

Young People Leaving Care

A Four Nations Perspective

Janet Grauberg
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Contents

| | | |
|-----|---|----|
| | Preface | 3 |
| 1.0 | Introduction | 4 |
| 2.0 | Legislative and Policy Frameworks | 5 |
| 2.1 | England | 5 |
| | 2.1.1 Key Legislation | 5 |
| | 2.1.2 Current Policy Issues | 5 |
| 2.2 | Scotland | 6 |
| | 2.2.1 Key Legislation | 6 |
| | 2.2.2 Current Policy Issues | 7 |
| 2.3 | Wales | 7 |
| | 2.3.1 Key Legislation | 7 |
| | 2.3.2 Current Policy Issues | 8 |
| 2.4 | Northern Irelands | 9 |
| | 2.4.1 Key Legislation | 29 |
| | 2.4.2 Current Policy Issues | 12 |
| 3.0 | Comparing Outcomes Data for Care Leavers across the UK Nations | 11 |
| 4.0 | Policy differences across the four UK nations | 15 |
| 4.1 | Extending the Age of Support | 15 |
| | 4.1.1 Staying with foster carers/ in children's homes beyond 18 | 15 |
| 4.2 | The Role of the Corporate Parent | 17 |
| 4.3 | Improving educational outcomes | 18 |
| 5.0 | Conclusion | 19 |
| 6.0 | References | 20 |

Preface

The British Academy has undertaken a programme of work that seeks to re-frame debates around childhood in both the public and policy spaces and break down academic, policy and professional silos in order to explore new conceptualisations of children in policymaking.

The purpose of the policy case studies is to explore differences in approaches to policymaking around childhood taken by the governments of the four UK nations over the past 30 years.

The subjects of the case studies (Young People Leaving Care and Child Poverty) have been selected because they exemplify some of the differences in the drivers of policy development across the four UK nations. These differences are variously reflected in legislation, policy statements, and in approaches to practice.

The Care Leavers¹ Case Study seeks to summarise the policy priorities of the four UK nations for this group of young people, review outcomes for which data is publicly available, and discuss a number of areas where policy differences can be identified.

More information on the Childhood programme can be found at www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/childhood

¹ "Care Leaver" is the term most often used in legislation. A recent consultation in England suggested that young people themselves prefer the term "care experienced young person" or "care experienced adult", as appropriate (TACT,2019). This term is used where the text is not referring specifically to the legislative or policy context.

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

1.0 Introduction

For the last thirty years there has been a steady expansion of government engagement in the lives of young people who are leaving care. The term ‘care leaver’ is applied to a young person over 16 who has been in the care of the local authority for a significant time in their childhood and/or teenage years.

The precise definition of a care leaver and the support to which they are entitled varies across the UK nations. In particular Scotland has a different policy and legal framework for the care system which precedes the recent devolution settlements, and which informs different definitions, processes and a different ethos. Further, each UK nation collects and publishes different statistics (Scottish Government, 2018(a)).

Noting that the definitions vary across the nations, the latest data on the numbers of young people defined as care leavers in each UK nation is below:

- In England there were 39,580 care leavers aged 17–21 at March 2018 (Department for Education, 2018(a))
- In Scotland there were 6,109 young people eligible for aftercare, of which 4,488 are 16-21 and the remainder 22+ at July 2018 (Scottish Government, 2019(a))
- In Wales there were 646 Care Leavers, aged 16-18 at March 2018 (Statistics for Wales, 2018)
- In Northern Ireland there were 549 Care Leavers aged 16-19 at March 2018. (Department of Health, 2018)

The core legislation relating to the care system in England is the Children Act (1989), alongside the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Detailed provisions for Wales are now contained in the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014. Each of the UK nations has also enacted further specific legislation or made additional legislative provisions relating to young people leaving care.

Government policy has focused on care leavers because their outcomes are consistently poorer than those of their peers, in terms of educational achievement, employment, progression to higher education, mental health and rates of homelessness.

Research by Professor Mike Stein indicates that care experienced young people premature independence, moving to live on their own much earlier than other young people (Stein, 2005). This is compounded by their experience of uncertain identities - most young people struggle with their identity as they grow into adulthood but care leavers have less support and family connections to help them develop a secure sense of who they are. Care experienced young people also typically lack support networks.

Over the last thirty years governments across the UK have introduced a succession of policy initiatives to improve these outcomes. These have included new data collections, performance indicators and targets, coupled with focused programmes, for example to allow young people to stay on with their foster carers after they turn 18, or to encourage local authorities (LAs) to do more to involve those with care experience in decisions about local services.

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

2.0 Legislative and Policy Frameworks

This section summarises the key legislation in each of the four UK nations relating to care leavers and highlight some of the current policy issues in each nation.

2.1 England

2.1.1 Key Legislation

The key legislation relating to young people leaving care in England is the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 (Roberts et al, 2019). This introduced requirements for local authorities to assess the needs of the young person as they left care; appoint a personal adviser for them; and develop a pathway plan. This support was available to care leavers up to age 18, or to age 21 if the young person was in education.

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 required local authorities to provide assistance to care leavers in education (including a £2,000 bursary for those in higher education); and extended support from a Personal Adviser to age 21 for all care leavers, and to 25 if they remained in education.

In 2015, following the Children & Families Act 2014, the “Staying Put” policy was introduced, requiring local authorities to support young people to remain with their former foster carers to age 21 where both the young person and carer want the arrangement to continue.

Since 2018, following the Children and Social Work Act 2017, local authorities have been required to publish on their website details of their offer of support to young people leaving their care (the “local offer”). This Act also extended the entitlement to support from a personal adviser to all care leavers up to the age of 25, not just those in full time education.

2.1.2 Current Policy Issues

In July 2016 the Government published ‘Keep on Caring’, a wide-ranging Care Leaving Strategy (HM Government, 2016). This set out five outcomes that statutory support should address:

- Being better prepared and supported to deal with the challenges of living independently
- Improved access to education, employment and training
- More stability, safety and security
- Improved access to health support, in particular help to maintain emotional health and well-being
- Achieving financial stability.

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

In 2017, the Government appointed a National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers to work with LAs, Mark Riddell, formerly the Head of Leaving Care at Trafford Council. He published his first annual report in October 2018, highlighting examples of LA good practice (Department for Education, 2018 (b)). The Government is also funding a number of innovation pilots, including “Staying Close” a variant of Staying Put for those leaving residential care, new approaches to support continuing relationships with former carers and professionals, and to identify additional family members, and alternative delivery models such as a Social Impact Bond.

Policy appears to be giving greater focus to the quality of relationships with friends, family and professionals to support care leavers in transition. The “Keep on Caring” Strategy recognises that Personal Advisers may not be able to provide all the support that care experienced young person needs for a good transition to adulthood. It is not possible to assess whether this is yet having a consistent impact on LA practice.

Accommodation continues to be an intractable issue. As at March 2018 67% of 17-year-old and 80% of 21-year-old care leavers in England were housed in accommodation their LA considered as suitable (Department for Education, 2018 (a)). A 2017 Centrepoint report surveyed care leavers and practitioners and found that 26 per cent had sofa surfed and 14 per cent had slept rough since leaving care (Centrepoint, 2017). There are particular challenges for those placed out of borough during their time in care.

Young people with experience of being in care continue to describe rapid and unsupported transitions to independence, without relationships that they can rely on for practical and emotional support. A 2017 Coram Voice review of the evidence on care leavers’ transitions notes ‘Young people said that services usually focused on helping them develop practical skills but felt too little attention was given to preparing them emotionally for leaving care’ (Baker, 2017).

2.2 Scotland

2.2.1 Key legislation

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 (as amended) provides that local authorities have a legal duty to prepare young people for leaving care or ceasing to be looked after; and provide advice and assistance to young people who have ceased to be looked after on or after the date when they turn 16. Local authorities are legally required to provide aftercare support until the care leaver turns 19.

Scotland’s Staying Put policy – called “Continuing Care” – was introduced through guidance published in 2013 and consolidated into legislation by the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, (Scottish Government 2013 (a), (b)). The Scottish Government explained that, as a result, a young person born after 1 April 1999 who is looked after in foster, kinship or residential care is eligible to request Continuing Care and, if their carer is willing to provide it, they can remain in their current care placement until they turn 21 (Scottish Government, 2016 (a)). The local authority is required to support this placement unless they judge that the placement would significantly adversely affect their wellbeing. In addition, the 2014 Act made any young person who ceases to be looked after on or after their sixteenth birthday and is less than 26 years of age eligible (between the ages of 16 and 19) or potentially eligible (between the ages of 19 and 26) for aftercare. This applies to all care leavers regardless of the placement type while looked after (excluding secure accommodation). The Act also extended responsibilities to promote the interests and wellbeing of care leavers to health bodies and Further Education providers (Scottish Government, 2016 (b)).

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

In October 2017 the Scottish Government announced its intention to exempt care leavers from paying Council Tax. This was followed by the publication of regulations which came into force on 1 April 2018, with Scotland thereby becoming the first UK nation to allow care leavers (up to the age of 26) to be exempt from Council Tax.

2.2.2 Current Policy Issues

A wide-ranging speech by the Scotland Children & Young People’s Commissioner in October 2017 highlighted that young people with experience of care said that they were not loved, listened to or made to feel secure (Children & Young People’s Commissioner Scotland, 2017). It noted the increasing prevalence of homelessness among this group and the increasing use of temporary accommodation by LAs to house vulnerable young people. It also highlighted areas of progress, in particular the growth of Champions Boards – groups of care experienced young people working with professionals to identify and challenge issues in the local area.

Homelessness, and the implementation of the Continuing Care legislation continues to be a live policy debate, with a report published in 2019 raising concerns about children being moved on from their accommodation at short notice (CELCIS, 2019).

From 2017, care leavers accessing higher education have been entitled to a bursary of £8,100 per year, non income-assessed and non-repayable. This has been welcomed, but there are still a number of issues around impact and implementation (Scottish Throughcare And Aftercare Forum, 2019).

Scotland has also announced an independently chaired Care Review, intended to be a ‘root and branch’ review of the care system, and due to report in 2020. After the initial round of consultation an initial list of “Intentions” has been published (Independent Care Review, 2019). The most relevant to care experienced young people is:

“Aftercare will be designed around the needs of the person leaving care supporting them to lead a fulfilling life, for as long as they need it.”

2.3 Wales

2.3.1 Key legislation

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 came into force in April 2016. The Act provides the legal framework for improving the well-being of people who need care and support, and carers who need support, and for transforming social services in Wales. It makes children’s wellbeing the central focus of social care services for children and young people and requires local authorities to have “due regard” to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child when exercising their functions under the Act (Drakeford, 2015).

With regard to care leavers, Sections 103-118 of the Act requires LAs to assess a young person’s needs for education, training, employment and the provision of accommodation.

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

Young people leaving care are entitled to:

- **Housing:** Young people in foster care can stay living with their foster carers up to the age of 21 (or 25 if in education) under the When I'm Ready scheme, subject to agreement. LAs have to offer care leavers support to access suitable housing up to the age of 21 and care leavers have "priority status" on housing lists until they turn 22. A Leaving Care Grant of up to £2,000 is available to help set up home.
- **Education or training:** Young people aged 19 or over can apply for the Assembly Learning Grant for Further Education of up to £1,500 for full time studies. LAs also fund education grants or "bursaries". The Higher Education Bursary is £2,000. Care leavers aged 18-21 can claim Income Support and Housing Benefit if studying below degree level, provided they enrolled before their 19th birthday (Student Finance Wales, 2019).
- **Support:** The local authority must keep in touch with their care leavers up by allocating a personal adviser to each young person up to the age of 25. LAs have to arrange suitable accommodation for care leavers aged 16 or 17 and have to pay for furnishings. Care leavers in Wales are now exempt from paying council tax, and the Welsh Government provides a £1m fund to support local authorities to support care experienced young people to transition into independence (Welsh Government, 2017).

2.3.2 Current Policy Issues

The Children's Commissioner for Wales's 2017 report "Hidden Ambitions" highlighted three inequalities, compared with other young people in Wales (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2017). Firstly, young people are being moved out of foster care or residential care as soon as they turn 18, when this is in the middle of an important year of studies such as A-levels. Secondly, post-18 living arrangements known as "When I'm Ready" do not allow young people to stay in their residential care home past the age of 18, unlike young people in foster care. And finally, support for care leavers ends at the age of 21 unless that young person is engaged in education or training. (This has since been addressed by the extension of personal adviser support to all care-experienced young people).

The report recommends that all LAs should have a care leavers' forum to gather and offer views to the LA about the services being provided. It also recommends better planning of housing options for young people, including using the Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework developed by Barnardo's, coupled with practical independent living skills such as opening a bank account, paying bills and cooking, supported by a consistent Wales-wide offer of grants for setting up home, rather than the current position where LAs have discretion. It recommends that care experienced young people should receive additional support to help them navigate the benefits and housing benefit systems and that councils should offer training and job opportunities to care leavers, and use their links to local businesses to offer a wider range of training & employment options.

A follow-on report in 2018 noted progress on the issues of LAs providing training opportunities, some closer working with housing, and additional independent living training, and a generally higher level of awareness of the needs of care leavers. It also recommended more opportunities to share good practice between LAs and reiterated the key recommendations above (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2018).

Most recently, the Welsh Government announced in February 2019 that Council Tax was to be scrapped for care leavers across Wales (Welsh Government, 2019).

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

2.4 Northern Ireland

2.4.1 Key Legislation

The Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002, which came into force in 2005, “...aims to improve the life prospects of young people who are looked after by HSC [Health and Social Care] Trusts as they make the transition to independent living and become care leavers”. To achieve this, the Act placed new and enhanced duties on HSC Trusts to support young people who are leaving care.

The main aims of the Act are to prevent premature discharges from care, improve preparation, planning and consistency of support for young care leavers, and to strengthen arrangements for financial assistance. Central to the Act, are duties to assess and meet individual’s needs, provide Personal Advisers and develop pathway planning for young people up to the age of 21 (or beyond if they are continuing in education).

In addition, the 2012 “Standards for Leaving Care Services in Northern Ireland” established “minimum standards for leaving and aftercare services. The Standards specify the arrangements, services and procedures that need to be in place and implemented to ensure the delivery of quality services for young people leaving care” (Department of Health, 2019).

The equivalent of “Staying Put” is called the “Going the Extra Mile” scheme, which was launched in 2006.

The aim of this scheme is to promote continuity and stability of living arrangements in post-care life for young people living with foster carers by ensuring that financial support is available to assist carers to continue to meet the care, accommodation and support needs of these young people until they reach the age of 21. Allied to this, the scheme also aims to promote better outcomes for young people leaving care in relation to training, employment and education.

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

2.4.2 Current Policy Issues

In 2017 a coalition of agencies working with and for young people aged 16 plus who are leaving the care system, led by Barnardo's NI, published a report making six key recommendations (Access All Areas, NI, 2017):

1. Deliver fully resourced statutory support for all care leavers to at least age 25.
2. Care-proof all government policies: Care leavers should be treated as a 'protected group', with the potential impact of policy changes measured through Equality Impact Assessments.
3. Publish disaggregated data collection to age 25.
4. Firmly establish care leaver 'champions', including an All Party Parliamentary Group for looked after children and care leavers.
5. Strengthen rights and participation through strengthening existing/or creating new forums to enable care leavers to influence policies, practice and services, which impact on their lives.
6. Ensure the needs of particularly vulnerable groups within the care leaver population are addressed.

In May 2018 the Northern Ireland Government responded with the launch of a consultation entitled "Strategy for Looked After Children: Improving Children's Lives" (Department of Health, Department for Education, 2018). The key areas for development in relation to care leavers are better transition from CAMHS to adult mental health services; better support at University; expanding housing options; and continuing contact with friends and family, including former carers, when leaving care.

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

3.0 Comparing Outcomes Data for Care Leavers across the UK Nations

While the systems are broadly similar, there is no consistent definition of the concept of “care leaver” or the support that is offered to young people leaving care, linked to underlying differences in the care system in the four UK nations.

This is seen most clearly in the statistics which are collected and published, and which vary significantly from country to country. For example, Wales and Northern Ireland publish data relating to young people leaving care up to the young person’s 19th birthday, England up to 21 and Scotland up to 25. Some countries publish additional data relating to accommodation, others focus on educational achievement or economic activity.

The UK Statistics Authority publishes a note on comparative statistics which summarises the data collected (UK Statistics Authority, 2013). This is reproduced in the table below. This makes comparative analysis of the outcomes for care leavers, and how they might be linked to differences in policy approach, rather difficult. The publication notes (p.20) that “Nearly all the users who responded... expressed some degree of interest in making comparisons across the UK, but those who had actually attempted such comparisons found the exercise hugely frustrating.”

Care Leavers

| England | Scotland | Wales | Northern Ireland |
|--|--|---|---|
| <p>Care leavers on 17th-21st birthday</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accommodation • activity | <p>Young people ceasing to be looked after on or after 16th birthday and up to 26th birthday.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • age at time of ceasing to be looked after • destination on discharge • final accommodation type, including continuing care • pathway plan and pathway co-ordinator on date they ceased to be looked after <p>Young people eligible for aftercare services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • age, gender, ethnicity • disability status • accommodation type • economic activity • episodes of homelessness since becoming eligible for aftercare services | <p>Care leavers aged 16 and over</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accommodation • activity • age, gender • reason care ceased • personal adviser • pathway plan • accommodation | <p>Care leavers 16-18</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • educational attainment • health • accommodation • activity • age, gender, religion, disability • duration of care <p>Care leavers on 19th birthday</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accommodation • activity • age, gender, religion, disability • duration of care • young parent status |

With this caveat, the table below sets out published information on outcomes for care leavers across the UK nations.

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes Data for Care Leavers across the UK Nations

Policy differences across the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

Outcomes for Care Leavers

| Outcome Area | England Source is Department for Education (2018(a)), unless otherwise specified. | Scotland Source is (Scottish Government (2019(a)) unless otherwise specified. | Wales Source is Statistics for Wales (2018) unless otherwise specified. | Northern Ireland Source is Department of Health (2018) unless otherwise specified. |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| Number of Care Leavers | There were 39,580 care leavers in England at 31 March 2018, aged 17-21. | There were 6,109 young people eligible for after care in Scotland at July 2018, of which 4,488 are 16-21 and the remainder 22+. | There were 646 Care Leavers at 31 March 2018, aged 16-18. | There were 549 care leavers in Northern Ireland at 31 March 2018, aged 16-19, of which 313 were 16-18 and 236 were 19. |
| Contact with LA or Health & Social Care Trust | In the year ending 31 March 2018, local authorities were in touch with 88% of 19 to 21 year olds care leavers, although in touch rates vary by age group, with LAs in touch with 76% of the 620 17 year old care leavers, 94% of the 10,360 18 year old care leavers and 88% of the 28,510 19-21 year old care leavers. | Of those young people who had reached 16 years of age at the time they ceased to be looked after during 1 August 2017 to 31 July 2018, 72% had a pathway plan and 70% had a pathway co-ordinator. Where a young person's final placement type was 'at home' they were less likely to have a pathway plan or a pathway co-ordinator than if the final placement type was 'away from home'. There were 6,109 young people reported to be eligible for aftercare services on 31 July 2018, of whom 62% were known to be receiving aftercare. | As at March 2016, 465 care leavers aged 19, (93%), were in touch with their local authority (StatsWales, 2016). Note this data is no longer updated. | Some 94% of care leavers aged 19 were in contact with Health and Social Care Trusts; with 68% in contact at least once a month. In terms of becoming a parent, 12% of all care leavers aged 19 were parents, with 18% of female care leavers aged 19 becoming mothers on or before their 19th birthday. Note – this data is only published for Northern Ireland. |
| Staying Put or equivalent Schemes | The number and proportion of 19- and 20-year olds who ceased to be looked after on their 18th birthday and who were still living with their former foster carers ('Staying Put') increased slightly from 25% in 2017 to 26% in 2018. In 2018, 1,800 (55%) children who ceased to be looked after in a foster placement aged 18 remained with their foster carers 3 months after their 18th birthday. This is up from 51% last year. | Continuing Care placements were recorded and only 3.4% of those young people were recorded as being in Continuing Care in 2017/18 (a total of 208 young people). Some local authorities did not provide any data on numbers of young people in Continuing Care for 2017/18 and this data is underdeveloped. | In 2018 20% of 18-year olds staying in a "When I am Ready" arrangement with their former foster parent(s) | As at March 2018 79 (25%) of 16-18-year-old care leavers were living with their former foster carers, of which 68 (22%) were in "Going the Extra Mile" Placements. 71 (31%) of 19-year-old care leavers were living with their former foster carers, of which 68 (29%) were in "Going the Extra Mile" Placements. |

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Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes Data for Care Leavers across the UK Nations

Policy differences across the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

| Outcome Area | England Source is Department for Education (2018(a)), unless otherwise specified. | Scotland Source is (Scottish Government (2019(a)) unless otherwise specified. | Wales Source is Statistics for Wales (2018) unless otherwise specified. | Northern Ireland Source is Department of Health (2018) unless otherwise specified. |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| Education & Employment | <p>For 17-year olds, 35% were in education, 14% in training or employment and 28% were not in employment, education or training and for 18 year olds the figures were 48%, 17% and 30%.</p> <p>For 19 to 21 year old care leavers, 6% were known to be in higher education, 20% were in other education, 25% were in training or employment and 39% were known to be not in education, employment or training (which is compared to around 12% of all young people aged 19 to 21 years).</p> <p>Note – Data on higher education is drawn from Local Authority statistics. Others have argued (Harrison, 2017) that the number of care leavers who progress to HE is significantly larger – many will start after their 21st birthday or will no longer be in contact with their local authority.</p> | <p>47% of those receiving aftercare for whom current activity is known were in education, training or employment. (Scottish Government, 2019(c)).</p> <p>In 2017/18 only 16% of leavers had one qualification at level 6 or better (compared with 61% of all school leavers) (Scottish Government, 2019(b)).</p> <p>Figures from 2017/18 show that 76% of children in care for the full year were in positive destinations. This is compared to 93% of all school leavers. (Scottish Government, 2019(b)).</p> <p>The rate of exclusions among care experienced children is much higher than in the general school population: 169 cases per 1,000 pupils in care for the full year, compared with 27 per 1,000 in the general school population (Scottish Government, 2018(b)). Note – this data is only published every two years, and only for Scotland.</p> | <p>In 2016, at age 19, 43% of care leavers were not in training, education or employment (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2017).</p> | <p>69% of care leavers aged 16-18 had GCSEs or other qualifications. The proportion of care leavers who had 5 GCSEs (A*-C) or higher was 27%. Note – this data is only published for Northern Ireland.</p> <p>Of care leavers aged 16-18 for whom information was available, half (50%) were in education or training, 12% were working and 38% were unemployed or economically inactive.</p> <p>Of the care leavers aged 19 for whom information was available, 65% were in education, training or employment; a higher proportion than in 2016/17 (61%) and higher than 19 year old care leavers in England (60%).</p> |

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Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes Data for Care Leavers across the UK Nations

Policy differences across the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

| Outcome Area | England Source is Department for Education (2018(a)), unless otherwise specified. | Scotland Source is (Scottish Government (2019(a)) unless otherwise specified. | Wales Source is Statistics for Wales (2018) unless otherwise specified. | Northern Ireland Source is Department of Health (2018) unless otherwise specified. |
|---------------------|--|--|---|--|
| Housing | <p>For 19 to 21-year-old care leavers, 35% were living independently, 12% were living in semi-independent transitional accommodation, 12% were living with parents or relatives and 8% were living with former foster carers, similar to last year. In 2018, 84% of care leavers now aged 19, 20 or 21 years were in accommodation considered suitable⁹; as were 90% of 18-year olds and 67% of 17-year olds. However, information is not known for 9% of 19 to 21-year olds, 5% of 18-year olds and 23% of 17 year olds (which helps to explain the low proportion in suitable accommodation).</p> | <p>Note – data on suitability of accommodation is not published for Scotland, but practitioners estimate that between 30-50% of individuals who are homeless could be care experienced (Who Cares Scotland, 2019).</p> | <p>There were 646 young persons aged 16 and over leaving care between 1 April 2017 and 31 March 2018. Of which, 598 (93 per cent) were in suitable accommodation at the date they ceased to be looked after; 158 of those were with parents or relatives in suitable accommodation.</p> | <p>A quarter (25%) of the care leavers aged 16-18 were living with their former foster carers (kinship and non-kinship). Most of these (68 out of 79) were in GEM placements. 26% were living with their parents, 13% living independently, 20% in supported accommodation and the other 16% in residential accommodation, living with friends, living with family, custody and other accommodation.</p> <p>On their 19th birthday 24% (54) were living in independent accommodation, 19% were living with kinship foster carers and 13% with non-kinship foster carers). 68 of these 71 former foster care placements were GEM arrangements. 18% were living with their parents and 15% were in supported lodgings.</p> |

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

4.0 Policy differences across the four UK nations

The descriptions above indicate that the four UK nations have consistently sought to improve outcomes for care experienced young people and have largely identified similar issues as a focus for policy intervention, although the approaches and policy levers deployed have been different from country to country.

The following paragraphs discuss a number of policy areas where the approach has differed and provide some comment about why this divergence may have taken place.

4.1 Extending the Age of Support

A core provision of the legislative and policy framework since the early 2000s across all the UK nations has been the requirement on LAs to provide a personal adviser to every care leaver, who acts as a key point of contact for all services, and works with the young person to draw up a shared pathway plan stating their goals, such as education and employment plans, as well as housing options and other issues such as contact with family members. The statistics collected show that generally LAs are in touch with between 88% and 94% of young people aged 19, with the numbers falling as the young people get older (Department for Education, 2018 (a); Statistics for Wales, 2018; Department of Health, 2018; Scottish Government, 2019(a)).

There is a general trend towards extending the age of support with England, Scotland and Wales recently introducing legislation to offer personal adviser support until age 25. Extension of support to age 25 is a current campaign by the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland.

4.1.1 Staying with foster carers/ in children's homes beyond 18

As well as extending the duties on local authorities to support care leavers for longer, there has also been pressure to reduce the requirement on young people leaving care to live independently and manage their own budgets, bills, employment and education on their own. All four nations are now implementing some kind of scheme to enable young people to stay in their foster placement beyond the age of 18, but this varies in how far it has been adopted.

In England the “Staying Put” scheme was introduced in May 2014. In 2018 55% of young people leaving care while in a foster placement were staying with their former foster carer 3 months later, and the proportion of 19- and 20-year olds staying with their former foster carers was 26% (Department for Education, 2018 (a)).

In Scotland the “Continuing Care” scheme was introduced in April 2015 but 2018 was the first year of data collection. Only 3.4% of young people were recorded as being in such a placement. (Scottish Government, 2019(a)).

In Wales “When I am ready” arrangements were introduced in April 2016 and in 2018 20% of care leavers were in such an arrangement with their former foster carer (Statistics for Wales, 2018).

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes Data for Care Leavers across the UK Nations

Policy differences across the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

In Northern Ireland the “Going the Extra Mile (GEM)” scheme was introduced in 2006. In 2018 22% of 16-18-year olds and 29% of 19 year olds were in a GEM placement (Department of Health, 2018).

Debates continue in each country about the scope of the policy and the effectiveness of implementation. In England, the Fostering Network suggests that there are ongoing concerns about financial support and training for foster carers, and a number of issues are still being worked through, for example, supporting care leavers at University to return to their former foster carers during holidays (Fostering Network, 2019). There are also trials (through the Staying Close scheme) of various ways of enabling young people to stay connected to a residential home.

In Wales conversations continue about the experience of the “When I am Ready” scheme, and the extent to which young people are informed about their rights to stay on in their placements (Voices from Care, Cymru, 2019). A consultation was completed in Wales in 2018 about young people’s views on extension of the scheme to residential care. The Welsh Government is currently working with accommodation providers and other stakeholders to examine how the “When I am Ready” principles can be extended to young people leaving residential care.

In Scotland, since April 2019, the ability for young people to continue where they had been living has been extended to all care leavers up to the age of 21, whether they were in foster care, residential care or kinship care. However, a 2017 report suggested that staff were uncertain about how much to promote the scheme, citing concern about costs and impact on the availability of placements for younger children in care (McGhee, 2017). Concerns about young people moving to supported accommodation in a rush were expressed in a 2018 report (Frame, 2018), and a report published in 2019 suggested that young people were still being moved on from their accommodation at short notice (CELCIS, 2019).

The 2018 NI Strategy for Looked After Children notes that GEM is available beyond age 21 and that there are plans to develop a similar scheme for those in residential care (Department of Health, Department for Education, 2019).

The differences between the four nations in the proportion of care leavers staying on in these placements may be attributable to the longevity of the policy – with Northern Ireland and England having greater proportions in such placements.

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

4.2 The Role of the Corporate Parent

Since the early 2000s the concept of the “Corporate Parent” has been used to encourage local authorities to act in ways that a parent would do for their own child. Over the past 10 years there have been moves in England, Scotland and Wales to extend the scope of these responsibilities, but they have differed in focus and scope.

The Welsh Government has made a commitment to ensure that corporate parenting duties are extended and acknowledged across all public services. The existing guidance for local authority Elected Members is being updated and the Minister is expected to report in autumn 2019 on plans to:

1. Strengthen the responsibilities under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 on local authorities and health boards
2. Develop a corporate parenting charter for other public bodies in Wales
3. Consult on the term corporate parenting (likely in 2020)
4. Develop statutory guidance to other devolved public services to allow for a full extension.

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 places legal duties on a wide range of public bodies (including health boards, schools and colleges) to promote the interests of care leavers. In 2015 an alliance of voluntary organisations launched the “Scottish Care Leavers Covenant” to support the implementation of the 2014 Act (Scottish Care Leavers Covenant, 2019). Corporate sign-up and endorsement by public and voluntary sector organisations to a set of underpinning principles, along with a series of specific actions set out in the Agenda for Change aims to bring consistent improvement to support and services and to address the ‘postcode lottery’ of provision that exists.

In England the focus of corporate parenting has been on the private sector, and the Care Leaver Covenant is funded by the Department for Education and was launched in 2018 (Department for Education, 2018(c)). It allows public, private and voluntary sector organisations to pledge support, including apprenticeships, work experience, and free or discounted goods and services. It is particularly reaching out to private sector employers, with companies such as Kier and Barclays, as well as government departments such as the DWP offering training opportunities.

In summary, signing up to the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant indicates support for the principles, whereas signing up to the English Covenant means the organisation is offering training or other opportunities to care leavers. This example can be interpreted as resulting from a different political viewpoint, with the Scottish Nationalist Government focusing their attention on public bodies and the English Conservative Government seeking a wider role for the private sector.

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

4.3 Improving educational outcomes

The key data collected on care leavers' outcomes across all four UK nations relates to education and employment. At age 19, the proportion of care leavers not in Education, Training or Employment (NEET) in 2018 was 39% in England, 53% in Scotland, 43% in Wales and 35% in Northern Ireland (The Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2017; Department for Education, 2018; Department of Health, 2018(a); Scottish Government, 2019(c)).

The lower numbers of care leavers who are NEET in England may reflect a greater policy focus within both the education and care systems on attainment at GCSE level over a considerable period of time, and considerable investment in England into "Virtual School Heads" whose role is to advocate on behalf of children in care within the education system. Some councils in Scotland and Wales have introduced "virtual school heads" but their appointment is not mandatory, as it is in England.

Further, performance targets for this group were introduced in England and Wales in 1998, but were abolished in Wales in 2006. In their 2012 report the Wales Audit Office criticised this decision, arguing that there was no strategy for improving educational outcomes for looked after children (Wales Audit Office, 2012). In response, the Welsh Government set out a strategy for improving educational outcomes in 2016 (Welsh Government, 2016). An assessment of progress made in March 2018 by the Fostering Network suggested that foster carers had seen some changes, but that there was still variable awareness of the additional funding available to schools for looked after children (the Pupil Development Grant) and variable emphasis on this issue from local authorities (Fostering Network, 2018).

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

5.0 Conclusion

This brief study has demonstrated four main points. Firstly, debates about care leaver policy across the four UK nations need to be informed by an understanding that the size and legal definition of the cohort varies significantly from nation to nation, and that the lack of comparable data makes meaningful comparisons of cross-national data difficult.

Secondly, all four Governments continue to seek improvements in outcomes for care leavers across a range of areas, including housing, education and employment. But the relative priority given to these outcomes varies from nation to nation, with England, for example, giving more priority to education and employment for those aged 16-21, Wales recently making educational outcomes a priority, and Scotland, for example, seeking to extend the age of support to an older group. The policy levers deployed also vary, as can be seen in the example above about the approach to corporate parenting. Other examples include the Westminster government's employment of a National Adviser to work with local authorities, and the decisions by the governments of Wales and Scotland to scrap council tax for care leavers.

Thirdly, it is challenging to link the variation in outcomes for care leavers with the current policy interventions. Apart from the policy implementation lag, outcomes for care leavers are greatly influenced by wider policies relating to children in care, and all children, as illustrated by the example of the greater focus on educational outcomes in England. A better understanding of why outcomes for care leaver vary across the four nations would require a much more detailed analysis of factors affecting children in care, and may be less meaningful than a focus on addressing the outcomes gap between care experienced young people and those who have not been in care.

Finally, an analysis of the legislative and policy framework alone may mask similarities or differences in how practitioners and young people experience the system. For example, it might be hoped that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which explicitly underpins Welsh legislation, leads to distinctive practice, but it is not possible to assess this from the policy documentation alone. Similarly, it could be argued that Scotland does have a focus on improving access to Further and Higher Education, but it is within a policy framework which recognizes that access to ongoing relational support and good quality accommodation is also required for a care experienced young person to succeed. A fuller analysis of how the different legislative and policy frameworks across the four UK nations influence outcomes for young people leaving care would seek to hear the views of care experienced young people themselves, and of those who work with them.

Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

6.0 References

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Chronology

Introduction

Legislative and
Policy Frameworks

Comparing Outcomes
Data for Care Leavers
across the UK Nations

Policy differences across
the four UK nations

Conclusion

References

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