Children in care
Policy and practice
Supporting looked-after children and young people to fulfil their potential amid increasing pressure and policy reform
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INTRODUCTION

Grounds for optimism despite a care system under pressure

The number of children entering the care system in England has reached record levels. Whatever the factors behind this stark fact – increased family breakdown, cuts to early help services, a “risk-averse” culture in children’s social care – the system is under pressure as never before.

Despite this challenging (if somewhat bleak) backdrop, at least a couple of developments in the past year have shown the wellbeing of looked-after children, and the professionals and systems that provide their care and nurture, in a more positive, optimistic light.

First, a landmark study just under 12 months ago, The Educational Progress of Looked-After Children, blew apart the prevailing simplistic assumption that because the attainment of children in care is much poorer than that of children not in care, the system is letting them down. Indeed, the study showed those who have been in care for a considerable period of time do better than children in need who are not in care. It is the early circumstances and trauma that led them to enter care that has more likely let them down than the experience of being in care.

The second development was Sir Martin Narey’s review of children’s residential care. The Narey report discovered a sector that is often providing inspirational care and support to some of society’s most damaged and vulnerable children, thus challenging the very perception of children’s homes as an “anachronism” to be an anachronism in itself.

Nonetheless, there is considerable room for improvement in commissioning placements, and in the quality of care children receive, whatever the type of placement. Reforms across the sector are either under way or under discussion.

Our annual Children in Care supplement aims to lay bare the pressing challenges across the commissioning landscape, in foster care, residential care, and indeed the support young people receive when leaving care. It also aims to shine the spotlight on examples of innovative practice – of good ideas that are being executed to good effect.

I hope you find this supplement to be a useful resource in supporting you in the vital work you do.

Ravi Chandiramani
Editor-in-chief, Children & Young People Now
Every child is unique, and so is every foster carer and children’s home. Children in care need to be with people who can meet their individual needs, but finding the right placement can be hard.

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The user-friendly website is already the main matching tool in the UK for adoption, used by nearly every local authority and independent agency. The new commissioning platform has been recommended to all authorities and providers, and to the government, by Sir Martin Narey. His recent review of residential care highlights the inefficiencies and poor intelligence in current commissioning practice, and how Link Maker can change this.

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WHY ARE CARE APPLICATIONS SOARING AND HOW CAN A ‘CRISIS’ BE Averted?

The children’s care system in England is on the verge of a “crisis” due to a record-breaking rise in applications this year, according to the country’s most senior family law judge. Sir James Munby, president of the High Court’s Family Division, made the stark warning in September, shortly after figures revealed a leap of 34 per cent in care applications. This rise from 941 in August 2015 to 1,258 in August 2016, recorded by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), represents the largest ever month-on-month increase in care applications since it started central collection of the figures in 2012.

Already 2016/17 is on course for registering the highest annual level of applications on record, surpassing last year’s tally of 12,781. There were 7,438 applications in the first six months of 2016/17 (April to September), up 23 per cent on the 6,044 recorded during the corresponding six months last year.

In delivering his warning, Munby condemned the lack of a “clear strategy for meeting the crisis” and said that unless action is taken, the legal system would struggle to cope and the legal aid bill would soar. He called for greater early intervention work to keep families together where possible and avoid cases coming to court.

Among projects he is keen to see expanded is the Pause Project, which looks to prevent repeat removals among mothers who have had children previously taken into care. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Cafcass share Munby’s concerns. During the summer they announced a joint initiative to find ways to stem the rise in applications.

Cafcass chief executive Anthony Douglas says they also want to see an expansion of “small and significant programmes” that target support at families in crisis. He says that “settlement conferences, which are trying to achieve early resolution rather than protracted legal disputes”, are also being considered for expansion, as are kinship arrangements.

“There are some parts of the country where exploring kinship arrangements happens routinely but in others care proceedings are issued far more quickly. Once a case comes to court it can be harder to find other solutions within the family,” Douglas adds.

The care system is also seeing higher numbers of older children coming into care, with 13,870 aged 10 years or above becoming looked after in 2015, compared with 12,120 in 2013.

Douglas says a heightened focus among councils on child sexual exploitation is a factor in this rise. He adds: “Five years ago there was more likelihood of adolescents drifting and not receiving high enough priority. What CSE has done is bring around a greater focus on adolescents.”

With the increase in care applications showing no signs of slowing, Cafcass and the MoJ’s work to promote better pre-proceeding work will be crucial if Munby’s predicted crisis is to be averted.

IN A GOOD PLACE

As the number of children in care reaches record levels, Joe Lepper examines the challenge for commissioners to provide children with stable, happy homes that cater to their needs

Securing suitable placements that meet the needs of children and young people is critical to the “care” system living up to its name. However, the shortcomings within the system in coping with England’s rising looked-after children population have come into sharp focus this year.

Ofsted’s latest annual review of social care found that only half of local authorities have a good understanding of how their local market can meet children’s complex and diverse needs. This is leaving many local authorities resorting to panic spot purchasing rather than “proactively approaching providers and commissioning placements that are right for the children they look after,” says Ofsted. The effect on children can be devastating, with poor commissioning leading to unnecessary moves through placement breakdowns.

Residential care commissioning has come in for particular criticism, since it is still often regarded as a last resort rather than considered earlier in a child’s time in care. This was one of the key themes addressed in Sir Martin Narey’s government-ordered review of children’s residential care in England.

Narey’s review, which reported in July, also questions how well council commissioners are securing value for money. He cites Oxford Brookes University research that found weekly per child prices ranged markedly from £1,900 to £9,325.

Andy Elvin, chief executive of fostering

CAFCASS CARE APPLICATION DEMAND

![Graph showing care application demand from 2012/13 to 2016/17](source: Cafcass)
and adoption charity The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT), says that children’s care commissioning is often treated by councils as merely another service to procure, under tendering rules that “are the same for everything, from bin collection to children’s care placements”. Short termism in council funding is also a huge stumbling block to effective commissioning, adds Elvin. Year-on-year funding allocations from central government “mitigate against making good decisions for children”, he says. “For example, if you are overspending in December and the specialist placement you want for a child is going to blow the budget further, then a council may hold the child in a placement that costs less but is unsuitable.”

Regional collaboration
Narey’s review urges more regional collaboration in order to improve commissioners’ ability to pinpoint the best placement for each child.

National Children’s Bureau (NCB) director of external affairs Enver Solomon says this is particularly the case for highly specialist placements. As an example of such poor planning, he cites a recent conversation with two council commissioners “who had really struggled to commission places for two young men, who were victims of sexual exploitation but also displayed sexualised behaviour that meant they couldn’t be with young women”.

Kevin Gallagher, managing director at Amberleigh Care, a provider of such specialist placements for boys, says this example comes as no surprise. He backs calls for better information sharing of specialist care “because they are low-volume and highly complex, so not widely available”.

Charlotte Ramsden, chair of the Association of Directors of Children Services’ health, care and additional needs committee, and director of children’s services at Salford City Council, says local authorities are getting better at sharing such information but “there is definitely more to do”.

Regional commissioning can also help councils save money, through block purchasing agreements where providers offer discounts, Narey’s review highlights.

The Department for Education’s policy paper on children’s social care, Putting Children First, has pledged to use money from the children’s social care innovation programme to fund pilots of large-scale regional commissioning. A DfE spokesman says that further details around this will be released “in due course”.

Existing examples of effective regional commissioning are thin on the ground though. Narey points to a therapeutic residential care partnership between provider Keys Care and six councils: Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Hertfordshire, Milton Keynes, Bracknell Forest and Reading.

This was awarded to Keys in 2010 on an initial five-year arrangement and since extended for a further three years. This £25m contract sees Keys provide the councils with a specialist school plus 20 children’s residential care places across six homes. Each council has an allocation, which can be traded with the other five depending on changing demand. It relies on the continued commitment and co-operation of all six authorities – if one leaves, the partnership is dissolved. The provider is assured they will be paid for their beds at all times so is able to offer better rates per place.

Buckinghamshire, which co-ordinates the project, estimates the cost of each Keys placement at around £1,300 less than the £4,300 cost of spot purchasing. Each year, the deal saves the six authorities a combined £1.4m.

Simon Brown, project lead and head of children’s care services at Buckinghamshire County Council, says: “With the Keys project there is no additional costs for us. If the child has additional needs, Keys meet those and cannot charge us extra.” While the arrangement is saving the councils money, Brown says the main benefit is the improved care it provides for children.

He says that while they had anticipated the specialist school would be full, they have found the care and support provided by the homes has enabled many of the children to thrive in their mainstream schools.

Action on reducing missing from care incidents has also impressed Brown. The homes have a strong focus on working with children who run away, to assess the reasons behind such incidents, and work with police to ensure they are returned swiftly.

“Our quarterly reports show the same pattern, of a new child coming in with high levels of missing incidents and over a period of time those have been reduced to zero,” he says. Work on a new tender for beyond 2018 is under way. Changes under consideration include making apprenticeship opportunities available for residential care leavers with the successful contractor. This follows on from one resident already securing work with Keys. Staying Close arrangements, to support children near to homes when they leave until they are 21, will also come under discussion.

Another collaborative block contract is a framework agreement launched five years ago for foster and residential care covering seven East Midlands authorities: Northamptonshire, Nottingham City, Nottinghamshire, Derby City, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, and Rutland. Citing evaluation by Oxford Brookes University, the deal saves the councils around £1m a year. In his report, Narey asserts that even greater discounts could be achieved “through more aggressive negotiation”.

Deborah Mahon, commissioning and strategy service manager at Northamptonshire County Council, says the roster of providers is reviewed annually to ensure it meets local demand.

Value, quality of care and the views of young people who are involved in the tendering process, are the main criteria for providers to be appointed. Mahon says councils have met the challenge of collaborating over a large distance by appointing a project manager early on to work across the region and “iron out any issues”.

Already Ofsted has noticed a positive change in Northamptonshire. Its inspection in February praised the council’s focus “on improving the quality of placements and the outcomes achieved by children”, adding that “the majority of children looked after live in good and stable placements that meet their needs and keep them safe”.

Out-of-area placements
But the inspectorate wants Northamptonshire to do more to reduce out-of-area placements and increase local placements. As of March 2015, 16 per cent of looked-after children were placed more than 20 miles outside the council’s boundaries, two per cent above the England average and up on the previous year’s 13 per cent.

Narey cautions against overplaying the issue of out-of-area placements though. He urges commissioners to “recognise that the right placement for a child is more important than location” and “no longer impose geographical restrictions” on providers.

But Andy Elvin at TACT warns that to dismiss the value of placing a child close to home is “naive” because “a lot of what is best for a child, such as contact with birth family, school and friends’ families, is tied up in geography”. Ramsden also says that for most children, maintaining local links is important: “We should always go with a nearby placement where it meets their need unless there was a risk to staying local.”

With such disputes still rife and huge improvements to be made in collaborative working, the commissioning landscape will need to look a lot different if it is to effectively meet the needs of England’s ever-rising and diverse population of children in care.
The Narey review argues that the prevailing view of children’s residential care as an ‘anachronism’ significantly underestimates its contribution. Joe Lepper asks how these views can be overturned.

COUNCILS, MEDIA AND POLITICIANS alike have for too long underestimated the valuable contribution children’s homes can make to improving young lives. That was one of the central findings of Sir Martin Narey’s government-ordered review of children’s residential care in England, released in July.

Children’s homes are now seen as “an anachronism, to be used only as a last resort” states his report, which lays out 34 recommendations to “deliver significant improvement in the care of the challenging, troubled, harmed, often damaged, yet frequently inspiring children who live in them”.

In its Putting Children First policy paper, the Department for Education outlines plans to address some of his recommendations, such as piloting the Staying Close strategy, which allows care leavers from residential care to be supported near to homes until they are 21.

But with no government announcement regarding many other key recommendations – such as the creation of a Residential Care Leadership Board of commissioners, academics and independent providers to advise the government – it remains to be seen whether Narey’s vision will deliver meaningful change.

The Who Cares? Trust chief executive Natasha Finlayson says one of the best legacies of Narey’s review would be for social workers to move away from seeing foster care as the default option for placing children.

Too many in social care have “an inbuilt assumption that being in a nuclear family is the gold standard”, leaving children’s homes to be seen as merely “a dumping ground”, she adds.

Instead, she hopes there is greater realisation that “living in a family may be too intense” for many children and therefore makes attempts to foster them doomed to failure.

Ofsted’s annual social care report certainly indicates many children undergoing multiple placement breakdowns should have been placed in residential settings from the start. Among children with this chequered care history, half finally achieved permanence in a children’s home.

Sir Martin Narey’s review outlines 34 recommendations to significantly improve children’s lives in residential care.

Bryn Melyn chief executive Bob Yetzes suggests such a shift in thinking has already begun, with the therapeutic residential care provider fielding an increasing number of calls from commissioners wanting to place children “in the high end of the most extreme cases” as soon as they come into care.

But he adds that progress is still too slow in considering a therapeutic residential care placement straight away for those who fall below that high needs threshold but “probably won’t survive in a foster care family environment”.

Kevin Gallagher, chief executive of residential care provider Amberleigh Care, which specialises in supporting boys who display harmful sexual behaviour, suggests that a mistrust about residential care has developed among some commissioners who have got “their fingers burned” by providers describing themselves as “therapeutic” but failing to deliver on their claims. This points to a wider issue of professional esteem and status of the residential care workforce.

Finlayson says that sometimes “the reality doesn’t match the marketing claims”. “Just looking at latest job adverts, you can see ones in children’s homes that say they are looking for a senior therapeutic residential care worker with a level 3 qualification – which is the equivalent of A level – and offering between £20,000 to £22,000 a year,” Finlayson says. “I would contend that someone with that level of qualification and salary could not justify calling themselves a senior therapeutic worker.”

Such relatively low expectations around
WHOLE-TEAM TRAINING AIDS UNDERSTANDING

Team training is seen as a crucial ingredient to a successful children’s home, according to Sir Martin Narey’s residential care review. Such group sessions help build team spirit and offer staff the chance to share the daily challenges they face and learn new strategies to tackle them.

One such example is the RESuLT training programme, developed in 2011 by the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust-based National Implementation Service. This has benefited from £4.1m from the Department for Education’s social care innovation fund and, following trials in Dudley, Greenwich and Oxfordshire, has since been used by a further eight councils for children’s home staff.

The programme provides 10 weekly, half-day sessions for all members of a children’s home team, including domestic staff and management, and is carried out by two facilitators, one from another home and one from child and adolescent mental health services.

Through role-playing, practical activities and analysing latest research, the course covers issues such as promoting positive behaviour and improving relationships with children.

RESuLT lead developer and systemic psychotherapist Cath Connolly says the involvement of all staff is a key element as “it gets everyone together and gets them to think about how they work as a team”.

Other benefits are “giving staff a theory and language to their practice, which helps their self-esteem”, says Connolly.

“This means they are able to go to looked-after children reviews and rather than sit in the corner quietly they can speak confidently using a theoretical language about the interventions they use in the home,” she adds.

Melanie Dryden, manager at Mainland Road Children’s Home in Dudley, one of the first to take part, says her team’s confidence improved dramatically after the course.

“We also discovered more about our strengths and that some of the good practice we were already doing wasn’t being done in all homes,” she adds.

Ross Pearce, a senior residential childcare worker at the same home, added: “It gave us a better understanding of the children by taking us through their development from when their mother was pregnant with them.”

Evaluation by the Universities of Loughborough and Bristol praise the course’s blend of theory with practical advice, as well as for helping to bring staff teams together.

training and salaries can leave residential care with a poor reputation among social care staff. “Some say Tesco shelf stacker one day, residential care worker the next,” adds Finlayson. She calls for children’s residential care to receive “the same promotion that has been going on for the teaching profession” with a national focus on “how important and rewarding the work is”.

Narey calls for tighter checks on the quality of training in his review, particularly online diploma courses. All trainee social workers should also work in homes during their course, he recommends, although he does not back a move towards a graduate-only workforce, which Scotland is set to introduce in 2018.

Gallaher says another way recruitment can improve is to ensure homes offer staff more opportunities to reflect on their often challenging work with damaged children.

“When done right these are a significant benefit to staff,” he says.

Supporting staff to cope with the demands of residential care could also help address missing-from-care incidents, suggests Finlayson.

“What you hear most from young people who have run away is that ‘no one would be bothered if I was gone and they didn’t care when I got back’.”

Missing incidents

According to Ofsted’s annual social care report, 2,500 children went missing from care in 2015/16. The inspectorate points to the need for better co-operation between police and children’s homes to speed up the reporting of missing incidents, as well as a greater focus on return interviews to prevent repeat occurrences.

Yetzes recommends that homes establish missing incident protocols with local police that are tailored to the vulnerability of each child. Describing Bryn Melyn’s protocols with police in Shropshire and North Wales, he says: “For some, if they go missing for five minutes, because the children are so vulnerable the police will attend immediately. For some others it may be an hour. Some maybe three to four hours as they are capable of looking after themselves and not at risk.”

Narey’s review also addressed the issue of the size of children’s homes.

Three-quarters of homes registered between 2012 and 2016 were for five children or less – and one quarter of these were only for one to two children.

But Narey says there is no strong evidence to support the assumption that outcomes are better in smaller homes and urges councils and providers to consider boosting the supply of larger settings.

Bryn Melyn is already bucking the trend for smaller homes by opening an eight-bed children’s home in 2017, specifically for girls and with a strong focus on communal living as a way of preparing them for independence. The larger size will enable it to provide permanent psychology and education support, as well as training kitchens.

Narey also addresses a popular assumption that large homes lead to institutionalisation, where children are expected to fit into predetermined routines and rules. He says that poor management rather than the actual size of the home is the more likely factor behind such a situation.

Finlayson goes further than Narey in saying that smaller homes are more of a concern than larger settings. “A one or two-bed home with a high staff ratio can sometimes be far too intense for the young person and I query whether that provides value for money,” she says.

Avoiding institutionalisation

She believes institutionalisation can be effectively countered by focusing on strong relationships between staff and children and “behaving in a more quasi-parental way”, with staff helping with homework and questions aroundsexual health.

“When we speak to young people they want staff to be their champion, who they know will look out for them,” she says.

Designing bedrooms of different sizes as well as giving children freedom around how they decorate them are other ways to avoid institutionalisation, says Yetzes. But he warns against trying to force children’s homes to replicate a family home environment.

“Children in residential care don’t want another set of parents. They already have parents in most cases – whether they like them or not is another matter.”

Action for Children has developed a strategy for its children’s homes, Residential Outcomes Now, that focuses on promoting strong relationships while keeping an appropriate professional distance.

Head of policy and research Emma Smale says: “This brings a relationship-based culture at management and practitioner level. The focus is to show the importance of building relationships so that children feel supported and safe and can trust the people they are cared by.”

The Narey report’s recommendations, if implemented, would likely take years to filter into mainstream practice. To speed up change, there is a belief that more radical solutions are required than his own call for a DBE-run leadership board.

Bryn Melyn chief Yetzes calls for the creation of an independent body to oversee residential care with the same standing as the medical Royal Colleges. If residential care is to shed its anachronistic image in some quarters, such bolder steps may be required.
Residential care is not a single entity, but rather a sector of different models of delivery meeting a range of complex needs. It cannot be a generalist approach and the specific needs that a home is set up to respond to should inform: its structure, the training for staff, the practice methodology and the appropriate suite of assessments to set intervention goals and measure placement progress.

Amberleigh Care provide specialist residential intervention for young males (11-18) who display sexually harmful behaviour in two formal therapeutic communities in Shropshire and Mid-Wales. Each setting its own fully registered school and is supported by an overarching, multi-disciplinary therapy team. Our practice framework draws on two clear evidence bases: Service Standards for Therapeutic Communities in relation to the use of relationships and group living in a planned environment and the Good Lives Model (GLM) in relation to sexually harmful behaviour.

All placements start with assessment, but it is important to be clear what you are measuring and how this will be used in intervention planning and tracking. Some measures are sensitive enough to be repeated at regular intervals to track progress, whilst others are designed to be pre and post intervention scales.

- AIM2 assessment
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)
- Becks Youth Inventory,
- HoNOSCA,
- Resiliency Scales
- Child Trauma Checklist

These assessments support case formulation to set tailored and developmentally appropriate intervention goals. These are then implemented through:

- Weekly individual therapy
- Weekly group work programme
- Internal practice consultation to care end education staff teams
- Specialist staff training
- External staff support consultation
- Quarterly integrated intervention reviews

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Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation: Prevention and Protection
RIPE FOR REFORM

With government pledging to undertake a ‘national stocktake’ of foster care and MPs conducting their own inquiry, Joe Lepper asks what measures would improve quality of care and outcomes for children.

Even though the vast majority of looked-after children live in foster placements, government attention has homed in on adoption and residential care in recent months and years, leaving fostering remarkably overlooked.

Until now. The Department for Education’s Putting Children First social care policy paper in July promised to conduct a “national stocktake”, while the education select committee has since announced it is holding an inquiry into the state of fostering in England.

According to commissioners, providers, regulators and academics alike, fostering is an area of the care sector crying out for reform, with too many children going missing, too many placements breaking down and not enough carers available to support the rise in referrals.

According to Ofsted, missing incidents increased by 19 per cent in 2014/15, while there were 7,245 placement breakdowns in the year, affecting eight per cent of fostered children. In half of all cases the carer ended the placement and in a fifth of cases the placement did not even last a full day, Ofsted found.

As well as an ongoing shortage of foster carers across the country, concerns are increasing about ensuring there are enough specialist carers to meet the needs of the most challenging children.

Since announcing plans for a “stocktake” no detail has emerged from the government on how this will proceed, with the DfE’s attention seemingly occupied by other matters such as proposals to extend grammar school provision.

A DfE spokesman says it will aim to “build a rich evidence base about how the foster care system works”, with a focus on spreading best practice and highlighting areas of improvement.

Concerns over independence
But fostering experts are concerned it will be lightweight compared with the residential care review and the government’s focus on adoption, which has included an independent review of post-adoption support and the release in March 2016 of the government’s Adoption: A Vision for Change strategy.

The Fostering Network chief executive Kevin Williams says he is concerned about the proposed stocktake’s lack of independence, since it will be carried out directly by the DfE, and questions why “the government has undertaken reviews into other areas of care but did not start with the area with the largest group of young people”.

On launching the MPs’ own inquiry in October, education committee chair, Conservative MP Neil Carmichael, said: “We do not have any details as to what [the stocktake] will look at, how long it will take or what the outcomes will be.”

Andy Elvin, chief executive of adoption and fostering charity The Adolescent and Children’s Trust (TACT), believes the government should draft in independent academics and financial consultants to offer a critical analysis of the foster care market.

Harvey Gallagher, chief executive of the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers, says a “stocktake” itself suggests it will merely collect data but not “propose any solutions”.

He fears it may fall short on the task of bringing meaningful improvement to a “poorly co-ordinated” foster care system blighted by a lack of cooperation between different councils as well as with independent fostering providers (IFPs). “No one has a sense of where the carers are and who is best to take a child.”
FOSTER CARE

PARENT AND CHILD FOSTERING

A n increasing appetite has emerged among councils to use specialist parent and child foster placements.

According to Nikki Luke, research officer at the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, such placements were set up for teenage girls in care who became pregnant. “Now it is being used more for mothers in their 20s and 30s where there are concerns around their parenting,” she says.

Luke says placements usually last for around three to four months, over which time the carer will assess the parent and child’s needs and relationship, help them to develop their parenting skills and then work closely with the responsible council to assess whether there has been an improvement. If the change is positive the mother may be able to return home with her child.

Christine Henry, East London deputy area manager for the charity The Adolescent and Children’s Trust (TACT), which provides such placements, has also seen increasing demand for parent and child fostering.

The closure of some specialist residential mother and baby units, which would have normally offered this form of intense support, is a factor, she says, with long-term savings on the public purse another.

Due to the intense nature of such placements, TACT usually only uses experienced carers and those with no other foster children in their homes, “as this placement is enough of a focus on their time”.

A five-day course covering attachment theory, child development, report writing, giving positive feedback and working with another adult in their home, is also given by TACT to its parent and child carers.

Carol Sloan, a TACT parent and child carer in Yorkshire, says a major part of the job is to “watch, monitor and suggest” rather than “take over or look after the baby”. The intense nature of the support can be challenging, but Sloan says talking through any issues, and “not to make the young mum feel a failure”, are important.

Henry adds that having robust and tailored planning agreements, which can cover minor issues such as routines for sterilising bottles, can also help avoid conflict.

The Rees Centre is calling for further research into parent and child fostering to assess its impact in keeping families together and whether its use could be expanded further.

A national register would go some way to address this, says Williams. He wants any review to examine the feasibility of such a register to produce a national picture of “what the foster care workforce is” for the first time.

Foster care training also urgently needs national co-ordination, says Williams.

At present, local authorities and IFPs have their own training schemes, so “when a carer moves to a different part of the country they almost have to start the process of being approved again”. Instead, he wants to see national, standardised training “that gives carers portability when they move”.

Such calls are part of an increasing desire among foster carers to be seen as professionals within the wider children’s services workforce, with payment and support to match that status.

Last month, a group of foster carers voted to set up their own union as a dedicated branch of the Independent Workers Union to focus on professional status, pay and conditions.

But Williams does not want greater gravitas for foster care to mean Ofsted moves beyond agency and service inspections to start inspecting individual carers (as it does individual childminders). “Ofsted already looks at the systems that support foster carers and care for individual children within that,” he says.

Charlotte Ramsden, chair of the Association of Directors of Children’s Services’ health, care and additional needs committee and director of children’s services at Salford City Council, says any review must prioritise the emotional support carers receive.

She points to the Salford Therapeutic Advisory and Referral Service, which “works closely with looked-after children but also provides therapeutic support to the carers and their family”.

Professor Judy Sebba, director of the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education based at the University of Oxford, also wants to see carer support take precedence.

The Mockingbird Family Model is a prime example of the type of innovative support for carers that should be emulated, says Sebba. The model originated in the US and has been used by nine fostering services across England over the past year. It organises “constellations” of carers around a “hub” home that can offer respite care, peer support and social activities to prevent placements breaking down and improve relationships between carer and child.

Among the 160 children and 155 families involved in Mockingbird in the UK over the past year there have been no placement breakdowns and no carers have left.

Social work communication

Another area in major need of improvement, says Williams, is communication between social workers and carers. Ofsted’s 2016 social care report found 40 per cent of carers did not get a chance to find out important aspects of a child’s life before they arrived in their home.

Williams says: “Being honest and open with carers will help get the right placements, but what we hear on occasions is that social workers do not always tell the full story to the children.”

One west of England-based foster carer, who specialises in short breaks for younger children (and declines to be named), describes how she felt like she had been “deliberately hoodwinked” by one social worker over one recent placement.

“I asked how old the child was and was told, very flippantly, ‘oh she’s definitely over three years old’,” she recalls. “Various meetings ensued over the next couple of months and the age was never clarified,” until eventually the carer was told the child was 16.

“I felt like we’d wasted two months of our time and was pretty cross.” When she made her “frustrations known” to the social worker team she was then told to “let it go and get over it”. “All it needed was an apology,” the carer adds.

Such anecdotes do little to help attract more foster carers to a sector struggling to meet rising demand and the increasing range of specialist roles needed, including parent and child foster carers (see box).

New carers are also needed for long-term placements, says Gallagher, especially as Staying Put arrangements, whereby children can stay with their foster carer until they are 21, are now in place.

Gallager says: “What we have at the moment is a cohort of carers who never expected to be providing Staying Put support and find that a difficult prospect. But if you recruit new carers, that long-term commitment can be made clear to them at the start.”

The national examinations of the fostering system are long overdue. They have plenty to get stuck into as a result.
Emily Rogers looks at some innovative methods to raise the educational attainment of children in care, and reverse the damaging impact of adverse early life experiences on their ability to learn

Jack went to school “to get loved”. He was happy at primary school, and shone academically. But in secondary, he found himself struggling with boundaries, comparing it to “pushing Play-Doh into one of those toys and it all spilling out”. Just before his foster placement broke down at 14, he started getting into trouble. “I didn’t think the teachers cared about me, so I stopped caring about school and stopped trying,” he recalls.

Jack’s need for nurture and understanding at school before he could be ready to learn echoes a message from The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England, a study by Bristol University and the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education. It has been pored over since publication last November by professionals tasked with narrowing the attainment gap. Just 14 per cent of looked-after children achieved five or more A* to C GCSEs last year, compared to 53 among non-care peers. But crucially, the report showed GCSE-level pupils who had been in care since primary school doing better than “children in need” not in care. And it gave their corporate parents pointers for improving attainment further, including getting them into mainstream schools, avoiding exclusions, and improving teachers’ understanding of pupils’ social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

Belief in these protective factors drives Salford virtual school’s multi-agency meetings. Chaired by virtual school head Peter McNamara, it includes teachers, support staff, school leaders and the carer and social worker, pooling their knowledge and observations about a child’s strengths, talents and interests. The social worker then confidentially shares the child’s pre-care history of neglect, trauma and abuse, which McNamara says can have a “transformative” effect on teachers’ willingness to work with him or her. “When people hear these stories, they’re aghast, often close to tears,” he says. “The majority get right behind the young person on hearing their story. It changes their perception of the pupil as a thorn in their side who disrupts class.”

The virtual school’s education psychology team then presents a 25-minute session on attachment theory. Attendees reflect on the child’s needs, based on this theory and his or her backstory. Together they compile a support plan, covering three themes: “prevent”, such as ensuring staff know the pupil’s behaviour triggers; “connect”: improving communication with the carer and other professionals; and “de-escalate”: strategies to soothe and calm the child.

The strategies in these plans are influenced largely by Louise Michelle Bombèr, clinical lead at children, families and schools support service TouchBase, who trained a group of Salford educational professionals last year. They attended her “Attachment Aware and Trauma-Informed” course. Bombèr aims to spread understanding of how looked-after and other vulnerable children “need to feel a sense of safety before they can think and focus, and take the risks required in learning”. Trainees – typically a senior and support staff member from each school – are equipped to become “attachment leads”, overseeing strategies to help these children settle and learn.

Bombèr’s approach involves a “key adult” working alongside the child within a small staff team named after him or her, such as Team Grace, which means staff “make the child feel there’s someone watching his or her back at every level”. Key adults need to become “stress regulators”, helping children regulate their emotions at trigger moments, through “sensory breaks” to release tension. Rona Taylor, project manager for Salford virtual school’s educational psychology team, recommends Bombèr’s technique of “wondering aloud”, through comments such as: “I notice Mrs Brown isn’t in today; you usually have her on your maths table. I’m wondering whether you’re missing her and feeling a bit scared.” Taylor says this can help a child with experience of trauma, “who may not know what they’re feeling”, by “making an educated guess, as mothers do with their babies before they can speak”.

Attachment-based practice

The impact of attachment based-practice on learning can be found in Attachment Aware Schools, a partnership between Bath Spa University, the virtual schools of Bath and North East Somerset (Banes) and Stoke-on-Trent, and training organisation Kate Cairns Associates. Each school sends two staff members on training, accompanied by online learning and a half-day’s training for heads and governors.

Participants learn techniques such as “emotion coaching”: empathising with a pupil’s feelings during an outburst and helping them towards “self-regulation” through calming strategies. Of 94 children involved in a Stoke and Banes pilot, the proportion meeting expected levels rose from 26 to 38 per cent in reading and 24 to 40 per cent in maths over the 2014/15 academic year.

Debbie Barnes, chair of the Association of Directors of Children’s Services’ educational achievement policy committee, is pushing for better understanding of looked-after children’s emotional vulnerability in schools through “triangulated” use of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: getting it completed by the school and young person, as well as the carer.

This routinely happens in North Tyneside, where virtual head Jane Pickthall says it has raised issues that the virtual school or carer may have been unaware of, such as bullying. Triangulated SDQ scores led Pickthall to appoint a counsellor and educational psychologist using Pupil Premium Plus funding, extending support to those not eligible for child and adolescent mental health
TOP TIPS TO NARROW THE ATTAINMENT GAP

- Do not assume a child’s prior attainment gives a true picture of potential: they may have been unable to focus on learning when assessments were done.
- Ensure the designated teacher is a member of, or can influence, the senior leadership team to positively impact on the experience of children in care within the school.
- Ensure that everyone in the authority is clear on what the virtual school does, and therefore also on what the virtual school does not do, which is key to making other arms of the local authority more accountable.
- Have a named governor for looked-after children who champions them and holds the school to account.
- Devote time to building good quality relationships and have a key person available when needed.
- Understand that the relationship is the main motivator, not the threat of punishment or promise of reward.
- Know what is important to a child or young person and find opportunities to demonstrate they are ‘kept in mind’.
- Foster carers are part of the team: include them and use them to help a child progress.
- ‘Time in, not time out’: children who are emotionally dysregulated need to be kept close.
- Looked-after children have diverse needs, requiring different tools of different types.
- Hackney’s virtual school has a multidisciplinary team including an occupational therapist specialising in attachment issues, a speech and language therapist and social pedagogues, helping pupils build self-esteem, life skills and resilience.

Adapted in Hampshire for foster carers, this is delivered by the county’s educational psychology service to primary-aged children with below age-related expectations, selected by virtual head Anwen Foy. A school staff member and the child’s carers are invited to a 90-minute training session with educational psychologist Julia Alfano. The carer and child read in unison for around 20 minutes three times a week for 16 weeks. If the child stumbles, the carer stops, says the word and asks the child to repeat it. The child taps the page to read independently.

PAIRED READING

Paired Reading is also reaping benefits. As a national association, we want to ensure the designated teacher is a member of, or can influence, the senior leadership team to positively impact on the experience of children in care within the school.

Services. Pickthall cites one-to-one tuition as another worthy investment. She has funded a teacher to qualify to train colleagues in Reading Recovery, a 30-minute-a-day reading and writing programme for five-to-six-year-olds, with 10 now lined up to deliver it.

“Wanted a boy who’d had Reading Recovery before entering care,” she says. “His phonics score was one of the highest this year.”

Paired Reading is also reaping benefits. As a national association, we want to ensure the designated teacher is a member of, or can influence, the senior leadership team to positively impact on the experience of children in care within the school.

The valuable role of foster carers in supporting their children’s education was highlighted by an April 2016 evaluation of London Fostering Achievement (LFA), a programme by The Fostering Network and education charity Achievement for All (AfA). The report by the Rees Centre and Loughborough University recommended the rollout of the programme’s Education Champions, foster carers trained to empower fellow carers in proactively supporting their children’s educational needs.

The LFA programme also saw AfA coach teachers across nine boroughs in raising looked-after children’s achievement. Matthew Blood, virtual head at the Tri-borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Hammersmith & Fulham and Westminster councils, says LFA led to valuable resources including its online toolkit, guiding schools through analysis of their looked-after pupils’ social, technical, educational, environmental and psychological barriers to learning. Blood also noticed impact from AfA’s training for teachers in holding “structured conversations” with carers and children, a process of engaging the child in voicing education issues and solutions, which led to clearer goals identified in personal education plan meetings. “When part of that process, children felt listened to,” he says.

“With one primary school child from a difficult place, needing very high levels of intervention. Every professional knew he or she needed to do something specific. The carer knew she had to read to him in a particular way, the school knew he needed a five-minute ‘check in’ with a key adult on arrival. He then made a really successful transition to secondary school and enormous progress.”

Tackling exclusion of looked-after children is also crucial. “It is four times more at risk of fixed-term exclusions than others. The Rees Centre research laid bare the cost to learning; each additional day missed equated to a sixth of a GCSE grade lost.”

Lincolnshire Council aims to wipe out exclusions through a new system of “solution-focused” pastoral support, contributing to a 30 per cent reduction in exclusions since January.

“Training in solution-focused coaching has so far reached 52 school staff, equipping them to deliver five 60-minute-one-to-ones to pupils with challenging behaviour, questioning them in a way which helps them tap into individual strengths and talents and set goals based on these. “We need cognitive change and this new approach brings it about,” explains Lincolnshire’s inclusion service manager Mary Meredith, who describes the traditional approach of sanctions and rewards as a “disaster” for looked-after pupils.

Lincolnshire’s trainer, consultant Geoff James, says the approach is “very good for looked-after children because it doesn’t delve into the morass of multiple foster placements and the initial failure of family breakdown, so you don’t re-traumatise someone by fishing about in their past.” He adds: “This reminds them they’re the agent in their lives: they just need to remember what they want and what they need to do to get there.”

HEAD TEACHER ATTITUDES

Debbie Barnes stresses that “every day counts” for looked-after children, which means getting them quickly into high-performing schools. The ADCS is pushing for local authority powers to direct academies to admit looked-after children to avoid the educationally-damaging “drift and delay” caused by appeals. Pickthall says the issue “will have to be a priority over the coming year”. “Our members are telling us it can be a problem getting looked-after children into schools when they move during the academic year,” she explains. “It’s often down to head teachers’ attitudes and there’s such variation. As a national association, we want to level the playing field.”

And as the government proposes the reintroduction of selective grammar schools, Jack – now a 21-year-old care leaver and university student - is doubtful about their compatibility with the rocky roads to educational success like his. “I may have got into a grammar at 11, but my placement broke down at 14, and I can’t imagine how it could have supported me,” he says. “If my special school hadn’t gone out of its way to support my emotional wellbeing, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

Thanks to Jane Pickthall, Alan Clifton, Alan Rees, Nick Corker and Michelle Louise Bomber
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Amid the multitude of challenges in working with children in care, a huge amount of innovation is taking place across the country. Charlotte Goddard examines three examples of excellent practice.

REDUCING ANXIETY FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN

ARC HD Services, Hampshire

Almost half of children in care have a diagnosable mental health disorder, a fact acknowledged in government guidance on promoting the health of looked-after young people. With this in mind, Hampshire-based independent residential care provider ARC is carrying out innovative work with nine- to 18-year-olds with complex mental health needs, including emerging personality disorders and associated self-harm behaviour, attachment disorder, post-traumatic stress, ADHD and autistic spectrum disorder.

The organisation works closely with commissioning teams, child and adolescent mental health services and local providers to tailor care packages for young people.

ARC’s two rurally-located three-bed homes – Brocklands and Small Acres - are designed to be small enough for everyone to feel important and have their individual needs met, and large enough to offer a sense of community living. “We aim to offer anxiety-reducing environments in calm and spacious accommodation with high levels of staff support,” says director Martin Rose.

“Ducks and chickens roam ARC’s rurally located homes.”

The gardens are large and have ducks and chickens, and young people are encouraged to be involved in the development and maintenance of the site.

Each child has their own bedroom, toilet and shower room, as well as their own lounge, enabling them to choose to socialise with others or remain in their own safe spaces. The bedrooms and bathrooms are designed to prevent self-harm – magnetic curtain rails, for example, will fall down under unusual loads. This allows children to have their privacy while minimising risk. “If there is a particularly high level of risk, we increase the level of observation, but given these children have strong mood swings, we can let them have time in their room alone and know they are safe,” explains Rose.

Children often come to the homes from secure units or hospital. Staff carry out a rigorous assessment process to make sure new arrivals can be matched appropriately with current young people at the home, and take care to avoid disruption to existing residents.

ARC backs up its provision of an anxiety-reducing environment with the practical application of attachment theory. “Staff are trained in aspects of mental health and attachment theory and have a ‘therapeutic approach’ based on an understanding of children’s individual needs,” says Rose.

A consultant mental health nurse therapist offers psychosocial intervention through group work or on a one-to-one basis and the service is overseen by a consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist.

Access to therapy and education is tailored to individual needs and abilities. For example, a 17-year-old recently arrived from hospital wanted to get a job rather than complete his GCSEs. “We got him involved in management training at Tesco,” says Rose. “His self-esteem has rocketed. If we had made him do his GCSEs, we would have lost him. I strongly believe in the value of education but you have to be flexible.”

Relationship building is key. “Staff work hard to develop strong and meaningful relationships with each of the children. It can take time to build trust, but it is the quality of relationship that mostly determines the quality of outcome for the child,” says Rose. “Often the children arrive in a state of hopelessness with low self-esteem and self-value – by the time they have left we aim to have provided them with many memorable experiences and achievements and hope they will feel valued, loved and missed.”

An Ofsted inspection in November 2015 found Brocklands to be a “good” home with leadership and management that is “outstanding”, while Small Acres was rated “good” earlier this year. “For us the best indicator of success is that we tend to take children who stay until they are 18 – there is no high turnover,” says Rose.

ARC is currently looking for another property in which to expand. “We feel our innovation lies in the creation of an anxiety-reducing environment and specialising in children coming out of hospital placements – there is a national shortage for that kind of provision,” says Rose.
Developing secure attachments with carers is crucial to improve outcomes for children who are fostered, but different styles of attachment can affect the way in which a child develops.

In a bid to discover whether the attachment style or profile of a foster carer is associated with specific outcomes for the children in their care, around 15 fostering agencies are taking part in a project run by the University of Leicester social work lecturer John Hoffman. The agencies hope the knowledge gleaned will help with the recruitment, selection, training and ongoing support of foster carers, and decisions to match them to particular children.

“One of the next big steps in fostering is to make better use of the foster carers we already have,” says Harvey Gallagher, chief executive of the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers. “We need to be able to match children with foster carers better than before.”

As part of the project, Hoffman is using standardised measurements of attachment styles, which can be used to build an individual profile for each foster carer. Fostering agencies taking part receive a day’s training on attachment styles, and use of measurements.

“They are being used in a number of ways – at the beginning of the recruitment process, the initial assessment phase, to help give a sense of prospective foster carers, and as part of personal development planning of existing carers,” he says. “Carers have a profile that takes in different types of attachment, and we look at what that means in terms of their own functioning.”

Carole Carter, director at Affinity Fostering, an outstanding-rated agency taking part, says its carers are already trained in attachment issues.

“This work allows us to better understand our carers’ attachment styles and look at how they can impact positively or not on the young people we currently have in placement. It can also help us explain disruption in placements,” she says.

Affinity carers have completed questionnaires with the support of social workers to start building their profile. “This will give us more information when we are matching young people to carers,” says Carter. “A carer might live in the right location but their parenting style might not match what we want for that young person. For example, if a young person comes from a birth family with an ambivalent attachment style, where parents might respond to them sometimes but not other times, the young person has had to up the ante to get attention. We would look for a carer with a consistent attachment style, so that they respond to that child at all times.”

Hoffman insists the profiling “is not being used to stop people from becoming carers – it’s about responding in a more bespoke way to the needs of a child and a foster carer.”

Carter adds: “It is quite a new concept but needs to be seen in context. There may be other issues in a placement that can still benefit young people. If a carer lived near to their school for example, it might be more beneficial for the child to go there and keep some consistency in their lives, rather than elsewhere to someone with a more appropriate attachment profile. We would then do work with the foster carer around their attachment style.”

The number of asylum-seeking children in the care of councils in England has risen 62 per cent in a year according to research by the BBC, with the largest group being boys aged 16 and 17, coming from countries such as Afghanistan or Eritrea.

Barnardo’s Specialist Fostering Service, based in the South East, supports unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, as well as other children with complex needs, including young mothers and babies, children who have been trafficked, children on remand and victims of child sexual exploitation.

“We train our specialist foster carers to provide full-on support for a range of different children,” says Manda Nicoll, project manager.

“There are currently a lot of referrals coming through for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children because of the situation in Syria. There are also an increasing number of parent and child referrals as the courts seem to be going down that route to keep babies with their mother rather than taking them into care.”

It currently has 38 foster families, some of whom are looking after groups of siblings. Specialist carers need significant amounts of training and support to care for children such as a young girl from Vietnam who was trafficked and raped, and found herself here without being able to speak English.

“We place really carefully and spend a lot of time on the recruitment process, making sure carers are well-informed about what is going to be demanded of them,” says Nicoll.

“The foster carer always has the opportunity to say if they want to take a child or not. We work very closely with them; there is always a social worker on call. Severely traumatised young children can cause problems at any time of the day or night.”

All training is open to all foster carers, and some choose to specialise. “One carer has worked a lot with young victims of child sexual exploitation, but is now choosing to work with parents and children as they find the idea of that quite interesting,” says Nicoll.

“We have put a lot of work into youngsters who want to abscond all the time,” adds Nicoll. “They are not allowed access to the internet or telephone, the house is put on police alert, and the carer starts reporting procedures if the child does take off.”

The Specialist Fostering Service grew out of a service set up in 1988 to support children with special educational needs who attended Meadows School in Kent, during school holidays and at weekends. It is a self-sustaining service commissioned by local authorities and currently receives up to 80 referrals a day.
STAYING CLOSE REFORMS

AROUND THE CORNER

Young people in residential care will soon have the right to ‘stay close’ to their placement when they leave, helping smooth the transition to adulthood. Joe Lepper investigates how this is likely to work

The government launched the landmark “Staying Put” reforms in 2014, allowing young people in foster care the right to remain with their carers until turning 21. But its exclusion of children in residential care from sharing the same entitlement has cast a shadow over the reforms ever since. The much higher costs and safeguarding concerns meant those in residential care have missed out.

Two years on, the option of offering young people the chance to stay in their children’s homes after their 18th birthday remains off the table. However, an alternative approach, called Staying Close, is gathering support among ministers.

The Department for Education announced plans in July to pilot the approach through the children’s social care innovation programme “in order to understand the costings, practicalities and impact”.

The Staying Close option involves offering young people leaving residential care the chance to move into nearby supported accommodation, in order to maintain attachments with their former home and its staff through regular visits and ongoing support. A scoping study by National Children’s Bureau last year put forward the approach as the least expensive and most viable of a number of alternatives to Staying Put for young people leaving residential care.

The Narey review of residential care urged the government to introduce Staying Close for children reaching adulthood as one of its recommendations, stating: “If the NCB estimates of the cost of introducing Staying Close are reasonably accurate, then there is no reason that it could not be made available to all those in children’s homes reaching their eighteenth birthday.”

NCB projected the cost per young person over three years to be £33,828, considerably less than the estimated £493,296 bill per person of applying Staying Put directly to residential settings over the same period.

Narey also suggests savings could be even greater, highlighting one Staying Close-style arrangement by North Lincolnshire Council, where the cost per child is around half the NCB estimate.

That example, which concerns newly built independent living accommodation for older children in the grounds of the Kingfisher Lodge children’s home in Scunthorpe, also gives an indication of how Staying Close may work across England.

Cllr David Rose, North Lincolnshire’s cabinet member for children, families and learning, explains that the council made the decision to build the five-bed housing on the same land as the six-bed care home because it “seemed unjust” for children in care homes to miss out on the benefits of Staying Put.

He says: “There was a clear anomaly that those in foster care were getting this and those in care homes were not. So it seemed sensible for us to put in place something that would provide them with the necessary support and encouragement to live independently.”

Maintaining links

Built in 2014, the independent accommodation, called Kingfisher House, offers young people the chance to share meal times at Kingfisher Lodge. The two separate buildings also share staff and regular visits to the lodge are encouraged.

According to Cllr Rose, the sense of stability and continuity of care the arrangement offers young people is a major benefit at this difficult time in their lives when they are looking to secure courses and jobs.

He states that none of the young people at Kingfisher House are not in education, employment or training. Indeed, of the current residents, three are in further education and work, and a fourth is at university but stays at Kingfisher House outside of term time.

Young residents of Kingfisher Lodge were also involved in the design of what may become their new home for a further three years, “so there is a sense of pride in it”, says Cllr Rose.

In welcoming the planned pilots Cllr Rose hopes the government ensures it looks at the estimated long-term savings of investing in Staying Close.

“He here the children pay rent, are in work or education. The alternative would be to throw them out into the community and all the risks that involves such as unemployment, risk-taking behaviour, drug and alcohol issues and unwanted pregnancies,” he says.

London-based provider St Christopher’s Fellowship prioritises the sharing of staff and continuity of care for the care leavers that live in its Cornwall’t campus, a transition service for those aged 16 and over.

This offers two stages of independent living for those leaving St Christopher’s care homes, which are between 20 and 30 minutes away by public transport. The first house is the likely destination for most upon leaving the children’s homes. The second, neighbouring house, entails less support and is already more independent and will in most cases house those that have moved from the other building.

Angela Harris, West London regional manager at St Christopher’s, says: “Looking at the Staying Close policy, there is a real opportunity for looking at locations that are much closer together, ideally within walking distance.”

NCB director of external affairs Enver Solomon hopes the Staying Close pilots can get under way swiftly to ensure those in residential settings benefit as soon as possible.

He says the scheme is likely to work best where there is a strong commitment among home staff to genuinely involve the young person in activities, such as meal times.

Having the same key worker would be vital to ensure this continuity of care, Solomon says, adding that to maintain links, the young person’s new accommodation “needs to literally mean staying close” to the home.

Kingfisher House and Kingfisher Lodge share staff

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Underpinned by over 50 years successful provision of therapeutic care, Glebe House offers an emotionally secure and monitored environment, which supports adolescent males who are a risk (emotionally and physically) to themselves, to children, to their families and to the wider community.

A huge benefit for young people and local residents alike, is that Glebe House is set in a rural location.

Residents are referred to us by local authorities and social services or as directed by the Court. Over an average of two years, residents are encouraged to recognise and effectively reduce risks and threats. The aim is to assist them to learn how to maintain socially and legally acceptable standards of behaviour, so that they can resume independent living in the future.

Our Charitable Trust provides specialist interventions for young men with a known history of sexually harmful behaviours.

Case services include:
- Residential Treatment Service to address harmful sexual behaviour in older teenagers
- A well defined Therapeutic Community model that promotes young people developing their understanding and taking responsibility
- An independence transition service
- The provision of on-site education
- Training and Consultancy
- Community based assessment and intervention work
- Tailor made outreach programmes for young men leaving our care
- Circle of support where appropriate
- Registered Independent School – CQC Registered

“Young people benefit from exceptional, inspirational and unique care. They are each valued as individuals and as part of the Therapeutic Community. All young people experience an intensive and holistic support package. This helps them to understand, acknowledge and address offending behaviour.

(Outstanding’ Ofsted inspection September 2015)
The government is reviewing the role of personal advisers in supporting care leavers’ transition to adulthood after its Keep on Caring strategy gave councils new duties. Charlotte Goddard investigates.

Personal adviser Hannah Broadbent has had a hectic morning. Two young care leavers have turned up in her Trafford office: their post-18 placements have broken down and they need support finding housing.

On another day she might be accompanying young people to the GP, dealing with mental health services or the job centre on their behalf, or even helping them paint their house. “Young people have often been involved with a number of different professionals, all trying to minimise the challenges they face, and when they turn 18 a lot of that support ends,” explains Broadbent. “Young people have described it as being like falling off a cliff.”

Personal advisers offer emotional as well as practical support. “When a young person moves into their first flat it can be quite a lonely experience,” says Chloe Cockett, policy and research manager at the Who Cares? Trust. “A personal adviser will support them in building up resilience, and can be at the end of a phone if their boiler breaks or they break up with their boyfriend.”

Personal advisers are not, however, trained counsellors and if necessary would signpost young people to further support.

Local authorities have been required to appoint a personal adviser for children leaving care since 2000, and since 2008 personal advisers have been required to support young people until they turn 21, or 25 if they are in higher education. The government’s recent care leavers strategy, Keep On Caring, sets out plans to ensure all care leavers will be able to access support from a personal adviser until the age of 25, a proposal that Trafford Council is already putting into practice.

“In a way it was the wrong way around before,” says Broadbent. “Young people at university may be more settled, whereas others may be leading more chaotic lives. Some say they don’t need any more support so we would step back, but they can always come back to us later on.”

The quality of the personal adviser service varies considerably between local authorities, which is why the government is undertaking a review of the role. “Some care leavers have told me that they hadn’t met their personal adviser until they were about to leave care,” says the Children’s Commissioner for England Anne Longfield. “In some areas, personal advisers are working well, but provision and the level of service is patchy elsewhere, so I welcome the government’s review on this issue. We need to ensure a greater level of consistency so that personal advisers are there for this vulnerable group of young people much earlier on.”

A report produced by the Centre for Social Justice for the Children’s Commissioner earlier this year recommended that personal advisers start working with young people from the age of 14.

Broadbent currently has a caseload of 24 young people but under a previous employer she had responsibility for more than 50. “In that situation you cannot see the young people as often as you need to,” she says. “We are statutorily required to see them six times a year, but some of them are so vulnerable that it scares me to think they might only be seen six times a year.” At Trafford, personal advisers contact their clients weekly, or more often if necessary.

Career routes into the personal adviser role vary, and people come from previous roles including residential care, youth work, education, and working with asylum seekers.

There are no required qualifications and training is currently “patchy and inconsistent,” according to the CSJ report. “We hear of young people applying to university, for example, who find that if their adviser has not been through that, they struggle to support the young person with issues such as writing personal statements,” says Cockett. “Hopefully, the review will look at capacity, skills and training, as well as why personal advisers choose the role.”

The Children’s Society is calling for personal advisers to be trained in how to support the young people they advise on financial matters.
Several new steps aim to improve commitments to young people leaving the care system. The Children and Social Work Bill, currently passing through Parliament, establishes a new duty on local authorities to publish and update when necessary a “local offer for care leavers”. This is information about all of the statutory and non-statutory support services available to care leavers in the locality, in areas including health, education, employment, housing and participation. Local authorities are already obliged to publish a similar local offer for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

The bill also sets out corporate parenting principles that aim to ensure the best interests of looked-after children are kept at the heart of everything a local authority does. Local authorities must promote the health and wellbeing of looked-after children and young people; encourage them to express their views, wishes and feelings, and take those into account; and help them gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners.

“The principles outlined in the bill consolidate and clarify existing responsibilities that are already central to the work of councils across the country,” says a Local Government Association spokesperson.

“Many areas have already made good progress in making sure that corporate parenting principles are embedded throughout their work, such as the ‘Child Friendly City’ approach in Leeds.”

Local scrutiny committees will play a key role in ensuring councils uphold the principles in spirit as well as to the letter. “Bodies such as the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, run by Catch22, have a key role to play in supporting local authorities to improve and share best practice, for example around developing a local offer and embedding the corporate parenting principles across all departments,” says Frances Flaxington, strategic director at Catch22.

Some believe the principles do not go far enough. Emma Smale, co-chair of the Alliance for Children in Care and Care Leavers, and head of policy and research at Action for Children, says: “There needs to be some mention of mental health, which is a glaring omission. The principles need to go further, across the health service, schools, the police, anyone in contact with or responsible for children in care.”

While the statutory corporate parenting principles will apply only to local authorities, the Care Leavers Covenant, to be launched during National Care Leavers Week, is a voluntary set of commitments any organisation can sign up to, including private companies, government departments and charities.

“Good organisations will pin it on the wall and share it, but in areas that are less good, the covenant won’t go anywhere,” says Smale. “We welcome the good intentions but it has no teeth.”

The government wants to test out the delivery of services to care leavers through innovative means, such as Care Leaver Trusts, and the development of Social Impact Bonds, a payment-by-results system where service providers are paid for achieving results leading to public savings - such as getting more care leavers into education, employment or training.

Care Leaver Trusts would be a new kind of organisation, bringing together a range of services for care leavers. Such bodies are seen as having greater scope to work in more innovative ways, with greater flexibility and ability to respond to needs. They could also work across a wider geographical area than one authority, making support for care leavers more consistent geographically.

Catch22 is currently in talks with several authorities about designing and delivering services to care leavers, including through Care Leaver Trusts. “We already deliver care leaver services for local authorities in a traditional commissioning relationship, but this proposal allows us to sit down with the local authority and care leavers, and design services together from the start. A trust must be seen as an integral and integrated part of children’s social care arrangements, as it will need to draw in other services such as apprenticeships, and housing, but will also have the freedom to innovate,” Smale says: “We support innovative approaches but have concerns about a move to provide flexibility where that might enable a provider to work outside the legal and accountability framework,” says Smale. “Introducing trusts isn’t in and of itself the answer to improving services. Greater joined-up working would be a key benefit, but innovations have occurred without the need for a trust.”

The LGA believes councils should retain the freedom to decide what arrangements will work best in their area. “While a number of areas have seen significant advantages to commissioning external providers to deliver leaving care services, recent Ofsted results demonstrate that in-house services are perfectly capable of providing ‘outstanding’ support to care leavers,” says a spokesperson.

Its recent report, The Cost of Being Care Free, found debt to be a significant problem for care leavers. But 47 per cent of local authorities do not commission or provide additional financial support for care leavers beyond the advice provided by personal advisers.

Nineteen-year-old Brett says he received valuable support from his personal adviser. “I was living in Kent and moved to London,” he says. “My personal adviser supported me in getting to know London and in finding a college placement. If there was one thing I could change about the system though, it would be to employ more permanent personal advisers and fewer temporary ones – in some local authorities there are a lot of agency personal advisers, so young people are not able to develop a real relationship with their PA.”

Relationship building is key to the role, and the CSJ report calls for all personal advisers to receive training in the skills required to build relationships with young people. In addition to support from an adviser, some voluntary organisations offer mentoring and coaching programmes, providing emotional support and confidence building, while the Who Cares? Trust runs the Care Advice Line, which care leavers can call to get support with issues such as money worries, housing issues, health, and education.

The government hopes employers in the sector will create a Personal Adviser Apprenticeship as a new route into the role, in the same way that a group of employers is developing trailblazer apprenticeships in social care. The apprenticeship would be set at Level 3 (equivalent to A-level) and take between 12 and 18 months to complete. The hope is that such an apprenticeship would also encourage young people with experience of care to join the workforce.

“If you have that experience you would make a good personal adviser, because you would know how things work,” agrees Broadbent.

Cockett, however, cautions: “It is important to remember that while having experience of care can be helpful, it is also about other skills. This is a vulnerable group of young people that deserve the very best group of professionals, and personal advisers need to be very well trained.”

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