



**Consumer
Focus**
Campaigning for a fair deal

Care leavers perspectives on public services

Exploring the drivers and barriers for care leavers using public services in England



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About Consumer Focus

Consumer Focus is the statutory consumer champion for England, Wales, Scotland and (for postal consumers) Northern Ireland.

We operate across the whole of the economy, persuading businesses, public services and policy-makers to put consumers at the heart of what they do.

Consumer Focus tackles the issues that matter to consumers, and aims to give people a stronger voice. We don't just draw attention to problems – we work with consumers and with a range of organisations to champion creative solutions that make a difference to consumers' lives.

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The full research report by Community Research is available at: <http://bit.ly/ndh9tf>

Introduction

Around 10,000 young people leave care every year in England. While these young people will have had a range of experiences of care, evidence shows that as a group they tend to be more vulnerable and more dependent on public services, than other young people.

During our research, Consumer Focus, with the National Care Advisory Service (NCAS), involved care leavers as experts in order to identify their key drivers and barriers when trying to access public services.

At first sight the findings are not unusual. Care leavers value the same drivers of customer service as other consumers. However, the findings reveal issues that are particularly important to care leavers. In particular how 'soft' customer service issues can become critical barriers for this group of service users.

Our report recommends a greater focus on improving customer service; delivering greater personalisation and support for care leavers; and providing greater consumer education before care leavers become independent.

We recommend that as Government embarks on a systematic review of public services to deliver greater choice and diversity of provision, it should review how changes in the character of provision might impact on some of the most vulnerable consumers.

Making the transition to living independently

Unlike the general population, where 24 is the average age for leaving home¹, young people often leave care and live independently before they are 18. Although local authorities (as corporate parents²) have a duty to continue to support care leavers, this support ends by age 21 if they are not in education or training. Most of these young people will not have family support to fall back on when these services cease and from 18 they are increasingly expected to manage independently and access multiple public services.

This transition can be more difficult than that of their peers if they do not have the support of their Corporate Parents, friends and family and do not know how to access the right support at the right time. This can be critical because care leavers are twice as likely not to be in employment, education or training, and four times more likely to have a mental health disorder than young people in the general population. They are more likely to be homeless, and children in care rank becoming homeless as one of their top 10 fears³.

¹ Barnados, *In Loco Parentis* (2010)

² A 'corporate parent' is the legal guardian for a child in care, normally their local authority

³ NCAS, *Journeys to Home* (2009) p.2



The role of public services

Care leavers need public services to support them as they learn to support themselves. Public services have a vital role to play in preventing issues from escalating into serious problems such as long-term unemployment and homelessness. The quality of their support can have a significant influence on the ease with which care leavers make the transition to adult life.

However, public services no longer operate independently from each other. Rather, there are multi-agency working arrangements and interlinked services that direct service users on to the next relevant service through signposting, referrals and raising awareness. While this brings greater opportunities to provide tailored responses it also means responsibility for service delivery can be fragmented which can have a negative impact on the service user.

Service providers have a responsibility to deliver services to vulnerable service users who are often some of the most reliant on public services.

Given this context, care leavers' ability to navigate their way through the public services landscape is a vital component in whether a care leaver gets the supports they need to make a successful transition to independent living.

Key findings of the research

Our panel found that care leavers have a very clear idea about what constitutes good and poor customer service. These findings are consistent with other studies on customer service among other groups in the general population⁴. Good customer service includes personalised support; being treated like an adult and with respect; clear explanations and information; being dealt with quickly; keeping promises and getting it right first time.

The findings also highlight the drivers and barriers that influence whether or not a care leaver decides to use a public service. Drivers support care leavers to use public services and include good-quality customer information, accessible opening times and friendly staff. Barriers stop care leavers from using services. These include poor-quality customer information, inaccessible locations and opening times, unreliable services and rude staff.

The research found that the way in which care leavers perceive and experience public services can create significant barriers that prevent them accessing essential support.

These perceptions include:

- the belief that services are not relevant to their situation
- a lack of awareness about how services are delivered
- a lack of trust in service providers to treat them with respect and respond to their needs
- the belief that services are bureaucratic and complex
- feeling reluctant and embarrassed to ask for help
- wanting to demonstrate independence and solve problems independently



⁴ Communities and Local Government, *Getting it right, righting the wrongs* (2009); NCC, *Playlist for Public Services*, (2005); Consumer Focus, *At the Centre* (2009)

Care leavers will accept poor service without challenge

In our research, care leavers had experiences of positive and responsive public services as well as inconsistent services with poor outcomes. Even though they want more reliable and personalised services, they tend to accept poor customer service and poor outcomes without challenge.

When discussing public services many care leavers displayed low levels of expectation. In general, public services were not expected to provide as good a level of service as private companies. Care leavers rarely talked of public services as the kinds of services where they would expect to receive good treatment or good outcomes.

Care leavers do not see themselves as customers, and do not challenge the poor quality customer service they expect public services to offer. They said that too often staff are unfriendly, systems are bureaucratic, and waiting times can be too long. These customer service issues create barriers to accessing vital services. There is a direct relationship between how a service is delivered and the way that care leavers feel about that service.

Where care leavers feel services are not relevant they will not engage with them. Some care leavers told us they would not contact the police service as they didn't feel it was relevant to them. This demonstrated the need for improved communication to make services more relevant, accessible and more approachable to care leavers so they can feel confident accessing services when they need them.

All service providers must ensure young people have a way of challenging poor quality service. These customer service issues can become significant barriers as care leavers dismiss a public service as unapproachable.

Young people value the personal relationships they form with members of staff in public services

We found that care leavers develop a reliance on a small number of key individual members of staff, usually their Personal Adviser⁵ or Connexions adviser. They valued these relationships because they are built on receiving reliable and consistent support.

When young people trust a public service a significant barrier is removed. It is important to care leavers that service providers treat them with respect, and they value friendly staff who give them reliable and consistent support.

This enables them to:

- know the relevance of particular services
- develop trusting relationships with service providers
- know how to access support
- be signposted to the right service

⁵ Personal Advisers, from within local authority Leaving Care Teams, support care leavers through their transition to independent living

Care leavers need consumer education on what services are available

Care leavers are poorly equipped to navigate their way through public services. Many lack the skills, knowledge and confidence to access the services they need.

Care leavers are not even confident that they know what is available to them from the services that they are familiar with. They recognise that they need to develop the skills for finding out what is available and how to access it. This was felt to be essential preparation for independent living when continuing personal support comes to an end.

Almost all care leavers believed that provision of this information should be the responsibility of the local authority. They did not think care leavers should be expected to find out about and negotiate public services alone. They said they should be provided with information at an early stage and certainly before the actual needs arise. They strongly backed the suggestion that they should receive information while still in care and at school.

However, care leavers also recognise that some onus should be placed on them to find the information they need to help build their confidence and develop their independence. A number of the young people interviewed were clear that a balance needed to be struck between spoon-feeding young people while at the same time ensuring that those leaving care are given sufficient help and information to access vital public services.

The breadth of possible needs among care leavers and the complexity of services on offer, means that consumer education lessons would need to be repeated, reinforced and delivered gradually over time for them to be successfully absorbed.

Information should be delivered through multiple channels

Delivering a personalised service can provide targeted and effective support to care leavers who want more information to help broaden their knowledge and understanding of public services. This will help reduce over-reliance on individual support workers by empowering care leavers to access and use new services themselves.

We found that care leavers wanted information to be delivered in a variety of ways to respond to the different ways in which they take in information. These could be through traditional printed media, such as leaflets; digital media, such as websites; social media, such as Facebook and specific online peer networks for care leavers; face-to-face contact; telephone services; and online instant messaging services.

Recommendations

Service providers must continue to implement the principles of personalisation in the delivery of services for care leavers.

Recommendation 1: Supporting open public services

Realising open public services for care leavers means delivering on personalisation and facilitating care leavers to demand, and make use of, greater choice and fairer access. Care leavers can be empowered to be active consumers of the services they need if they are given the right help at the right stage of their transition to independent living.

The Cabinet Office needs to ensure through the current Open Public Services Reform programme that the ‘take what you are given’ culture is no longer accepted by care leavers who instead should be empowered to demand the highest levels of service, confident in the knowledge services will treat them with respect and will respond to their needs.

Our research found implementing relatively simple principles of personalisation can help overcome many of the barriers care leavers face. These principles are not new and have been taking hold in public services but they need to spread more quickly and deeply in the current phase of service transformation. They should not be lost in the current spending cuts.

Greater choice in provision will only enable more personalised service delivery if care leavers and their support workers have the tools to tailor increasingly specific services to their needs. Care leavers must continue to receive high levels of personalised support across the board and efforts must be made to ensure its delivery becomes an accepted norm.

Recommendation 2: Delivering personalisation

Public service providers need to deliver the personalisation care leavers value to ensure they can access the support they need.

Care leavers told us they valued personalised support, developed over time to build trust. In our research said they wanted to see services which:

- Treated them as individuals
- Provided individually tailored support
- Delivered with respect and empathy
- Kept their promises and built trust into their relationships

Delivering good-quality customer service consistently to all customers should be the goal of every public service. However, earlier research by Consumer Focus shows that public services are often failing to do this⁶. The ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, adopted by so many public services, does not respond to an individual’s needs and this is particularly significant for care leavers.

⁶ Consumer Focus research on Jobcentre Plus and the Department for Work and Pensions Customer Charter found low customer satisfaction levels due to poor quality customer service (At the Centre, 2009; Making a Charter Work, 2010). NCAS research on care leavers’ experiences of Jobcentre Plus found the service difficult to navigate, with low levels of awareness of what was available, even among staff who delivered the service (ref to follow)

Individual public services should also provide specific support to young people leaving care in addition to that provided by local authority Leaving Care Teams. This should include having a named individual responsible for the delivery of services to care leavers.

These named individuals should have strong links to local Leaving Care Teams who are usually the first point of contact for care leavers when they want to access advice and information.

Many Leaving Care Teams already deliver that highly personalised support, which care leaver's value, through their Personal Advisers and Social Workers. Connexions was also signalled out as offering a responsive, personalised service.

Recommendation 3: Care leavers singled out three public services, and we make the following recommendations

- The Connexions service is a highly valued service that offers care leavers the personalised support they need, and on which many rely as they enter a difficult and changing labour market. Without this valued service care leavers will find it much more difficult to access other services they need. This service needs greater co-ordination to avoid being lost in short-term spending cuts
- Jobcentre Plus was identified as needing to improve the way it delivers its services. It also needs to offer a more personalised service. Jobcentre Plus should work more closely with local Leaving Care Teams and have named individuals take charge of how services are delivered to care leavers

- Jobcentre Plus has carried out successful pilots delivering greater personalisation to care leavers and there are more opportunities for tailored support through the web of employment support available. However, Jobcentre Plus still needs to ensure there is real personalisation based on engaging with care leavers to learn individuals needs and aspirations and not rely on what professionals think will work best
- The police need to address the fact that young people, and care leavers in particular, do not see the police as providing a service for them. Rather, they mistrust the police's enforcement role. The police must work with Leaving Care Teams to raise awareness of the role of the police in order to build trust and facilitate care leavers to recognise the police is a service they can turn to when in need

Recommendation 4: Local authorities need to ensure care leavers have a broad knowledge and understanding of local public services including what services are available, how to access these services and what to expect from them

Consumer education needs to be provided early, before a young person leaves care with key messages reinforced through multiple channels of communication. This should mean care leavers are less reliant on a single support worker.



Although care leavers value and rely on individual relationships within their care teams, they also want to develop the skills to do things on their own.

For example, as a national network offering free advice, Citizens Advice Bureaux can complement other formal sources of support and aid care leavers to develop their independence, by offering advice on non-care related issues, eg rental deposits or other consumer issues. However, their services were not well-known among care leavers, who felt Citizens Advice Bureaux could make their services better known to care leavers.

As corporate parents, local authorities are ultimately responsible for ensuring care leavers receive the preparation they need to move to independent living. This will include offering advice, support, information and raising awareness of the availability of services at a pace that is right for care leavers so they can experience a smooth transition. Local authorities as good corporate parents should, like any good parent, hold the hand of care leavers through difficult and uncertain times but they should also know when to empower care leavers so they can take on responsibility and help themselves as part of that progression to adulthood.

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