

Children Leaving Care in the United Kingdom: “Corporate Parenting” and Social Exclusion

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“We have a special responsibility to young people who are in care or who have left care. As their corporate parent we owe them a special duty. I am determined that young people living in and leaving care will in the future get the same support, as far as possible, as other young people who are living at home and leaving home. This means a home to live in or return to, a shoulder to cry on, encouragement with work or school or college, someone to take you out for a meal or out for a drink, someone to help you with a bit of cash when you need it, somewhere to get the washing done” (DH, 1999: 5).

Thus did Frank Dobson, the first Minister for Health in the Labour government that was elected to govern the United Kingdom in 1997, encapsulate the essence of the concept of “corporate parenting.” This concept was embodied in the measures that were introduced through the subsequent Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, which became part of UK social welfare law in November 2000 and was implemented by local authorities with effect from October 1, 2001. The Act is part of a wider reform program for personal social services in the UK and sits alongside the Care Standards Act 2000 and the “Quality Protects” initiative for children in need—especially those in care (DH, 1998a)—as part of a multi-faceted attempt to improve the quality of state child care. It is, of course, difficult for the state to replicate the

sort of flexibility that is described above. The ideal, however, is an important one and it is one of the animating ideas of recent policy with respect to children in care.¹

As might be expected, leaving care policy and practice differs markedly between different countries and cultures. Very little comparative research has been conducted, but what data is available suggests that the problems experienced in the UK are not unique; they are similar to those experienced in some other countries, such as the USA, Canada and Australia (Pinkerton, 2002). Considering UK developments, therefore, is likely to provide insights that are relevant to other countries. This article therefore seeks to analyze the new policy approach to care leavers that has emerged in recent years. However, before outlining the origins of this approach, it is important to clarify the policy framework within which leaving care support is provided in the United Kingdom. Firstly, although we have identified our focus as the UK, the article centers primarily on policy in England and Wales. This is because although most social policy for the constituent parts of the United Kingdom stems from UK central government, Scotland and Northern Ireland have different practices and legislation in this field. Indeed, Wales is also increasingly deserving of separate attention as the new Welsh Assembly forges different approaches to social care. That said, there is a great deal of influence between the different systems and a significant number of issues and policy responses remain UK-wide.

In the UK, local government has had responsibility for personal social services for both adults and children for many decades. Within local authorities, it is personal social services departments that have overall responsibility for children in care and care leavers in their local area. However, local government in the UK is not very powerful and the central government department with overall responsibility in this field, the Department of Health, determines the overall direction of policy. That policy is passed down to local authority social services departments for implementation and interpretation, with some remaining but limited room for discretion. In recent years, central government has increasingly sought to exert control over policy delivery and standards of service. Such control is ensured through a number of means. As well as shaping the content of parliamentary legislation, central government also determines the details of implementation through the issuing of regulations and guidance and the use of inspection and monitoring tools such as the Social Services Inspectorate and the Commission for Care Standards. Such bodies oversee delivery and quality on the ground and report back to central government.

Children in Care, Leaving Care, and Social Exclusion

Since 1997, the Labour government's social policy has made a priority of tackling *social exclusion*. A focus on such exclusion differs both from traditional class politics and from new right conceptions of the "underclass." In contrast to the former, it is not concerned to radically alter general social structure but examines exclusionary processes at the meso or micro level, rather than the macro level. In contrast to the latter, it avoids focusing on individual behavior and instead focuses

on structural issues and social processes. Its concern with the plight of specific marginalized groups in society is evident from Prime Minister Tony Blair's own definition of the concept:

There is a significant minority of people cut off, set apart from the mainstream of society. Their lives are often characterized by long-term unemployment, poverty or lack of educational opportunity, and at times family instability, drug abuse and crime. This problem has got worse, not better (Blair, 1996; 141).

Discussions of social exclusion have often focused on people with disabilities, low paid workers, homeless people and the long-term unemployed. However, it is easy to see that significant groups of children can be attached to any of these categories as well as being an area of concern in their own right. Following Labour's 1997 victory, the new government's "Social Exclusion Unit," based at the heart of government in Downing Street, focused considerable attention on children. Children in care and care leavers quickly became central to their reform agenda.

The congruence between the factors associated with exclusion—homelessness, joblessness, lack of educational qualifications, social isolation, poverty—and the leaving care experience for a significant number of young people is striking. One illustration of this linkage is that children in care are identified as an especially vulnerable group in each of the first three reports from the Social Exclusion Unit. The first of these reports pointed out that children in care are "ten times more likely" than average to be excluded from school (SEU, 1998a: 9). The second report, on rough sleeping, noted that "between a quarter and a third of rough sleepers have been looked after by local authorities as children" (SEU, 1998b: 5) and cited the early age of discharge and lack of support for care leavers as crucial factors. The third report, on teenage pregnancy, cited research suggesting that "a quarter of care leavers had a child by the age of sixteen, and nearly half were mothers within 18 to 24 months after leaving care" (SEU, 1999: 17).

Care leavers are a relatively small group of young people, currently about 8,000 each year (DH, 2000b: 57), who are disproportionately represented amongst figures for a range of social problems. Even before the Social Exclusion Unit reports, a ubiquitous set of statistics had begun to be widely quoted in official sources—despite many of them being rather vague estimates.² Amongst the best known of these statistics were that between 50 percent and 75 percent of care leavers had no academic qualifications (compared to 6 percent in the general population), that 50-80 percent of care leavers were unemployed (at a time when it was below 15 percent in the general population of the same age), that 23 percent of adult prisoners and 38 percent of young prisoners have been in care, that 30 percent of the young single homeless had a care background (Utting, 1997; SSI, 1997). Such figures paint a bleak picture, even when one remembers that young people will have entered care in the first instance because they were already experiencing significant difficulties and disadvantages. As with disabled people and others with multiple disadvantages, these young people represent a "sticking point" on the road to an economically and socially successful society. However, because they already live in the care of the state, they are particularly amenable to state action to

improve their circumstances and outcomes. A further reason for focusing policy attention on this group is that after falling from 62,000 in 1989 to 47,000 in 1994, the numbers of children in care (in England, at least) had risen to 59,700 by 2002 (DH, 2002: 1). The rise is accounted for chiefly by an increase in the use of foster care within families, while numbers in children's homes have continued to decline. By March 2002, 66 percent of looked after children in England were fostered while only 10 percent were in children's homes. The rest were in a variety of other placements, such as residential schools (DH, 2002: 6). That the overall figure still only represents 0.5 percent of the relevant age group (Sinclair and Gibbs, 2002: 123) serves to indicate the depths of the problems that the above statistics represent.

One of the most significant ways in which government has long sought to tackle to problems of the state child care system has been to promote the use of fostering and, increasingly in recent years, adoption. Fostering children within existing private families was seen as preferable to the risks of "institutionalization" in children's homes, even in the relatively small children's homes (usually no more than a dozen children) that now predominate in the UK and elsewhere.

Past United Kingdom Policy on Leaving Care

In the UK, policy under the 1989 Children Act was for children to leave care for independence between the ages of 16 and 18. Having to become "independent" at such a young age has been the single biggest problem affecting the leaving care process. It is, of course, a problem that is not specific to the United Kingdom. In Australia, children also leave care between the ages of 16 and 18. This is associated with the same problems seen in the UK, such as poor educational achievement, homelessness and high teenage pregnancy rates (Mauders *et al.*, 1999). Under the 1989 Act, for care leavers between the ages of 16 and 21 local authorities had a duty to "advise and befriend" and a power to "assist." Such "assistance" could be in kind (such as emergency accommodation) or, in exceptional circumstances, in cash (for example, expenses associated with employment or with training courses). The "assistance" could stretch to the age of 24 for education or training begun before the age of 21.

However, this superficially promising legislative theory turned out to be very different from local authority practice. As well as much discretion lying with local authorities with respect to defining the "needs" of young care leavers (and hence the appropriate responses), significant problems also arose from its context. Firstly, the early 1990s were a time of economic recession and consequent financial pressures on local authorities. They were also a period of high youth unemployment. Secondly, other legislation during the 1980s and 1990s, in such areas as housing and social security, reduced the levels of state support available to young people generally. The overall approach of the Conservative governments that were in power in the UK during the 1980s and most of the 1990s, with respect to young people in transition to adult lives, was to seek to increase the role and responsibilities of families and to reduce the role of the state. These objectives came into conflict when the State was, in effect, the parent. Young care leavers fell through

the cracks of this family-based model which, as a well-known writer on UK leaving care services puts it, “didn’t seem to apply to the corporate parent (i.e., the state) of young people leaving care” (Broad, 1998: 43).

From this less than promising background, a number of factors explain the development of the new approach embodied in the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. The three most important of these factors are: firstly, the development of a highly critical body of research on past leaving care policy and practice; secondly, gradual official recognition of the wider failure of the state child care system to produce good outcomes for children and young people; and, finally, as we have seen, the election in 1997 of a Labour government with a strong commitment to tackling “social exclusion.”

Much of the research conducted on this subject in the 1980s and 1990s had suggested that leaving care problems resulted less from the level and quality of care provided while children were looked after by the state (although this did vary significantly and was particularly problematic with respect to education) and more from the specifically inadequate arrangements for leaving care. This comes across in studies which focus on the views of care leavers themselves. Stein and Carey’s early (1986) study of leaving care, an in-depth, qualitative analysis of the lives of 45 care leavers in the north of England, painted a compelling picture of their experience of a range of problems—loneliness, isolation, family relationship difficulties, poverty, lack of preparation for independence, and lack of educational qualifications or employment. The most emphatic of their conclusions was a rejection of the then-prevailing consensus amongst policy-makers that independence at the age of eighteen was either achievable or desirable. This sensible and somewhat obvious point was echoed in later studies (e.g., Biehal *et al.*, 1995) and buttressed by what we know about what is happening with the non-care population of young people. The UK government itself noted that 22 was now the average age of leaving home in the wider population (DH, 1998b: 24). Other estimates confirm that the early to mid-twenties are now the typical age at which young people in the UK leave the family home (Coleman and Schofield, 2001: 11). Also, most of these young people will have the option of going home at various points in times of need. Helen Jones, in an important study of the process of leaving home in the UK, has argued that this option of going “home” for periods has become increasingly used and that “more recognition is needed that leaving home is a process and not necessarily a one-off event: returning home should be seen as part of the process” (Jones, 1995: 149). Such a gradual transition process was not possible for those leaving the care system; their bed or place would quickly be taken by another child. Moreover, we know that many young people leave home even later in other countries. In Spain, for example, one study calculated the mean age of leaving care as 24 for men and 23 for women, two years higher than the respective mean ages in the United Kingdom (Holdsworth, 2000: 206). Since Stein and Carey, the field of leaving care research in the UK has mushroomed and most of the research has served to reinforce the early findings (cf especially Stone, 1990; Biehal, *et al.*, 1995; and Broad, 1998).

Partly as a result of such research, both elected and non-elected policy-makers gradually became cognizant of widespread policy failure. The Department of

Health began to recognize the growing consensus on the need for action and official investigations (Utting, 1997: 91-93; SSI, 1997) also found that: (1) post-care contact was often left to young people to initiate or maintain; (2) most young people were ill informed about available post-care support; (3) few young people had formal care plans; and (4) most local authorities found it difficult to keep track of 18-21 year olds.

The outcome of such findings was a growing acceptance of the view that young people should be more effectively involved in the development of leaving care policy, that there should be one contact point or link person with social services that individual plans for young people should have realistic targets and that contact should be more systematically maintained.

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000

The reforming agenda of the new government built on this analysis to provide a strong momentum towards an improved policy approach for care leavers. This bore fruit three years later, with the passage of the Children (Leaving Care) Act. Whilst the Act did not go as far as some activists would have wished, it did ensure that local authorities would remain directly responsible for the welfare of their post-16 care leavers until at least the age of 18. They would no longer be able to shuffle off their caring and financial responsibilities before this age. It also ensured greater mandatory support between the ages of 18 and 21.

Although the Act applies overwhelmingly to England and Wales, an exception to this is the provisions with respect to exclusion from financial (social security) benefits between the ages of 16 and 18, which also apply to Scotland. This exception was designed to prevent young people from choosing or being encouraged by local authorities to cross the Scottish/English border in order to claim benefits from the state, thus evading the new local authority financial responsibility for young care leavers between the ages of 16 and 18. Broadly speaking, there are two groups of young people who are covered by the new legislation. Firstly, there are children aged 16 or 17 who either remain in care or who have already left. Secondly, there are those between the ages of 18 and 21 who were in care. Needless to say, the former group is entitled to much more help than the latter (cf Goddard, 2001). The help available to young people has been changed in a number of different ways. These are considered under three categories; benefits, assessment and planning; and the role of Personal Advisers.

State Welfare Benefits

One of the most significant developments was the removal of entitlement to central government financial benefits for children who leave care aged 16 or 17. This was designed to remove what was claimed to be a "perverse financial incentive" for local authorities to assist young people in leaving the care system as early as possible upon reaching 16. At this point, such young people became eligible to claim central government social security benefits and, if they left care, ceased to be a financial burden to the authority. This system was clearly problematic. While the

government's own Children Act report had cautiously argued that "the increasing trend to discharge young people early from "voluntary care" may reflect cost saving measures by authorities" (DH, 2000b: 61), the figures alone were disturbing. For 16-18 year olds, the percentages leaving care aged 16 rose from 33 percent to 44 percent between 1993 and 1998 (DH, 1999: 12). The UK parliament's House of Commons Health Select Committee was convinced by the evidence of academics and young people of "young people being put under pressure to leave care and live independently before they are fully equipped with the skills and self-confidence to do so" and of "informal practices and formal policies," which lead to such pressure (HCSHC, 1998).

Under the new Act, financial support for such children remains the responsibility of the local authority during this time (with some exceptions, such as lone parents or young people with disabilities). These young people now only become eligible for mainstream social security benefits at the age of 18. Whilst local authorities are given some flexibility with respect to how they interpret this financial responsibility, the level of support is supposed to be "well above the level which would have been supplied through the benefits system" (DH, 2001: 63). In short, regardless of where or how these young people are living, the local authority from which the left care remains responsible for their living and accommodation expenses up to the age of 18.

Needs Assessments and Pathway Plans

The Act also introduced a new duty to assess the needs of future care leavers when they reach their 16th birthday. This assessment was designed to aid the leaving care planning process. It determines the form and levels of advice, assistance and support that young people require—both while they remain looked after and afterwards—and forms the basis of a "Pathway Plan" for the transition to independence. This assessment is based on input from the young person, their doctor, their school and various other interested parties. It is required to address such issues as the health and development of the young person, their education, training and employment needs, their existing available external support (such as from family members), their financial needs, their independence skills and their accommodation needs (DH, 2001: 31).

The subsequent Pathway Plan, which runs up until the age of 21 at least (beyond, if there are educational or training needs) identifies the local authority role in meeting needs up to that age. However, local authorities are only supposed to have a role where this is appropriate and necessary. It may be, for example, that family members of the young person will be able to provide support in various forms. The role of the local authority therefore becomes making sure that all the gaps in the care and support needs of these young people are filled. These plans need to deal with such matters as the young person's support network, their education, training and employment needs, their family and social relationships, the necessary levels of financial support and their health needs. It also needs to make some provision for contingencies.

The provision of support beyond the age of 21 for agreed education or training includes, up to the age of 24, the provision of (or support for) vacation accommodation for those who need it. Over time, this may become a very important provision. Separate initiatives to improve the education of looked after children (cf Goddard, 2000; Jackson *et al.*, 2003) will hopefully lead to increasing numbers of care leavers going on to university-level education in the UK. Accommodation and other support through that process—difficult enough for young people not from the care system—will be important for them to successfully complete such education.

Also, these plans have to be reviewed at least every six months. This allows for the effective rewriting of plans as the young person's needs develop (if, for example, they do well at further education and wish to go on to higher education). Importantly, such a mandatory review process also forces local authorities to make regular efforts to not only keep in touch with but also to meet with young people and discuss their ongoing needs. In the past, large numbers of care leavers have simply "disappeared" from social services sight within a few weeks or months of leaving care at 16, 17, or 18. Studies of care leavers (e.g., Stein, 1986; Lynes and Goddard, 1995) have shown that many care leavers felt an acute and personal sense of abandonment by local authorities at this transition stage in their lives and would have welcomed an ongoing relationship.

Personal Advisers

The introduction of "Personal Advisers" for all care leavers between the ages of 16 and 21 provides an identifiable contact point with social services departments and others who have looked after these young people. These new positions, generally expected to be occupied by people with a relevant and experienced background in social work, teaching or youth work, provide something of a personal "safety net" for young people. Such advisers have a primary role in keeping in touch care leavers and, if contact is lost, must take "reasonable steps" re-establish it. However, although these advisers are the principal point of contact on the Pathway Plan, their role is likely to vary considerably in light of the different circumstances and support networks of the young person concerned.

The role of these advisers overlaps, to some degree, with the Connexions service, which began to be phased in for all young people aged 13-19 in England from April 2001. Connexions Advisers are intended to provide support on careers and other transitional issues for young people and are part of the wider agenda for tackling social exclusion amongst young people more generally. Looked after children have access to these advisers on the same basis as other children from 13 onwards and their Connexions Adviser may even be the same person as their leaving care adviser from the age of 16 onwards.

Corporate Parenting

Prior to the 2000 Act, the concept of parenting that was used by local authorities was set out in the 1989 Children Act. This Act was a major piece of legislation which drew together most child welfare issues and continues to determine much

child welfare policy in England and Wales, outside of those issues that are dealt with through family law (such as divorce), youth justice and the education system. With respect to “parental responsibility,” the 1989 Act is necessarily vague.

The Act uses the phrase “parental responsibility” to sum up the collection of duties, rights and authority which a parent has in respect of his child. That choice of words emphasizes that the duty to care for the child and to raise him to moral, physical and emotional health is the fundamental task of parenthood and the only justification for the authority it confers (DH, 1989: 1).

Since that time, many policy activists and researchers in this field had been critical of the minimalist interpretation of this responsibility by local authorities that we have already noted. The complexities of the new policy approach are best understood if one keeps in mind the government’s repeated reference to the central concept of “corporate parenting.” The use of the concept in this context refers to the attempt to replicate the actions of “good parents.” One can see this in the “Needs Assessment,” for example. This assessment fulfils the same function as the discussions about the future that many parents engage in with their children prior them beginning post-compulsory education.

In the UK, such education begins at the age of 16, when approximately 68 percent of all children will move on to post-compulsory education within their existing school or at a local further education college. This figure contrasts with approximately 18 percent of looked after children making the same move (Jackson *et al.*, 2003: 8). The Needs Assessment and subsequent Pathway Plan are partly designed to bridge this gap by focusing extra attention on the long-term needs of these young people at this critical age. Similarly, the changes to the financial benefit system for 16-18 year olds are an attempt to preserve the parental purse strings in the way that they are maintained for most young people of that age. Other attempts to replicate supportive parenting patterns include the regular contact from the personal adviser up to the age of 21, the potential for support with training and the requirement to provide support with accommodation during university vacations.

This expansion of the state’s direct parenting responsibilities has raised concerns that the individual rights of young people may be undermined by such paternalism. There have been some misgivings, for example, about the removal of social security benefits for most care leavers between the ages of 16 and 18 (Calder, 2000: 11-13) and with the civil rights implications of the duty of local authorities to keep in touch with young people after the age of 18 (Hansard, 2000). However, most commentators have seen the needs of these young people for ongoing support as sufficiently strong to outweigh such concerns.

There certainly is potential conflict in this field between a rights-based approach to the relationship between the state and adolescents and the explicitly paternalistic model favored in the Act. However, in support of the latter one can argue that the reason for past failure on leaving care is that a rights-based approach is inappropriate for this group of young people. Indeed, just as important as the level of financial support available during the 16-18 age range is the element of compulsion involved. Just as we would commonly regard parents who cut off their ties to their offspring at such a young age—even if that is what the young person

requests—as irresponsible, so we can justifiably view local authorities in the same way. Hence the new compulsion on local authorities and young people to maintain their relationship with each other until at least age 18 and on local authorities to go on doing this beyond 18.

Education and Leaving Care

Alongside the leaving care developments, there have been a range of other measures concerned with improving services and outcomes for children in care. Many of these have been promoted as part of what is called the "Quality Protects" initiative. This initiative provides extra money to local authorities to achieving performance improvements in specific areas. It incorporates a wide range of objectives, such as reducing disruption to the lives of children in care and ensuring that they get proper health care and educational support (cf Fawcett *et al.*, 2004). The most relevant feature of this initiative, with respect to leaving care, are the measures that have been introduced in relation to education.

By the late 1990s, there was a widespread acceptance that educational disaffection and low achievement levels were major problems within the care system (Goddard, 2000; HCEESC, 1998; HCHSC,). A consensus on the need to address this problem resulted in detailed official guidance on the subject (DHDEE, 2000). This guidance focused on both raising the priority of educational achievement for looked after children and on improving cooperation between social services departments and local schools.

It provided for the appointment of designated teachers within schools to ensure action for looked after children; for example, ensuring that each child would have a mandatory Personal Education Plan. It also prioritized educational continuity during placement moves by placing time limits on educational gaps that might occur around such moves. A significant number of children in care, especially those in foster care, experience frequent moves. Long periods of time between schooling have often accompanied such moves. These changes were designed to achieve, in the first instance, what some regarded as a woefully unambitious target on the part of the Department of Health. Local authorities were instructed to achieve the following: to improve the educational attainment of children looked after, by increasing to at least 50 percent by 2001 the proportion of children leaving care at 16 or later with a GCSE or GNVQ qualification; and to 75 percent by 2003³ (DH, 2000c: 51).

In response to the valid criticism from many quarters that one GCSE was virtually useless in the UK employment and education markets, a further target was introduced: to increase to 15 percent by 2003/2004 the proportion of care leavers aged over 16 with 5 GCSEs grades A-C (DH, 2003).

Even this target is low, since 50 percent of UK school children already leave with five or more GCSEs at this age (Jackson *et al.*, 2003). It is, however, indicative of the very low educational achievement base from which current policy proceeds.

The Impact of the Policy Reforms

It is too soon yet to assess the lasting impact of the Labour government's reforms with respect to leaving care, although there are ongoing research projects on various aspects of the reforms. However, there are some useful indicators of their initial impact. On the education front, progress has been slow. The low performance targets were not met by local authorities. The percentage of children leaving care with one GCSE or GNVQ rose through 2000 to 2002 from 31 percent to 41 percent. This meant that there was virtually no hope of reaching the 2003 target of 75 percent. The figures for children achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A-C fared even worse; the numbers merely rose from 4 percent in 2000 to 5 percent in 2002 (DH, 2003b).

With no prospect at all of hitting the original targets, the government adopted the time-honored political strategy of changing the targets. The new targets are for 90 percent of care leavers to have sat (not necessarily passed) a GCSE exam by 2006 and for 15 percent to pass 5 or more GCSEs by 2006. The government also instituted an investigation into the subject by its own Social Exclusion Unit, which will feed into the future policy. This depressing downscaling of the government's ambitions in this area has significant implications, of course, for the numbers of care leavers who may go on to university in future years. No reliable figures are available on the present numbers at university, but all estimates suggest that it still remains extremely low (Jackson *et al.*, 2003).

On leaving care support, there is more hopeful evidence. The government had also introduced performance measures in this area, such as keeping in touch with young people after they leave care and the percentages in training, employment or education. One target that they provided for local authorities concerned the level of employment, education or training of care leavers aged 19 in 2001/2002 who had been in care on their 17th birthday. This was supposed to reach at least 60 percent of the comparable level for young people in the local area, rising to 75 percent by 2003/2004. The first measures in this area found that 46 percent of care leavers met the criteria of being in education, employment or training in 2002. This compares to 86 percent of their non-care peers (DH, 2003). In short, local authorities are not meeting the target. However, they are much closer than in the case of educational qualifications. Also, the figure varies from authority to authority (depending on, for example, local employment rates) and 38 percent of authorities were actually meeting the 60 percent target. On the other hand, it is difficult to assess the meaning of this figure since it is the first time that such data has been available. It may, for example, reflect a realistically low initial target. It may also reflect the general good performance of the UK economy in recent years and the consequent significant fall in youth unemployment.

Alongside this, measures were also introduced to assess how well local authorities were doing in keeping in touch with care leavers aged 19. In 2002, councils remained in touch with 75 percent of care leavers on or near their 19th birthday. This might seem a small achievement, but given what we know from past research about how quickly young people disappear from local authority sight, it represents significant progress.

Conclusions

After well over a decade of depressing research findings and increasing governmental acceptance of the seriousness of the problems in this field, there has been a distinct heightening of attention on care leavers in the UK. Recent initiatives have been widely welcomed by activists and social care professionals as a long-overdue attempt to tackle the manifest shortcomings of previous policy and practice. These developments were not, however, inevitable. Their introduction was prompted by the election of a Labour government in 1997 after 18 years of Conservative rule. This new government had a strong social reform agenda with respect to social exclusion and care leavers were quickly seen to occupy a central location in any attempt to tackle social exclusion amongst young people.

Whether the changes introduced will prove to be part of a successful long-term solution to some of the main problems of care leavers remains in some doubt at this point in time. The focus on education is bearing results, but slower than anticipated. The focus on maintaining contact and support is showing more apparent success, but the actual content of such support and contact will vary tremendously. One of the main successes in this area is that such data is being collected at all; at least now we have a realistic picture of care leaving in the UK. On the other hand, the central problem of leaving care for independence too early persists; though the worst features of young people leaving care for independence at 16 should be reduced. The age of 18 very extremely young to be leaving home, even for those with supportive families. Even if the new support systems work properly, most care leavers will continue to find their start to adult life much more difficult than their non-care peers.

The slow progress in the educational field may turn out to be indicative of wider problems of implementation by local authorities with respect to the government's ambitious objectives. This sort of problem has a long history in the difficult relationship between central and local government in the UK. It suggests that the legislation may not be implemented fully and consistently. This was a problem in relation to the 1989 Children Act and there is no reason to believe that local authorities have become more effective at responding to the enthusiasms of central government. It is precisely because of such problems that central government has resorted to setting explicit targets. Such targets are indicative of a general lack of trust between central and local government in the UK in recent years. Local authorities are under more pressure to perform in this field than they have been before, but such improved performance as we have seen looks likely to last only as long as central government keeps applying such pressure. To its credit, central government has done so thus far.

Notes

1 "Looked after children" is now the official, governmental term used to describe children in the United Kingdom who are cared for by local authorities and voluntary child welfare organiza-

tions under the approval of the state. Such children used to be most commonly referred to as "children in care" and that term is still widely used. It is also the term more commonly under-

stood by international audiences. Hence my preference for using it throughout this article.

- 2 The lack of hard data about this group, in the UK and in other countries, is indicative of the low priority given to their welfare (Pinkerton, 2002).
- 3 For school children in England and Wales, the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is the basic educational qualification at the end of compulsory schooling. It is given for

individual subjects (such as history, mathematics or geography). Therefore, as well as through grades (A to E, with A being the highest), performance is also assessed on the basis of the number of GCSEs that a child has acquired. General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) are more vocationally-oriented, rather than academically-oriented, qualifications.

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