people when it came to finding suitable accommodation, which in some cases leads to young people feeling unsafe and lonely. A recommendation from the peer researchers as well was that peer mentors would be really good as they would have experience of being in care and making the transition to independence. They would be able to answer questions about leaving care and provide an insight into what to expect.

Finally, young people wanted more support after leaving care, in terms of finance, independent living skills and just having someone to be there if they need it.

