

Lost After Care: Monitoring Report 2013



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Introduction

In 2011 I published 'Lost After Care', a report detailing the experiences of young people preparing to leave care and the concerns they expressed about a wide range of issues affecting their rights and welfare as they moved to independence. Whilst my report highlighted significant examples of good practice in relation to the way in which professionals, practitioners and local services worked with young people to assist them in this transition, it also identified a number of shortcomings that made this transition difficult and challenging for young people.

Young people were not always aware of the services that were available to them and therefore did not always use them. They were unclear about the differing roles of the various professionals that they came into contact with, despite the importance that they attached to these relationships, and they felt that the planning for their move to independence was often inadequate and rushed. Young people also felt that they were not sufficiently listened to and consulted in relation to the important decisions that were being made about their life and their transition from care to independence.

My report made a number of suggestions for service improvements to address the issues that young people and professionals had raised. This report details the progress made by local authorities and other partners to address those service improvements. It will form part of a continuing dialogue that I want to establish with government, local authorities, and professionals about continuing to improve the outcomes for young people transitioning from care to independence.

**Keith Towler,
Children's Commissioner
for Wales**

Methodology

I asked all 22 Local Authorities to complete a questionnaire in relation to the service improvements identified in Lost After Care. The letters were sent to the Chief Executive Officer and copied to Heads of Children's Services in December 2012 requiring a response by March 2013. All 22 authorities responded to the questionnaire.

Questionnaires were also sent to Welsh Government, CSSIW and Local Health Boards in relation to the service improvements they were expected to report on. Welsh Government, CSSIW and four of the seven health boards responded.

I did not undertake any follow up work in relation to the returned questionnaires as I intend to use the findings of this monitoring exercise to engage in further dialogue with key stakeholders about the issues raised.

The monitoring report is therefore based upon the information that was returned in written form by the various respondents. Some respondents provided me with more detailed information than others and therefore may feature more heavily in the examples of promising practice referred to in the report.

Commissioner's View

I have been encouraged to hear how work and services for young people who have been in care and are approaching independence have progressed. Some respondents told me about well embedded services and provision and others have reviewed their services more recently, and have told me about a 'Lost After Care' action plan being developed following monitoring and evaluation of their service against the improvements set out in 'Lost After Care'.

I was particularly encouraged by one local authority who, as well as sending me their official response, had also worked with young people in their locality to see if they felt that this was the reality on the ground. This authority shared with me the young people's analysis and their subsequent plan to improve things where there was a mismatch between the two responses. This is something I would like all local authorities to consider in the future. This practice clearly demonstrates an authority that is prepared to listen to and act upon the views of children and young people in the shaping of their service.

I will also continue to ask young people for feedback about their experience of moving from care to independence. In 'Lost After Care' I committed to establishing a national forum for children and young people in care and leaving care that would enable them to meet and share experiences. In July this year the second such forum took place and was well supported by young people and practitioners from all over Wales. The event has proved to be very popular with young people, some of whom shared some very interesting perspectives about their life in care.

I hope that this report, as well as future events, will serve to give a flavour of the current state of post 16 services in Wales and act as a catalyst for practitioners and managers to share further practice examples and service development.

Social Services

'Lost After Care' identified a number of service improvements for local authorities to take forward. Young people found the process of leaving care scary and were unaware of their rights and entitlements when leaving care. They particularly stressed the importance of having a good working relationship with their social worker, personal adviser and other support staff, and identified the need for a clear and relevant pathway plan.

Rights and Entitlements

To identify and respond appropriately to the rights of those leaving care, I proposed as part of the annual council reporting framework, that local authorities undertook a self assessment of services for young people moving to independent living, providing young people with the opportunity to feedback on their own experiences, and ensuring the relevant scrutiny committee included care leavers within their published forward work programme (service improvement 6 & 9).

Whilst 20 local authorities reported that they considered the rights and entitlements for young people leaving care as part of their reporting framework, I was not given much detail on what this involved, and was left unclear about the quality of such assessments.

However, some local authorities did describe how they were proactively working on assessing the future needs of young people leaving care in order to better plan and provide appropriate future services, including evidence of direct consultation with young people to ensure that services were responsive to their needs. For example:

Powys told us that their ACRF includes information about young people's transition to independence with individual service user feedback, and that they include feedback from young people in the corporate parenting meeting, to ensure that issues for future planning of services can be properly considered.

Neath Port Talbot said they are using their management information system to shape services to meet the identified needs of care leavers. For example, their recent analysis identified a gap in accommodation for care leavers which has led to the commissioning team working to develop an additional supported lodgings scheme. The management information system analyses data in relation to Education, Employment and Training, Health, and Keeping in Touch and is being continually developed to identify unmet needs.

I was encouraged by a firm commitment amongst some elected members and managers to incorporate the findings of 'Lost After Care' into their work streams, in order to try and improve opportunities for care leavers within their areas. For example:

Swansea told us that their Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered 'Lost After Care' and produced its own report - 'What is the Best Way to Support Care Leavers in Swansea' (March 2012) - to drive forward improvements. The Corporate Parenting Forum has also committed to reviewing progress on all the priorities for service improvement highlighted by 'Lost After Care'.

In order to help increase young people's awareness of their rights and entitlements I suggested that Lead Members and Heads of Children Services should ensure that a copy of 'My Planner' is provided to all young people on their 15th birthday, and to ensure that it is accessible to all young people moving on to independent living on the local authority website (service improvement 12).

I developed 'My Planner' in consultation with children and young people. It contains a checklist of rights and entitlements for young people leaving care. Whilst two local authorities did not share our view that distributing the resource would be helpful to looked after children in their areas, the other twenty local authorities were either working towards sharing the resource with young people, or were already doing so. For example:

Pembrokeshire make hard copies of 'My Planner' available for young people moving on to independent living and have redeveloped their website with details and further additional information for care leavers.

Vale of Glamorgan told us that 'My Planner' has received the full support of the Corporate Parenting Panel. It is given to all young people moving on to independent living and there is a link to the Children's Commissioner website and it is included on the council website.

Changing the Name of the Team

Many of the young people we spoke to during the field work for 'Lost after Care' said that the thought of having to live independently was scary, and that for some of them, their first introduction to the concept of leaving care was meeting a leaving care team worker. They found the term leaving care threatening and scary so I suggested changing the name of the teams to something like 'Future Care Support Team' (service improvement 7).

I received resoundingly positive responses from all local authorities agreeing with the rationale for a name change. 15 were already using an alternative name whilst the other 7 were considering a change or were in the process of consulting with young people about a change.

Names such as Route 16, Network 16 or 16+ team seem to be among the most popular choices. Conwy told us about their Pathway Team, Carmarthenshire about their Next Step Team and Bridgend have Just @SK, all chosen following consultation with children and young people.

Some of the teams have a wider remit than just leaving care and this is reflected in names such as 'Child and Young Adults Support Team' in Flintshire. This name was chosen by young people and the team tries to ensure that the same workers travel the child's journey to independence with them. Monmouth has a 'Supporting Children and Young People Service' and Anglesey has a 'Permanency Team' all working with children and young people across a wider spectrum than just leaving care.

Positive Relationships with Professionals

Young people had identified good working relationships with key staff and clear pathway plans as being crucial to their wellbeing, and I proposed that all care leavers should have access to a personal adviser and social worker as required by legislation, and that Independent Reviewing Officers ensure they maintain an overview of pathway plan reviews for relevant children (service improvement 13 & 28).

Other key professionals providing support are mentioned within the education and housing sections of this report.

I was therefore pleased to be told that 21 local authorities offer a personal adviser to all care leavers. Nearly all local authorities told us that they were meeting, or working towards meeting, their statutory obligation in allocating a social worker and personal adviser to care leavers in their area. For example:

Anglesey work to avoid too much change at once by introducing a personal adviser to work alongside the LAC social worker until age 18. This ensures consistency and ensures that the transition and planning process is undertaken with a social worker who knows the young person well. The leaving care social worker begins to work alongside the personal adviser at 18.

Swansea: ensure that no care leavers have to wait for the allocation of a young person's adviser or a social worker and this is monitored closely. Barnardo's Bays project has recently undertaken a recruitment campaign in anticipation of an increase in the number of former relevant young people requiring a service. The LAC 14+ team now have no unqualified workers, allowing them to promptly allocate all cases.

I was concerned to hear a number of young people reporting they had not been involved in the formulation of their Pathway plan and was unaware of its contents. I strongly suggested that local authorities must work closely with young people to ensure that they both understood the purpose of and contributed to their Pathway plan. Local authority responses indicated that most authorities are attempting to address the issue of inconsistency of pathway planning through a more robust monitoring process. For example:

Conwy told us that they have a Quality Assurance Framework for the Pathway Team, and the local authority have undertaken consultation with young people in the area regarding pathway plans. IRO's monitor the quality of pathway plans.

Rhondda Cynon Taf: allocate an IRO to young people leaving care between 16-18 years who will review their pathway planning and needs. Post 18 the young person is given the choice as to who reviews their plans and can ask for their Independent Reviewing Officer to remain involved. If arrangements for the young person are not satisfactory then an additional review may be convened, or the IRO can raise a concern in line with their guidance.

Education

In 'Lost After Care' I noted that young people in care who were approaching independence did not always receive the effective practical and emotional support they needed to fulfill their educational potential. This in turn could make it difficult to progress onto further education, training or employment. Young people wanting to continue in education were sometimes given conflicting or incorrect advice, and some lacked the qualifications and work experience they needed to open up educational and work opportunities in the future.

Trained and Experienced Professionals

I was encouraged that all local authorities recognised the importance of having properly trained and supported individuals to work with young people leaving care. All local authorities told us about some degree of co-working and cooperation between education, social services, and Careers Wales, to support the looked after young people in their care. Some authorities had well developed training packages in place, whilst others had signalled an intention to develop such programmes. (service improvement 26 and 27)

In relation to the training of Social Workers and Personal Advisers:

The **Vale of Glamorgan's** Education team is seeking to set up a practice learning event with teachers, social workers, health colleagues and foster carers to improve understanding of LAC issues.

Blaenau Gwent's LAC education coordinator is in the process of drafting a training pack to be delivered to smaller groups of professionals working with their LAC, concentrating on issues pertinent to individual schools, education establishments and other services. This will include designated staff within their schools, PRU Staff, tuition service staff and Education Welfare Officers.

An information pack is also to be produced and issued to all residential providers where Blaenau Gwent looked after children are placed. The pack will focus on the importance of establishing robust links between placement and school and prioritising learning within the residential home and school setting.

Cardiff are developing a 'Brighter Futures for Looked After Children and Care Leavers' project group who will work together to improve outcomes for looked after children and care leavers. One initiative that the group has taken forward is the introduction of joint Children's Services and Education workshops for Social Workers, Teachers and Foster Carers. One of the aims of these workshops is to promote an understanding of roles and responsibilities across the services.

Financial and Practical Support

In relation to the role of LAC teachers:

Gwynedd told us that they have a Vulnerable Groups Education Coordinator appointed jointly by the Education and Social Services Departments who has introduced training for designated LAC teachers. This officer has clear responsibility for children in care and is in regular contact with all Gwynedd schools to promote opportunities for children in care.

Vale of Glamorgan offers training to designated LAC teachers on an annual basis and the education team is seeking to set up a practice learning event with teachers, social workers, health colleagues and foster carers to further improve understanding of LAC issues. All schools in the Vale of Glamorgan are informed about the LAC teacher role and each has a LAC file for further information.

Newport LAC Co-ordinators have developed and produced a LAC handbook for designated LAC teachers and have used this tool as the basis of their training. The LAC co-ordinators undertake an annual review of LAC teachers in every school to ensure that new staff receive appropriate training and support.

In addition to being offered advice and guidance about routes into higher education and training, a key element identified by young people in furthering their educational aspirations was clear advice and guidance about finance and accommodation (service improvement 15).

A number of authorities told me that they already had guidance in place detailing the financial and practical support that is available to care leavers, but this was not always in a format that was easily accessible to young people. I would urge all authorities to ensure that any information relating to young people's needs should be in a format and style that they will readily understand. It is not acceptable that young people are unable to access or understand key information at such a crucial stage of their lives.

Work Experience / Apprenticeships and Educational Opportunities

A number of authorities had indicated that they were developing this further using a variety of electronic and young person friendly formats. Where this information does not currently exist there were generally plans to consider or develop such a resource.

Vale of Glamorgan plan to provide relevant information on their website during 2013. This information is also routinely available through the 15+ Team and the 'one stop shop.'

Swansea issues every care leaver with a document detailing all the financial aspects of their support entitlement as well as how to access other means of support. This includes support available to attend education courses, benefit entitlements whilst in education and information about colleges and universities that offer financial and other support specific to young people leaving the care system.

In order to deal with the issues of the lack of qualifications and work experience opportunities for young people approaching independence, I suggested that local authorities should develop work experience / apprenticeships / educational opportunities for young care leavers and an action plan with targets for improving outcomes for their young people (service improvement 10).

All local authorities either told us that they had existing schemes and opportunities for young people to undertake work experience, or encouragement to take up educational or training opportunities or that they intended to make this area a priority for the Corporate Parenting Panel in the future. Bearing in mind that many young people take up work experience placements or gain advice and support for a future career through a family contact, I welcomed initiatives which showed local authorities fulfilling this role as corporate parents.

Gwynedd's Corporate Parenting Panel discussed developing work experience opportunities for LAC with the ultimate objective of reducing the number of young people leaving care who would otherwise be Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). Careers Wales' input is a key component of this initiative working, and they are co-located at the office of the Post 16 team in order to promote this work, and to work with young people to promote work experience opportunities. The scheme is a partnership between Gwynedd Council, Coleg Menai and Careers Wales.

Torfaen have a range of services to develop work experience, apprenticeship and educational opportunities for young people moving on to independent living including their 16+ Mentoring Scheme to support their young people through different aspects of their transition to independence. Following consultation with children and young people, foster carers, staff and councillors an action plan has been agreed which includes the provision of enhanced opportunities such as employment, vocational training and further education.

In **Neath Port Talbot** Route 16 have developed a working protocol with NPT College which recently won a Welsh and UK national award for the quality of the service provided to young people. There have been positive results with an increase in the number of young people going on to further education, a much lower dropout rate and a significant increase in care leavers going on to higher education. LAC Education Officers ensure that young people receive careers interviews, advice and assistance to apply for FE and training at year 10/11 and there are open days and orientation days at the college.

Housing

Accommodation for Care Leavers

Lack of appropriate affordable accommodation for care leavers was highlighted as a common problem for most local authorities at the time 'Lost After Care' was published. To ensure that there was appropriate accommodation available for young people becoming independent, I suggested that Housing Departments and Children's Services should review their stock levels, project likely demand, and forward plan to ensure they could provide a range of suitable housing options for care leavers (service improvement 25 & 11).

Most local authorities told us that they had reviewed their housing stock options for young people or had plans to do so in the near future, and only one local authority failed to give us any evidence about their housing provision. In my original report it seems that not only was there insufficient stock but that there was little forward planning, and therefore I welcomed reports of strategic planning by the wider council as evidence of them taking their corporate parenting responsibility seriously. For example:

Torfaen has recently approved their Young Person's Accommodation Strategy, which establishes priorities along a continuum of accommodation and support for young people, and presents an action plan to meet their needs in the Borough. Lead members are also invited to events such as the annual Care Leavers Conference, to raise their awareness around issues affecting care leavers and the need to assist their move to independence through providing and promoting a range of suitable accommodation options.

In **Caerphilly** the Leaving Care Team works proactively with local authority housing staff, social landlords and Supporting People initiatives. The Accommodation Officer in the Leaving Care Team ensures that annual projections are completed on the number and types of placement that young people leaving care will need and this information is shared with partners who will work to ensure that this need is met.

A significant number of responses from local authorities focused on more general youth housing policies or protocols and did not deal specifically with care leavers. Whilst describing close working between social services, housing and the third sector to meet identified need these responses did not specifically address the issue of provision and I am left with the impression that despite my report the accommodation options for care leavers remain a concern.

Supported Accommodation

Some young people are not ready to leave care at 18 and do not appreciate that the local authority has an obligation towards them beyond 18. I suggested that Heads of Children Services plan for the conversion of foster placements to supported lodgings placements to age 21 for all young people if the foster carer and the young person requested this. Young people also need to know that they can access care and support if independent living fails (service improvement 16 & 18).

16 local authorities told us that it is already current practice to convert foster placements into supported lodgings placements following a request, and some have been doing this for a number of years. Others are currently consulting or reviewing this as an option particularly in the light of the Welsh Government's 'When I Am Ready' consultation and proposals.

The **Vale of Glamorgan** Council supports young people aged 18 years and over to remain in their foster carer households as a supported lodgings arrangement. They are in the process of developing the scheme further with requirements of the 'When I am Ready' scheme in mind. They intend to consult with young people but are currently referring to this scheme as 'Eighteen Plus' services.

In **Gwynedd** a young person in a stable foster placement may stay beyond their 18th birthday and this can be converted into a supported lodgings arrangement if both parties agree. In addition they organise holiday accommodation for young people in higher education institutions with their foster carers for as long as possible. There are a number of examples where the carers continue to maintain contact and offer support to the young person long after they have left care.

A number of authorities told us that they have plans to increase the number of supported lodgings provision and given the support needs of care leavers this would be a welcome step. I will continue to monitor developments with interest.

Vale of Glamorgan reported that Children & Young People Services in partnership with Housing Services and Llamau had undertaken a review of available housing options. The review identified that there is a good range of options but with a gap of appropriate short term move-on accommodation between foster care/supported lodgings/residential care and independence. They are currently developing a business case for two self contained flats that would be supported by dedicated workers.

Rhondda Cynon Taf have developed a training flat project in partnership with a housing association and the after care team. This currently provides two units of accommodation, which are utilised prior to a young person leaving care, and for one week initially, and then up to four weeks providing a taste of independence. The success of the project has led to funding being agreed for an additional two units of accommodation.

Carmarthenshire have consulted with care leavers and included their views in their Housing Options Plan. They are looking to take forward the development of an additional range of supported lodgings as part of the wider planning for accommodation options within the county for care leavers.

I also suggested that young people need to be informed of their right to return to care if independent living fails. Although all local authorities told us that this was an option only 6 told us that they actively informed young people of this.

Merthyr Tydfil consulted directly with their young people prior to returning the monitoring response and when their young people told them that they didn't know that returning to care was possible and had thought bed and breakfast would be the only option if living independently failed, informed me they would take steps to make sure that this information was shared with young people. Their 'Reconnecting to Care' guidance is being taken forward by the Permanence Service and the Barnardo's Future Care Team to ensure that young people are aware of all their options.

Swansea recognise that progress to independence won't always be linear but will occasionally require a return to a more supportive environment and all young care leavers are able to return to care should their needs and vulnerabilities be such that they are temporarily unable to live safely in the community. They are supported, without being penalised, through second and third chances at tenancies, or if needs be, a return to care.

Tenancy Support

Young people managing their own tenancies for the first time can often experience difficulties in managing the demands of independent living which can lead to repeated tenancy failures. This can be a particular difficulty for care leavers who may not have the family and social supports that other young people have. I suggested that tenancy support must be offered to all care leavers moving on to independent living up to the age of 21, and that local policies should be amended to ensure that care leavers are given a second or third chance to make a success of a tenancy (service improvement 22 & 23).

Most of the local authorities had given consideration to amending their housing policies in this regard or were planning to do so in the near future. A few had amended their policies to take account of the specific circumstances of care leavers but most included more general reference to young people with housing problems and told us about processes that were in place to offer additional support to all young people to avoid tenancy failures in the first place.

In **Caerphilly** work has been undertaken with the local authority housing department to amend their policies in relation to Care Leavers. The Leaving Care Team have ensured that tenancy failures are explored with the housing department, and joint measures are put in place to make any subsequent tenancy a success. Homelessness Prevention Officers mediate with private sector landlords where tenancies for care leavers are under threat.

Flintshire are developing procedures to identify intentionality – when a person intentionally contributes to their homelessness. This is not applied to care leavers for the first independent tenancy breakdown. Checks are automatically made as part of homeless investigations to make sure that care leaver status is not missed. They have a successful disruptions meeting service in Flintshire for LAC placement breakdowns and negotiations are currently underway to expand the model into accommodation breakdowns to adopt a lessons learnt approach.

Housing Training for Professionals

To ensure that social workers and personal advisers effectively support and advise young people in relation to accommodation issues I suggested that Housing Departments should offer an annual training session or briefing (service improvement 24).

21 out of 22 local authorities provided me with evidence on this issue and I can see that across Wales there is a high level of cooperation and co-working between social services and housing departments. My specific suggestion regarding training or briefing sessions was met with a positive response with some authorities planning more opportunities for formal and informal learning in the future. My only concern relates to the number of times informal learning opportunities was mentioned. It was positive to see one authority introducing a mentoring scheme to make sure that the level of expertise and knowledge in their authority was not lost.

In **Blaenau Gwent** the Network 16+ Team undertake joint assessments with housing officers and both spend time based in each other's teams. This leads to a natural sharing of knowledge and expertise. There are regular meetings at both management level and between the team members and ongoing training has been provided by the housing department in relation to the Welfare Reform Act which will impact on young people moving to independent living.

Neath Port Talbot's Route 16 staff frequently deal with housing issues and are knowledgeable about supported accommodation, and available housing in the NPT and surrounding areas. There is a high level of expertise within the service and in order to make sure this is passed on to new staff a mentoring system is to be established so that expertise is maintained within the service.

Independent Living

In my report I described an inconsistent pattern across Wales with regard to the preparation and support that young people receive prior to leaving care. I found that there was not always a clear acknowledgment of the level of ongoing practical and emotional support the young person may need up to and beyond the age of 18. Some key people and services were not readily provided or accessible, and young people sometimes felt rushed, or didn't understand their rights in relation to leaving care and the possible options for them, if living independently was really difficult for them.

Drop-in Centre

I suggested that Social Services in partnership with voluntary organisations should develop a drop-in support facility for all care leavers up to 25 to provide advice, guidance, independent living skills training and emotional support (service improvement 14).

I was pleased to hear of a large number of local authorities who had established drop-in centres or who were looking to develop these. For example:

Bridgend's After Care team have merged with part of the local Authority's Youth Service with a view to young people accessing a range of services from one centre. The name of this service is Just@sk Plus.

In **Pembrokeshire** the Corporate Parenting Team is developing a monthly drop-in/forum for care leavers, linking with the youth service. A service specification for a core and cluster supported accommodation project is currently being developed, and consideration will be given to the inclusion of drop in support as part of this.

Some local authorities were seeking the views of care leavers in their areas to make sure that this was a facility that they would use and that any future development was in line with the young people's needs and wishes:

Swansea's Participation Officer for LAC has held several events with care leavers in the last six months on what kind of support they would like to receive and what form a future drop-in facility might take. Their ideas will be fed into the Children and Family Services Commissioning Strategy 2013-18. Young people are able to drop-in to the Barnardos BAYS project for help, advice and emotional support from their Youth Personal Adviser.

Merthyr Tydfil are consulting with young people via the LAC Participation Group about a drop-in support facility for all young people moving on to independent living aged up to 21/25. The Future Care Team premises will be able to accommodate this facility.

I acknowledge that for some authorities geography makes it difficult to locate a drop-in centre and welcome the fact that alternative solutions and ways of supporting young people are being explored. For example:

Monmouthshire told us that geography means a single drop-in support facility is not considered to be viable so the team works hard to respond to individual needs and intends to develop a rota of drop-in sessions around the county.

Powys has provided drop-in facilities but the geography of Powys does not support these on a regular basis. They provide information on other relevant services including Gwalia drop in support services and youth service groups. Recognising the difficulties of the geography, regular residential events and activity and consultation days take place, and they have regular newsletters and a facebook page for young people to improve contact and information.

Only one local authority stated that provision of a drop-in facility was beyond the remit and resources of their service although they did say they offered an outreach service.

Preparation for Independent Living

All 22 local authorities either offered some independent living training or were considering this, but generally it was not noted in the responses whether this training was accredited or not. This disappoints me as I had thought that one of the benefits of providing accredited training, in addition to preparing a young person for independent living, was the opportunity for the young person to gain some formal recognition that might help to improve their self esteem or their employment or training prospects.

Some training identified by local authorities was bespoke and specifically for care leavers, but mostly it was a more general training that was often ad hoc. I welcome the commitment by some local authorities to build training into their forward work programme to provide a more consistent and wider reaching approach. For example:

Cardiff Children's Services, in partnership with Careers Wales and Cardiff & Vale College provide a course entitled 'Entry to Vocational Studies'. This bespoke course for care leavers gives young people the opportunity to learn about financial management, cooking, cleaning, personal hygiene, emotional resilience, neighbourliness, problem solving skills and health advice. It also provides the opportunity to develop vocational skills in an area of their choice.

In **Swansea** a small proportion of care leavers access the BEATS project where they are able to access basic skills courses, various confidence building activities and enrol on accredited courses that may improve their chances of securing employment. Further information and advice, e.g. on sexual health issues, is available from Swansea's Info-nation 'shop-front' in the city centre.

Support from Carers / Advocates / Independent Visitors

I suggested that a 'transition planning' training module should be developed for all foster carers and residential staff to ensure that these key people who provide care and support on a daily basis are able and confident in offering appropriate advice (service improvement 21).

All 22 local authorities showed a commitment to training foster carers to enable them to support the young people through transition. 11 local authorities already provide specific training to foster carers and residential support workers about transition. Of the other 11 local authorities, some already provide training to residential workers which they are now planning to extend to foster carers or vice versa and the rest are looking to develop and deliver a training package. For example:

Newport has delivered their first 'Caring is Preparing' training course for foster carers by the 16 plus team and this will continue to be offered. Staff from the 16 plus team work very closely with residential staff and meet them on a weekly basis and also work with individual foster carers to enable them to be able to play their role in transition planning for young people.

Vale of Glamorgan already includes 'moving on' within the social services training programme which includes supporting young people to transition to independence. A higher level and more targeted course is being developed specifically around moving young people on to independence. These courses are accessible to foster carers and commissioned residential care providers in the Vale of Glamorgan.

In **Caerphilly** the leaving care team have been providing foster carer training on preparing young people for independence since 2005. The implementation of 'preparing for Independence' during 2013 will enable independence preparation to start at a younger age and increase in complexity and diversity as the child gets older.

This practical support from immediate carers needs to be strongly linked with easy access to other key individuals who can provide the care leavers with support, advice and guidance. I suggested that advocacy services for care leavers should be effectively promoted and readily available to all young people moving on to independent living to age 21, and that the current arrangements for providing independent visitors should be reviewed as it tended to be poorly resourced and difficult to access (service improvement 19 & 17).

21 out of the 22 local authorities in Wales currently commission advocacy services for care leavers, and only one told us that their current advocacy contract does not include provision for care leavers despite this being a statutory requirement. It is anticipated that this authority's engagement with a new regional commissioning project will address this shortcoming. I was particularly pleased to hear how 15 authorities proactively promote their services providing examples of how they do so. In my recent report into the provision of independent professional advocacy services 'Missing Voices' I had expressed concern at the poor promotion of advocacy and how important it was that young people were informed about advocacy.

Blaenau Gwent told us that they proactively offer advocacy services to all looked after children and young people. Two weeks prior to every LAC review the support of an advocate is offered as a matter of routine. The NYAS coordinator has good links with all the social services teams, which serves to promote the use of this service.

In **Newport** advocacy is available to all care leavers and actively promoted by the 16 plus team and by Be Heard, the advocacy provider. The provider attends team meetings, and calls in to continue to remind staff about informing the young people they are working with of their entitlement to advocacy.

In relation to independent visitor services, 21 local authorities told me that they commissioned an independent visitor service and only one spot purchased this service. I had suggested in Missing Voices that these services should be reviewed as I had been told that they were poorly resourced and difficult to access. Responses indicated that monitoring of services had led to positive developments in services in some areas with only one area reporting they had reduced the service following a review.

Rhondda Cynon Taf currently has an Independent Visitor Service managed by Tros Gynnal which is promoted to both young people and social workers. There are 10 independent visitors and there is an option for the service to be increased to meet demand at any time.

Carmarthenshire's Independent Visitor Service is provided through Action for Children. It should be easy to access, and IRO's have been asked to ensure that appropriate referrals are made to this service.

Health

From interviewing young people for 'Lost After Care' I found that, despite Welsh Government guidance directing professionals working with care leavers to facilitate arrangements to encourage young people to register with GP surgeries and dentists², young people were still facing some barriers and difficulties. In particular young people needed support to ensure that they could register successfully with and access GPs and dentists.

² (Welsh Government) 2007 Towards a stable life and brighter future

I suggested that LHB's should consider issuing guidance to GP surgeries outlining best practice in dealing with young people who are, or have been, looked after (service improvement 29). At the time of publication of this report, I had received responses from 4 local health boards:

Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board (ABMU) responded confirming their compliance with the statutory regulations as set out in 'Towards a Stable Life and Brighter Future'. ABMU's response to 'Lost After Care' stated, "It is essential that looked after children have permanent registration with a local GP practice wherever possible and that their health record is up to date and follows the child promptly."

Aneurin Bevan Health Board (ABHB) confirmed that they accepted the suggested service improvement, and had produced draft guidance for GPs outlining their responsibilities in the health and wellbeing of looked after children. The draft guidance states that "Best practice in dealing with young people who wish to access services but do not have a parent or carer to register for them is to deal with their medical problems first and then consider their registration".

Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board also accepted the suggested service improvement. The LHB acknowledged that "historically looked after young people leaving care did have difficulty registering with a GP if they had no address. This has been rectified in North Wales by using a Local Enhanced Service agreed with GP's focused on providing for vulnerable and homeless groups. In respect of issuing guidance to GP's outlining best practice in relation to looked after children (LAC) it is intended that this will be completed during the course of 2013."

Powys Teaching Health Board informed me that 'Lost After Care' was built into the work of the Powys Local Safeguarding Children Board, particularly the group on Safe, Secure and Stable Placements. The LHB detailed that "We have two Nurse Specialists for Looked After Children in order to address the health needs of children looked after by Powys County Council and the vulnerable children placed here by other authorities... Our Nurse Specialists for looked after children constantly liaise with our 17 GP Practices. GPs are copied into statutory notifications, so they know when a child is looked after or arrives in Powys. They receive copies of health assessments and plans and our nursing team liaises with them over any concerns, including transition planning... Our team is also involved in the training of foster carers. It is through these routes that we continue to promote the importance of ensuring care leavers are registered with GPs, so their health and wellbeing is promoted".

I will follow up with Cardiff and the Vale, Cwm Taf and Hywel Dda Local Health Boards to ensure that they have similarly made their own arrangements to address the service improvement that I made in 'Lost After Care'.

Welsh Government and CSSIW

Age of Leaving Care / Financial Support for Care Leavers

I had identified two particular areas in which Welsh Government could help to improve the life chances of those children leaving care.

Young people often felt they were made to leave care too early. One of the most consistent messages coming from the young people and professionals we met was that many young people were required to leave care before they were ready, and often the transition rather than being gradual, was too rapid or sudden. I therefore called on Welsh Government to amend legislation extending the maximum age at which a young person has to leave a foster or residential placement from 18 to 21 (service improvement 2).

'Lost After Care' also noted the lack of consistent financial support for care leavers, including those who go on to further and higher education. I suggested that Welsh Government should consult with care leavers to review the financial support available to young people moving to independent living to determine an acceptable level of support for all care leavers, and to issue guidance to local authorities (service improvement 1).

Welsh Government's Response

In a written response to me the Minister for Health and Social Services referred to the Social Services and Well-being Bill as being at the heart of their improvement agenda and articulating their objective to improve the well-being outcomes for people who need care and support.

"I have made it clear that to achieve this goal and deliver our corporate parenting responsibilities, we must have much more multi-lateral national leadership arrangements, with local accountability for delivery underpinned by a coherent National Outcomes Framework. This Framework will clearly articulate what individuals can expect, provide professionals working together with a shared focus to promote well-being, to measure what we are doing well and where we need to improve thereby ensuring people get high quality services that they are satisfied with and we have prioritised improving outcomes for looked after children at the forefront of this Programme."

The Minister also referred to Welsh Government's proposed 'When I Am Ready Scheme', which aims to enable young people to remain with their former foster carers beyond the age of 18. The scheme was developed and led by Ken Skates AM and was designed to place greater corporate

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accountability on local authorities to ensure looked after children experience a seamless transition from care to adulthood. Following a consultation process the Deputy Minister for Social Services has decided to implement the Scheme on a 'pioneer' basis and trial implementation in a small number of local authority areas. In the first instance Gwynydd, Merthyr and Rhondda Cynon Taf began pioneering the scheme in June this year with the expectation that in twelve months time this will be extended to the rest of Wales following Welsh Government assessing the impact of the current guidance, and addressing any operational issues that need further consideration.

Whilst I supported the intentions and principles of the 'When I Am Ready' scheme I had some concerns about the ways in which Welsh Government proposed to implement the scheme, and I hope the 'pioneer' stage will develop the scheme so that it may be delivered successfully throughout Wales.

I am less clear about Welsh Government intentions regarding consistent financial support for care leavers but would hope that this will be addressed in the regulations and codes of practice that are being developed to support the implementation of the Social Services and Well Being Bill. I will ensure that my policy team scrutinise the regulations and codes of practice to ensure this important issue is not overlooked.

Young people had raised with me their wish for a national forum at which they could meet and share experiences. In 'Lost After Care' I had proposed that Welsh Government work with my office to establish an all Wales forum for children and young people in care and leaving care (service improvement 3).

In July 2012 my office brought together over 50 young people who had left care or were preparing to leave care from across Wales. Whilst there were many positive experiences shared during the event, time and again we heard about the lack of consistency between local authorities in the provision of services for looked after children and care leavers.

CSSIW

Role of the Personal Adviser / Lived Experience Inspections

'Lost After Care' noted a lack of clarity around the role of the Personal Adviser and a lack of awareness and understanding of their entitlements by young people. I suggested that CSSIW undertook a national review of the role of the Personal Adviser and also suggested a series of spot inspections of leaving care teams to focus on the lived experience of children progressing from care to independence, highlighting good practice, and identifying areas for improvement and development (service improvement 4 & 5).

CSSIW have responded to my report and have acknowledged that despite significant progress in service provision since the Leaving Care Act 2000 it would be timely to review the current provision of services to young people leaving care. My office met with officials from CSSIW who have indicated that looked after children will be part of their thematic work programme during the course of the coming year. I'm pleased that CSSIW intend to focus upon a range of issues in relation to looked after children and that they have invited me to be part of the scoping for this programme of work. This will take place in the autumn of 2013.

A second forum took place in July this year with 72 young people participating. 97 young people had indicated to the office they would be attending. Numbers were slightly down from last year due to a cancelled flight leading to a number of young people from North Wales not being able to attend. A video diary of the event made by young people from Caerphilly will be made available to all local authorities and those that attended the day, and it is hoped that services will be able to use this to promote next year's event. Feedback from the young people who attended the day will also be used to shape next year's event. I want to ensure that this day provides the opportunity for looked after children across Wales to meet and share experiences with each other and with my office, whilst also providing the opportunity for a fun day out.

Providing looked after children and care leavers from across Wales with the opportunity to meet and share their thoughts, provides us all with an opportunity to learn from them about their experience of care and ways to improve things in the future.

Conclusion

I have been encouraged by the commitment that is being shown by a range of organisations to improve the situation for those young people who are moving from care. However I would not want anyone to think that the issues I identified in Lost After Care have all been resolved.

I intend to continue to listen to children and young people in the care system, and to report back to those who are responsible for delivering services to them on what they have to say to me. I want to work with local authorities, health boards, Welsh Government, advocacy providers and other local services to continue to improve the outcomes for this vulnerable group of young people.

I am committed to working with CSSIW in relation to their planned inspections of looked after children to ensure that the issues that children and young people have raised with me are taken into consideration in that work programme.

For my part I will continue to organise an annual forum for looked after children and care leavers from across Wales and will use this event to obtain feedback from children and young people about the issues that they want government and corporate parents to address, and I will ensure that these messages are heard.

My office will continue to work closely with the All Wales Care Leavers Forum and other relevant groups of professionals to help ensure that the rights of children and young people in the care system are both recognised and met.

Whilst it's good to learn about the progress being made we cannot become complacent when it involves services and support for young people leaving care. We owe it to young people leaving care, to help secure their future and to provide them with the best possible transition from care to independence.

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