Caring about health leads to healthier care leavers

David Graham

CLA National Director

The Care Leavers' Association

- Key data from research into health needs of looked after children and care leavers
- Key data from our own research and mental health project
- Some broader questions to think about
- Some possible solutions

The Care Leavers Association

User led national charity – for care leavers by care leavers

Our vision is for a “good life in care, a good life after care” – working to improve the care system and the lives of care leavers

The user voice needs to be at the heart of service delivery and design. Things can only be improved by listening to the user experience

The Care Leavers' Association

Care experienced children and young people have consistently been found to have much higher rates of mental health difficulties than the general population, including a significant proportion who have more than one condition (The Mental Health Foundation, 2002).

They are approximately four times more likely to have a mental disorder than children living in their birth families (NSPCC, 2015).

Almost half (rising to three quarters in residential homes) meet the criteria for a psychiatric disorder (NSPCC, 2014) compared to 10% of general population

Barnardo's surveyed care leavers within their remit and found were identified as having mental health needs, and of that group 65% were not receiving any form of statutory support They also reported that an assessment of case files showed that around 25% of care leavers had experienced a mental health crisis since they left care (Barnardos 2017)

40% of male and 33% of female looked after children were reported to have emotional and mental health problems (DfE, 2021)

Carers report often having to manage a range of significant emotional and behavioural difficulties in the young people they care for (Hiller, 2020).

Common mental health diagnoses among children in foster care include disruptive behaviour disorders and attention deficit / hyperactivity disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and mood disorders (Hambrick, 2016).

A 2008 study found that 72% of children aged between five and fifteen had some kind of emotional or behavioural problem at entry to care (NSPCC, 2015)

The Care Leavers' Association

Studies have demonstrated a strong long-term association between childhood trauma and adult mental and physical ill-health and behaviour. Almost two thirds of children looked after by the local authority are in care due to abuse or neglect. There are strong links between exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and mental illness (The Education Policy Institute, 2019)

Perpetuation of trauma and failure to support healing where children are already experiencing poverty and inequality is reflected in poor outcomes for many who have experience of the care system (Care Review, 2020a).

The Care Leavers' Association

The health and well-being of young people leaving care has been consistently found to be poorer than that of young people who have never been in care. In summary, research has shown that:

- In studies of care leavers, anywhere between 12 and 48 per cent identify themselves as having a long-term health problem (Horton 2005).
- Care leavers tend to eat poorly, often not eating enough because of lack of money (Blueprint Project 2004a), and not having the knowledge and skills to cook healthily (Stanley 2006).
- Care leavers are more likely to have mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, fears, conduct disorders and attachment disorders (Richardson and Joughin 2000).
- One study into the health of young people leaving care found that two fifths had tried to take their own lives between the ages of 15 and 18 years (Wyler 2000); and another that over a third have self-harmed since the age of 15 (Saunders and Broad 1997).
- Care leavers are likely to have experienced the death of a close family member or relative – some of these deaths will have been traumatic – this can have physical, mental and emotional impacts on the young person (Penny 2007; Healthy Care 2007).
- Care leavers have higher rates of substance and alcohol misuse and are more likely to smoke (Save the Children 1995; Big Step 2002; Wyler 2000; Department of Health 1997; Williams and others 2001).
- One study found that two-thirds of care leavers smoked cigarettes daily (Ward and others 2003).

The Care Leavers' Association

CLA Research

- 2014-17 Health Project
- Worked with10 CCG's
- Establish 3 User Voice Forums
- Survey of care leavers – 418 responses
- Partnership Seminars in 10 CCG areas
- Professional survey – 120 responses
- Reports

Our research

- 87% of people experienced feelings of low self esteem
- 79% of people experienced feelings of anxiety
- 76% of people experienced feeling depressed
- 78% of people experienced feelings of isolation
- Results did not change much from in care to after care

Why mental health deteriorates when you go into care? What our forums said!

- Lack of emotional bond / trust
- Multiple placement changes (feels like punishment)
- Not being listened to
- Build up guilt
- Saying I am better off without family
- Calling police to deal with behavioural issues (i.e. smashing a plate) Just made me want to be naughtier, made me angrier.
- Took advantage that staff weren't trained
- ABUSE – (phys, ment,emot)
- Post Code Lottery
- Emotions not seen as important – Emotionally handicap (no therapy)
- Mental abuse
- Not given chance to talk about it
- Wrong time to deal with it when help was offered (anger management issues)
- I opened up, they dismissed how I felt and palmed me off
- Counselling not regular enough

.

Why does mental health not improve when you leave care and live independently? What our forums said!

- No one cares
- Totally on your own
- All support disappears
- Moving about a lot services losing track
- Not given skills (practical, emotional etc)
- Had to wait months to be seen (mental health) I gave up
- Kept asking questions (wrong type of counselling)
- Couldn't relate to people because of care experience
- I had to take drastic actions before I saw someone / got help
- Therapy that doesn't work
- General mental health
- Never really leaves you (care experience)
- Public perception of looked after children/care leavers

2019 Health Review for GM Care Leavers

The Care Leavers' Association

What Harms

- Access to services
  - Waiting lists
  - Children to adults transition
  - Age cut offs
  - Missing appointments and being put at the back of queue
  - Getting to and attending appointments
  - Lack of understanding about issues faced by care leavers

- Mental Health support
  - Limited in some areas
  - Lack of understanding of trauma or ACE
  - Huge gap between childrens and adult service
  - Lack of early intervention
  - Lack of wellbeing support
  - Services treat symptoms and not cause
  - Limited therapy options

- Pregnancy services
  - Lack of understanding about care
  - Lack of support
  - Too much focus on child protection – fear of loosing baby

- Not enough interaction with social worker/PA

- Bad accommodation
  - Bad locations and quality
  - Not given priority – waiting lists
  - Difficult to fill in right forms
  - Not given budgeting/living skills
  - Universal credit difficult to navigate

- Having to travel distances to access services

- Addictions
  - Gambling

Express Yourself Project

Self Regulation - intricate skill is difficult to nurture in adulthood, as such adults who did not receive appropriate responsiveness to need and mirroring in infancy will struggle to self-regulate.

Co-dependency - children who receive less than good enough parenting the foundation for co-dependency is laid from birth; needs- emotional and physical can go unmet or are met infrequently and conditionally. This can often not only result in a tendency to recreate co-dependant relationships in adulthood but also but also cause the individual to disassociate from the unmet need

Disassociation - Adults who have spent their childhood experiencing their needs unmet and are unsupported through intense emotions learn to suppress them. Overtime this can lead to prolonged periods of stress response; toxic stress.

What change is needed

- **Protected characteristic**
  - Priority access to services up to 25
  - Fast track access to services
  - Less hoops to jump through

- **Better understanding of the care experience – training**
  - Understanding of trauma theory for all
  - Mental health training for PA's
  - Better understanding of issues faced by care leavers for all support services

The Care Leavers' Association

- **Consistent Support**
  - PA's and social workers limit change
  - Engagement with leaving care service at an earlier age
  - Seeing the same GP, mental health nurse etc

- **Financial support**
  - No council tax
  - Free prescriptions
  - Free travel
  - Benefit support

- **Specialist services**
  - GP
  - Mental health

- **Mental health**
  - Support should include wellbeing and coping issues
  - Trauma based
  - Need to be available
  - Not just in a crisis

Key Recommendations

The Care Leavers' Association

1. Early intervention is key. We need more understanding of the needs of care leavers to be incorporated into the childs time in care. Think ahead and address problems before they start.

2. Care leavers to be given priority access to health services. This should be extended wider to encompass services that can impact on health eg housing

3. There is a need for some specialist services. Mental health workers and sexual health workers could be based in leaving care teams. Current services could offer specific clinics for care leavers.

Key Recommendations

4. Make access and referral process to services easier. Include a health assessment as part of the pathway plan that is monitored and updated and shared.

5. Greater focus on trauma and better understanding of how it can affect a young persons life.

6. More interventions and support on emotional wellbeing and personal development– coping strategies and dealing with everyday life issues.

7. More social/creative/community interactions. Isolation can be so challenging.

The Care Leavers' Association

Wider key issues

- Mental health assessment upon entry to care
- Prevention
- Emotional health and wellbeing support during care
- The quality of care and relationships
- Stability
- Understanding behaviour
- Access to mental health services
- Access to adult services

The Care Leavers' Association

Health Project Reports

http://www.careleavers.com/what-we-do/health-project/

Project Report – recommendations

45 ways – working with professionals

Commissioning toolkit

Contact details

www.careleavers.com

david.graham@careleavers.com