

Appendix 1

Views of young people

Children in Care Focus Group

1. What has been the most important thing that Brent council has been able to do for you since you have been in care?

The group reported that Brent Council had been able to help them take part in more activities since being in care. Examples given included the Brent Community Friends, Care in Action Group and the Brent Youth Parliament. One member of the group said that she had been able to join the scouts since being in care. Another participant spoke about the sports qualifications that he had taken. These courses were available for young people in care if they wanted to take them.

One participant said that being in care had helped them get through a difficult stage in their life. The support they had received had been important and it was good to have someone to talk to if they needed advice or help.

2. What are you looking forward to most in your future?

One of the young people said that they were in their final year at school studying A-levels and that they hoped to go on to university next year. Although the work was difficult, he hoped to study civil engineering at university. He said that the council had helped him make the right choices with regard to his education.

Another participant reported that she hoped to go to college once she had finished school and hoped to be a criminal lawyer when she was older.

3. What worries (or worried, for those people that have already left care) you most about the future, particularly once you leave the care of Brent Council?

The participants had a number of concerns for the future. They included:

Housing – one of the young people was worried about his housing situation, particularly if he decided to go to a university outside of London. Although he would have a place to live during university term time, he was concerned he would not have a place to come back to during the holidays if he lived outside of London. This had limited his choice of university and as a result he planned to study in London. He had two main concerns – lack of housing options and his financial situation.

The group was informed by Anne Edwards that housing issues often arise for care leavers around the age of 18-19, as they leave their foster homes. Moving away from London for university isn't really an option for this group of people because of their housing needs.

Support from the local authority – The young people were worried about losing the support of their social workers when they leave local authority care. If they needed advice or support they were unsure where they would go for this, or whether they would be able to contact their former social worker. One member of the group said that she was still in college and hoped to study A-levels and go on to university. It was comforting to her that if she was still in full time education that she would receive local authority support until she was 25.

Financial worries – Participants reported that they are worried about money and being able to afford their bills and living costs once they had left local authority care. One individual was pleased that help and advice was available from the Looked After Children Team when they

came to move into their own place. However, it was a concern that once they had been independent for a while that they would not have anywhere to turn if they did run into money trouble, or had other problems.

Work – Some members of the group reported that they were concerned about their employment prospects because of the current recession and the impact it is having on young people. They were concerned that even if they worked hard at school or college to get their qualification it would still be difficult to get a job in the current climate.

General - The group discussed some of the issues raised by the participants. One of the recurring themes was the difference between someone who is in care and someone brought up in their family home. A young person in care will move into their own place around the age of 18 or 19 and there is a feeling that they are then on their own – it is difficult to know where to go to advice if they have a problem. Someone brought up by their parents should be able to go to their parents if they have an issue. One young person, who had moved into his own flat, reported that he had a very good relationship with his foster family and still visited them and asked them for advice. He trusted them and felt that they were like his parents. His brother also lived in the same foster family, increasing the sense of the family unit.

It was noted by the officers that some young people will stay in foster care after the age of 18, through schemes such as “My Place”. However, some young people need additional support perhaps up to the age of 26 or 27 to give them the best chance of success in life.

4. What would you like the council to be able to do for you as you grow older and reach a stage where you will leave care?

The participants had a number of issues that they felt that the council could help them with as they moved on from care services.

Contact with family – Brent could do more to help young people stay in touch with their family, such as setting up get togethers, or keeping siblings together in care. People need resources to stay in touch with their families and the local authority could help with this (Contact with family is to be included in the looked after children pledge).

How long does the council have a duty to young people? - One young person said that he hoped to be able to give something back to Brent for helping him whilst he’s been in care. The point was also made that the council does not have a duty to people in care for life. At some stage individuals need to take responsibility for themselves. However, everyone is different and there shouldn’t necessarily be standard age when support for a care leaver ends. It should be determined by the social workers in conjunction with the individual concerned.

Help to set up their own home – The group felt that the council needed to be better at helping young care leavers find a place to live on their own, and assist them as they move in to their new place. It can be quite daunting having to sign a tenancy agreement, set up gas and electric services, actually move in to the new place etc. At the moment, assistance with this is varied, depending on the key worker. One person reported a good experience, where a key worker had been really helpful. Others were worried about this and what would be done when they came to leave care.

Education support post GCSE – Support for children in care in full time education beyond Year 11 was seen as important. Although booster classes take place for children taking their GCSE’s, similar support would be welcomed for young people taking A-levels or vocational qualifications.

School support – One member of the group reported that she was frustrated by the support her school gives her. She felt that the schools needed to honour their commitments as they're quick to promise things, but not so good at delivering. Others were less critical and really positive about the support they had from their school. It was felt that social workers and education support had to be better linked and co-ordinated. For example, social workers should be following up on education plans of looked after children.

5. How do you want to be kept informed of the task group's work and would you be interested in contributing to the final report and presenting it to members of the council?

It was agreed that the task group's recommendations relating to young people in care would be presented to Care in Action in January 2010.

Meeting with four residents of Willesden Hostel

The De Paul Hostel in Willesden is a medium term supported hostel that encourages young people to move on to live independently. The main hostel has 24 hour staff cover and young people stay there for up to two years. Within Brent there is also two houses with floating support (a step towards fully independent living) – Steps House (on the same site as the hostel) and a house on Callcott Road with 6 rooms. 86 young people have stayed in the Brent accommodation projects in 2009. 85% of those who've moved on do so positively to longer term housing – very few come back to the service because their move on has failed. 60% of service users are aged 18 or under. Residents in the hostels also have to cook for themselves and pay a service charge to help them get used to budget management. Rental income to Depaul usually comes from housing benefit, whilst Supporting People Funding and individual donations also provide funding for the organisation.

The primary client group for Depaul is vulnerable young people. Very few of the young people staying in the Depaul projects have been looked after children. This is usually because they already have social care involvement to support them through the transition from child to adult. Some young people staying in the Willesden hostel will be using drugs – cannabis is the biggest problem. If it's necessary they will be referred to drug support workers. The hostel will take in pregnant girls, but after around 5 months pregnancy they will be moved on to a mother and baby unit. Some young women staying at Willesden are fleeing domestic violence.

The task group met four residents of Willesden Hostel to discuss their experience of transition services. There was one male, aged 20 and three females, aged 17, 17 and 18.

The male had been living at the Willesden Hostel for around 18 months. He had become homeless aged 15 after falling out with his mother. He sofa surfed for a couple of years, staying with friends. At this time he was out of the system and not relying on any support from his local council (Westminster). He was referred to the Depaul hostel from St Martin's, having gone there because he wanted to sort his life out, and make something of himself. He also wanted to move out of Westminster borough. Depaul has given him stability, something that he hadn't had before moving there.

He had been in college since moving into the hostel, achieving a level 1 plumbing qualification. He was currently looking for an apprenticeship in order to complete his plumbing qualifications and start working as a plumber. He did have an apprenticeship but had to leave because he was having some personal problems. In the future he hopes to have a career in plumbing, but finding a good apprenticeship is difficult.

The first female was aged 17 and was originally from Somalia. She had lived with her sister when she first moved to the UK, but had moved out after falling out with her. She lived in emergency hostel accommodation for five months before being referred to Depaul by Start Plus. She had been living in the hostel for around a month.

She was pleased to be living in the hostel because it had given her the opportunity to study. She was learning English in college. She was also positive about the support that the council had given her via the referral process. She wasn't sure where she would be in one year's time, but she did have ambitions to go to university once she felt she had learnt English. She was not sure what she wanted to study. She also hoped to have her own place to live by the time she was 25. She was concerned about the future and whether she would be able to stay in Britain.

The second female was 17 and was from Brent. She had been attending John Kelly School and was studying A Levels. She had ambitions to go to university in September 2010. She had left home and moved to college because she was fleeing domestic violence. Her brother was said to be the perpetrator. She was referred to Depaul by Connexions and was extremely positive about her key worker there. She was still in touch with her mum and visited when she could but had to take steps to avoid seeing her brother. She had been living in the hostel for around one month.

The third female was 18 years old and was living in the hostel because she was fleeing domestic violence. She had been moved out of her home borough and into Brent and no longer had contact with her family. She had been in the hostel since June 2009, but expected to be moved on soon because she was 18. She was in college in Barnet and expected to move there. She thought that Depaul would be in touch with her for around 6 months after she'd moved on to ensure she settled in the private rented sector, where she was likely to be housed. Her relationship with her key worker was good and she wanted this to continue.

The young people raised the following issues about transition services and services they receive in general:

- It was difficult to get an apprenticeship that was needed in order to finish a plumbing qualification. Despite having sorted out other aspects of his life, this was a concern to the man that the group met.
- Each of the participants had different views of the criminal justice system – some found the police difficult (the male) others found them very helpful (one of the females fleeing domestic violence).
- Social workers had not been that helpful. This was the view of the female originally from Somalia and the one of the females fleeing domestic violence. Despite being relatively new to the UK, the young female from Somalia was not in touch with any Somali groups or clubs. When she left her sisters there was little help from the local authority, other than to place her in hostel accommodation before she was referred to Depaul.
- One of the females who left home because of domestic violence appreciated the freedom she had living in the hostel.
- All of the young people referred to the stability that their lives had now that they were living in the hostel rather than at home.