

Q&A for leaving care services

New report: *What could make the difference? Care leavers and the welfare benefits system*

On Tuesday 23 March 2010, the National Care Advisory Service (NCAS) released the report 'What could make the difference? - care leavers and the welfare benefits system'.

What is the report about?

This report looks at the difficulties that care leavers have around benefits and how the benefits system can be amended to better meet the needs of young people in the transition from care.

What are the difficulties young people leaving care and those that support them face with the benefits system?

Young people in care are likely to leave home younger, and have more abrupt transitions to adulthood, than their peers. Most other young people remain in their family home and do not claim benefits at 18, especially if they are in further education. Yet the current system compels care leavers to. Many are expected to live independently and manage their own income and household, as soon as they reach legal adulthood, or to claim housing benefit to part fund continuing placements with former foster carers.

Moreover, our report has found a number of factors that make it more difficult for care leavers to enter employment training and education and secure suitable accommodation - key targets for local authority work with care leavers. This includes:

- Difficult claims processes, which often result in delays in payments and gaps in income for care leavers
- Misinformation from benefits officers about entitlements because of a lack of knowledge about the specific rules that apply to care leavers
- Care leavers being unable to enhance their employability through work experience, training or further education as they cannot access benefits and undertake these activities; and
- Difficulties with the system of local housing allowance.

How should these difficulties be addressed?

In the report we have outlined three sets of proposals:

- 1.) Changing the system** - An overarching recommendation about avoiding care leavers entering the benefits system in the first place.
- 2.) Immediate improvements** - Our second set of proposals are about 'ironing out the creases' in the current system, by making it easier to navigate for care leavers and those that support them.
- 3.) Amending regulations** - Finally we are proposing areas where the benefits system should be amended to better support care leavers, in recognition of the particular difficulties that this group face, poor education and housing outcomes.

What are the specific recommendations?

With this report NCAS are calling on the government to amend arrangements so that local authorities as corporate parents continue to offer financial support to young people who are in further education, instead of pushing them onto benefits, and, to fund this, arrange for a financial transfer from benefits budgets to local authority children's services. This would ensure that the up to 5,000 care leavers in England in further education are supported by their corporate parent in the same way that their peers are supported by their families.

The above recommendation will remove a significant number of the issues with accessing benefits for care leavers. However, some young people from care will still need to access benefits. NCAS are therefore calling for a number of 'tweaks' to the system to ensure better joint working between leaving care services and Jobcentre plus and benefits offices, to ensure better and more seamless support for care leavers. This includes:

- Named contacts in all services to help process claims more speedily and accompanying guidance for how these services can work together from the DCSF and DWP
- Training for these named contacts to overcome a lack of understanding of benefits entitlements
- Recognition of leaving care services running employability schemes for care leavers as 'partner providers' by Jobcentre plus so that those who engage in these can improve their readiness for work while continuing to receive benefits
- Easy to read guide on entitlements for care leavers;
- Facilitating direct payments of the local housing allowance to landlords to avoid that these vulnerable young people end up in rent arrears and risk eviction when they cannot manage their rent payments.

Why focus on young people in further education?

The proposal of giving financial responsibility for care leavers in further education to their corporate parent would 'level the playing field', by placing them in the same position as other young people who would not claim benefits if living with their parents. We would propose that the interpretation of further education is taken broadly to include a range of qualifications up to A-level equivalent. Some young people would be starting from a low base as they may not have any formal qualifications, whereas others would be undertaking courses to prepare them for university.

Those who are not in education, training or employment would go through the traditional benefits route, but could, through local authorities as Jobcentre plus partner providers, be supported to engage with education training and employment by services that cater to, and understand, their needs.

Won't this add to the administrative burden of leaving care services?

Children's services leaving care teams are often compensating for the shortcomings in the benefits system by picking up the cost of delays, e.g. supporting young people financially whilst they are waiting for their benefit claims to be processed. Much valuable staff time is also used to advocate and support young people with their benefit claims, which can then be redirected to other activities.

Would this proposal cost more money for local authorities?

Achieving this long term goal requires cross departmental budgets to be reapportioned via a reclaim mechanism to ensure that local authorities can support care leavers to remain out of the benefits system. We do not envisage that this change would need additional investment as the allowances remain the same. The significant difference is that young people would get their financial support via their corporate parent, who already supports them through the pathway planning process and can use this to respond to the needs and aspirations of the young person.

What types of schemes that leaving care services run would you like to see recognised by Jobcentre plus?

One local authority offers a four week work placement project with local employers. The local Jobcentre will not allow a young person to claim benefits if they are working over 16 hours. Yet the local employers involved in the scheme stress that, due to their work patterns, working over this time allowance would help to develop a wider range of skills in the young people they are working with. The local authority would like the Jobcentre as a partnership scheme that young people could engage with to improve their employability and allow the young people engaged in this scheme to continue to claim benefits.

Did you find good practice in this area that local authorities can learn from already?

In the report there are several examples of positive joint working between leaving care services and Jobcentre plus and benefits offices. There is currently a pilot scheme in the West Midlands to make it easier for care leavers to apply for benefits prior to their 18th birthday, and to establish a named contact in Jobcentre plus. The report supports this scheme being rolled out across the country and encourages local authorities to negotiate with their local Jobcentre plus/benefits offices to establish similar arrangements. Further details are available in the report and by contacting gerard.murphy@jobcentreplus.gsi.gov.uk or mandy.smith@gowm.gsi.gov.uk.

The report also highlights arrangements in Devon for channelling housing benefit payments for young people through the local authority. Further details are available in the report, in NCAS online practice database: www.leavingcare.org/data/tmp/5988-12604.pdf and by contacting ian.stewart-watson@devon.gov.uk.

As part of the total place pilot, Bradford leaving care services have been exploring how budgets can be used more flexibly to support care leavers who are not in education and employment. For further details contact: vaughan.chapman@bradford.gov.uk.

What have you based your findings and recommendation on?

This report derives from a seminar with civil servants and practitioners in leaving care and benefits experts in April 2009 that looked at care leavers' benefits issues and how to address them. Prior to the seminar NCAS conducted a scoping exercise that pulled together evidence from: recent research; issues reported to the NCAS advice service; feedback from young people through the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Participation forum; and information from local authority leaving care services. The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, coordinated by NCAS provided information both from a facilitated discussion around the issues and written comments and examples from individual services. Similarly, the London leaving care manager's forum provided a joint response around the issues.

What next - what are you going to do with the recommendations from the report?

In the coming months we will be working with partners in the voluntary sector, young people and local authorities to secure the above vital changes to the welfare benefits system for young people leaving care.

Want to find out more?

To access the full report and executive summary go to: www.leavingcare.org/news/185/ or contact ncas@catch-22.org.uk