



Making a Positive Contribution in Leaving Care Services

The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum



National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum

The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF) is a national network of 48 local authorities from England and five Health and Social Services Trusts from Northern Ireland who work together to improve the quality of their services through benchmarking and shared learning. Our aim is to improve outcomes for young people in care as they make their transition to independence. The Forum is facilitated by the National Care Advisory Service (NCAS). Membership of NLCBF is open to any UK leaving care service provider.

The Forum meets for two days, four times a year and works to benchmark services against national standards and assessment criteria within the framework of the five ECM outcomes as well as discussing current issues, policy issues, identifying good practice examples and useful tools. The Forum also informs policy development at national level.

More recently the Forum has been a key partner in the What Makes the Difference? Project (WMTD) – a European Union (EU) funded project working to identify ways to improve outcomes – as a way to bring additional added-value to members' involvement. In addition, NCAS supports member authorities to develop workplans on the issues being addressed through the National Leaving Care Standards.

National Care Advisory Service

The National Care Advisory Service (NCAS) is the national advice, support and development service for young people in and from care (age 13-25), their corporate parents and those who support them.

NCAS works at local, regional, national and EU levels to develop solutions based on good corporate parenting that include and empower young people and influence professionals and policy-makers to continually improve service quality and outcomes.

NCAS builds strategic partnerships to achieve its aims and works as a link between local authorities, voluntary sector partners and regional & national government as well as the EU.

It aims to provide opportunities, new experiences and skills development for young people.

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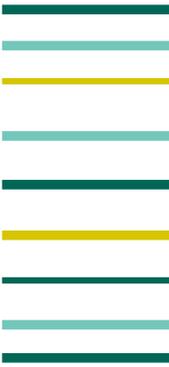
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5. MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION

STANDARD

- 5 Every young person is encouraged and supported to make a positive contribution to the development and delivery of services, to the planning and decision making that affects their lives and to their local communities.

ACTION CRITERIA

- 5.1 The local authority has a written policy and strategy for young people's involvement, including an implementation plan that is developed and regularly reviewed and evaluated with, and by, young people.
- 5.2 Structures and processes exist to ensure that young people are actively involved in the formulation and implementation of the local authority pledge and other policies that directly affect them, as well as in the planning, organisation, development, delivery and review of local authority services and in the recruitment, selection, induction and training of staff and carers.
- 5.3 Formal structures and processes for service user involvement include, but extend beyond, involvement in the Children in Care Council.
- 5.4 Care plan and pathway plan procedures ensure that young people's views are taken into account.
- 5.5 Where the lead professional holds a personal budget on behalf of a young person, decisions about how this is spent are made in consultation with the young person and their carer.
- 5.6 Young people are encouraged, supported and assisted to develop the skills necessary to advocate for themselves, both individually and collectively.
- 5.7 Young people are encouraged and supported to take part in volunteering and other opportunities in their local communities and within the local authority, including providing peer support to other young people in care.
- 5.8 Young people are given clear information about the range of services and support available to them, as specified in the local authority pledge, and about their rights and responsibilities both as young people and as citizens. This information should include how they can access those services and the support available.

Introduction

The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum's (NLCBF) activity is focused around the National Leaving Care Standards. This Benchmarking year we have been looking at the Making a Positive Contribution Standard. Over the course of the year we have explored and shared our current practice, had presentations on good practice in the field and taken steps to create a structure in which young people from our authorities are able to contribute directly and collaboratively with the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum.

The Making a Positive Contribution Standards is about ensuring that children and young people in and leaving care are fully involved in decision making that affects them and the service that is provided to them. Although there is a separate standard for Corporate Parenting, work that comes under the Making a Positive Contribution standard is critical to a local authority's ability to be a good and effective parent. The practice that is described in this document is rooted in the belief that local authorities have a duty to be the best parent that they can for each child or young person in their care: good parents involve their children in decision-making and provide them with the skills they need to be so.

The purpose of this document is to give a flavour of the work we have completed over the year with a particular focus on good practice examples and the philosophical underpinning of this work. We hope that other practitioners will find it useful as they think about how young people can be better involved and engaged in leaving care services.

This document has focused on four main areas relating to the Standard:

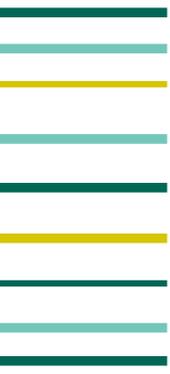
- Involvement of Young People in Decision Making and Planning
- The Pledge
- Children in Care Councils
- Involving Young People in Employment Opportunities

In each section, as well as a discussion of key practice issues, you will find examples of good practice and development activity from Benchmarking authorities. The first section includes a description of the work completed over the year that has explored the involvement of young people in the forum.

The Forum began the 2008-09 year by looking at the Making a Positive Contribution standard and benchmarking practice against it. This exercise enables the Forum to address common areas for development and leads to the developmental detail of the Benchmarking Forum's work plan for the year. Key areas for development in 2008-09 were strongly influenced by the Care Matters agenda, hence the focus on The Pledge and Children in Care Councils.

We have included other areas too as some of our authorities have strong records on the involvement of young people in decision-making aside from the Care Matters specifics.

Of course there are still areas for development and the continued role of the forum is to persist with learning from each other, sharing ideas and supporting each other's practice. We hope this work can support colleagues in other authorities too.



Involvement of Young People in Decision Making and Planning

The benchmarking exercise at the beginning of the year revealed the majority of local authorities have some form of policy and plan for the involvement of young people. More often than not, these plans are local authority-wide, known as participation strategies and are led by Participation Workers within the authority. Some individual leaving care services have user involvement work plans which set out the available opportunities for young people to become involved in service development and delivery activity.

Across the Benchmarking authorities, there are three main areas of involvement that are available to young people:

- Involvement in personal planning and decision making
- Involvement in service planning and decision making
- Involvement in group participation activities that are skills based or outings

This guide is concerned with the first two of these as this is where young people have the opportunity to explore and learn those skills that will have the most impact on their wellbeing and transition to adulthood.

This example from North Lincolnshire illustrates how a project with young people can cross over between involvement in personal planning and service development.

Case Study

North Lincolnshire has been working to improve the quality of young people's involvement in care and pathway planning. At our Making a Positive Contribution Event in October 2008, a member of staff and a young person from this authority gave a presentation describing the work of their project.

Young people had been asked about their experience of the care and pathway planning process and the roles of professionals in it. Their responses were telling. Young people said that they didn't really understand what the Independent Reviewing Officer does, what corporate parenting is and how the care or pathway plan was meant to work and how it was meant to help them. Young people felt that the process was led by and met the needs of professionals rather than young people.

To address this North Lincolnshire has developed a project that will produce guidance for young people on their entitlements, explain the role of the authority as corporate parent and what it will provide and also explain fully the opportunity provided by the pathway plan and the importance of being involved in it. The project is led by young people with support from Personal Advisors and Independent Reviewing Officers. It is being co-ordinated by the Children in Care Council and monitored by the Positive Contribution Group. In addition to the information on planning processes and roles, the guide for young people will include information on work placements and volunteering opportunities.

Alongside the development of the guide there are social opportunities for the young people involved and skills development such as interviewing and writing letters of application and curriculum vitae.

For North Lincolnshire the reasons for developing this work are clear. Young people are empowered through knowledge and better still, delivering that knowledge to each other through explaining the roles and process involved in planning but also the importance of being involved in it. It creates an opportunity for young people to be better involved in both their own planning and the development and delivery of the service. There are challenges as with all these kinds of pieces of work but North Lincolnshire is positive that this is a move in the right direction.

Some of the Benchmarking authorities have participation strategies that cover their whole authorities. They are often there for all children and young people in the authority, not just children in care and care leavers. Sometimes these strategies are managed and delivered by outside agencies, often from the third sector. All of these are positive and beneficial but the Forum recognises that work at that level should not absolve leaving care services from acting to support, empower and involve care leavers in their service development and in their own planning. This is why there are good examples of positive practice that come out of the leaving care services represented in the Forum. The trick for those services is how they link their own good practice to a wider agenda of positive Corporate Parenting within their authorities.

In Surrey, the National Youth Agency's Hear By Right planning mechanism is used to encourage the involvement of young people in service delivery and planning. Crucially, the involvement of young people is included in all staff targets.

In Devon a group of young people have been supported by the authority to develop the skills and knowledge to run young people-led inspections of their own and other leaving care services in the South West. This work was supported financially by the Government Office South West and is still ongoing with a number of services in the region still awaiting inspection. Devon has also recently worked with young people to develop an information pack for care leavers. Young people have worked on the content and the design of the materials which are particularly innovative.

In other Benchmarking authorities, young people are trained to interview new members of staff. North Somerset worked with the local authority's training section to provide the same training that all North Somerset staff receive when they are going to be involved in interview panels. This has been going on for some time and more and more young people have had the opportunity to receive training, learning new skills, feeling more confident and gaining a greater understanding of how the service works. The young people that have been trained have subsequently been involved in interview panels across the Children and Young People's Directorate, not just in the leaving care service.

Oxfordshire gave a presentation at the event in October which illustrated their own work in this area.

Case Study

Oxfordshire involve young people in their recruitment processes as part of their commitment to their work on Making a Positive Contribution under the National Leaving Care Standards. There is a clear process for young people to be involved as appointing officers. They receive appropriate training and support to understand how the recruitment process works, the issues of equal opportunities and how to score candidates' responses. Young people receive



high quality preparation and support, including ensuring they are supported to get to the interviewing venue. Young people have also been involved on these terms with foster carer recruitment.

The crucial part of the process is that young people have the experience of seeing their own influence in a decision making process about staffing for their services. There are challenges but these can be managed.

This work forms part of a range of opportunities offered by Oxfordshire to their young people, including involvement in the evaluation of the authority's Right2bCared4 pilot, involvement in training for carers and staff on preparation and planning for leaving care, and involvement in inductions for staff. Oxfordshire has a clear programme of training for young people to become part of a group that gets involved in participation work within the local authority. The Source Workers are provided with accreditation and work as peer supporters to other young people. They are also linked to the Children in Care Council and the Children's Rights Advisory Crew and the Children and Young People's Network.

Gloucestershire have a number of initiatives operating which enhance young people's ability to be better involved in the design and delivery of the service they receive. Young people have been involved in recruitment for a numbers of years. Their scores at interview count for 50% of the final score for candidates and can be decisive in selecting new members of staff.

In addition Gloucestershire now has a participation worker based in the leaving care service for one day a week. Her role is to engage young people in the service and offer learning opportunities, including accredited activities.

Gloucestershire is rolling out training on Preparation and Planning for leaving care and one young person is involved as a trainer on the programme. The same young person is developing her skills through her involvement in a consultation project for young people in supported housing.

Sheffield too involves young people in their recruitment processes as well as developing links between young people from the leaving care service and the authority's Corporate Parenting Panel.

The Benchmarking Forum has also been exploring how young people can contribute to its work over the coming years. Historically there has not been a mechanism for young people's views to feed in directly to the work of the Forum. This year, under the Making a Positive Contribution theme, work towards this goal has begun.

Case Study

Each Benchmarking meeting this year has discussed different ways in which young people could be involved. These have been long, exploratory debates to ensure that all members were comfortable with the process and could see how it could work effectively given the nature of the Forum.

In July, young people were involved in a day on developing a Pledge Template for local authorities outside the Forum to use. You can read about this in the chapter on The Pledge.

In October, at our Making a Positive Contribution Event, young people attended and as well as delivering presentations on good practice in their own authorities, they were involved in an exercise exploring how they felt they could be involved in contributing to the Forum.

The discussions at the October event reflected some of the work that had already gone on at the Forum itself and there was a clear way forward emerging. The young people themselves were keen to contribute to the Forum as well as having the opportunity to meet with each other again to discuss leaving care issues.

At the December meeting of the Benchmarking Forum it was agreed that a task force made up of forum members would meet early in 2009 to look at both the feedback from the October meeting and the December forum and agree a structure for a pilot year in 2009-10.

At the March meeting, members of the task force feedback the structure ideas for agreement from the whole Forum. The basic structure will ensure that young people from the October event who were interested in continuing to be involved will be worked with together as a Core group.

The Core group will meet prior to each of the Benchmarking Forum meetings to discuss issues that they would like the Forum to address. Two members of the Core group will attend the Forum to deliver the feedback from the Core Group.

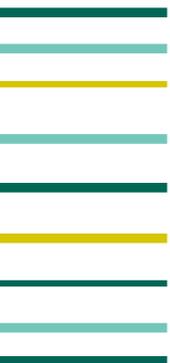
In October, during Care Leavers' Week, another event will be held at which the Core Group will recruit members to a wider young people's forum and this will continue to meet to feed in issues and create its own workplan for the coming year, including securing funding to support its work.

The Benchmarking Forum will be tasked with both responding to the young people's issues and in exchange, offering topics for feedback by the young people's group.

In March 2010, the young people's forum and the Benchmarking forum will have a joint meeting to plan their joint work for 2010-11.

All of these examples show the diversity of practice under this area of Making a Positive Contribution. What links them is the commitment to involving young people in activities that enhance their learning, their confidence and self-esteem and furnishing them with the kinds of skills and abilities that are vital to a successful adult life. Yes, young people are contributing to the improvement of services but ultimately it's about what we offer them that is important.





The Pledge

In 2009, the Department of Children, Schools and Families will be expecting local authorities to be able to report on the development of their Pledge to children and young people in their care.

A lot of work has gone into the development of Pledges across the country and the Benchmarking authorities have been no exception.

Case Study

During this theme year there has been a lot of input provided to the Benchmarking Forum on Pledge development, particularly based on the work completed in partnership with the National Care Advisory Service. It was felt however that there was a task the Forum itself could usefully complete to help themselves and other local authorities develop their Pledges from a Leaving Care perspective.

In July of 2008, a few Benchmarking members, accompanied by young people from their services, attended a day in London to explore what a Leaving Care Pledge might look like. The work completed that day led to the production of The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum Pledge Template.

The purpose of the Template was to provide local authorities with a framework which would help them create a Pledge from a leaving care perspective. The Template is linked to the National Standards for Leaving Care and asks prompt questions relating to each of the criteria. The purpose is not to provide a one size fits all Pledge but to help kick start the process for each authority to work on it with their young people.

This was a useful piece of work to do and has been helpful to a number of authorities seeking to develop their Pledge.

Benchmarking authorities have developed their Pledges in different ways. Some of our colleagues' leaving care services have been directly involved in the development of their local authority Pledges, others have not. As this is the first year in which authorities have been asked to develop a Pledge, many of our authorities Pledges are in development, with structures being set up to ensure that young people are involved, including care leavers.

More often than not the development of the Pledge is strongly linked to the development of the Children in Care Council (CICC) or other participation forum. In the next section we will examine the role of the CICC and how authorities are developing them with close links to their Pledges.

Case Study

Oxfordshire's work on the Pledge is well advanced. The Pledge has been developed in partnership with children and young people, including care leavers and staff. It has been consulted on and finally launched.

The Pledge includes promises guaranteed by the local authority, promises that the authority is working towards and also requests from young people that the authority can't commit to immediately.

The headlines are:

- A Home Where You Belong
- Help and Support on the Road to Adulthood
- Listen to and Value Your Opinions

The Pledge was launched in November 2008 and includes a workplan to ensure that the Pledge is fulfilled. This workplan is monitored and then reviewed on a six-monthly basis.

The work on the Pledge is part of Oxfordshire's range of opportunities for young people to participate.

The success factors for the Pledge will be not only the range and quality of young people's involvement in the process of developing it but also the link made from the Pledge through to the services and parenting that young people can expect. The Pledge should be visible in every young person's care or pathway plan. Equally, the line of accountability should run from the Pledge, through senior officers to the Director of Children's Service and the Lead Member.

Local authorities that are developing these structures will get the most success from the Pledge, particularly where a clear structure and process links the Pledge to the Children in Care Council.

The first Care Matters Annual Stocktake will take place in the autumn of 2009. This will be very revealing and hopefully show us exactly where those high-performing local authorities are. This will also be a good time to explore the link between high quality involvement of children and young people, a strong Corporate Parenting culture and better progress and outcomes for children in care and care leavers.



Children in Care Councils

The vast majority of Benchmarking authorities have some form of consultation or participation group to which their young people are linked. These are often long-standing and involved in consulting on service developments, writing newsletters, meeting elected members and generally contributing to service development and planning. Additionally they are often the sources of planning for group leisure activities, visits and conferences or events.

Case Study

North East Lincolnshire has already established its Children in Care Council from the foundations of a participation group that has been long-standing. The challenges arise from seeking young people's engagement and different understandings of what participation is or could be.

Case Study

North Lincolnshire has two Children in Care Council groups for different age groups with slightly different tasks. The Business Group is for young people aged 14-21 and has a more formal role, while the Editorial Group is for ages 10-17 and runs the newsletter for children in care and care leavers.

Other authorities have other models. In Kirklees and Barnsley, the groups are Corporate Parenting Groups or Panels. In Surrey the current participation group will be developed into a Children in Care Council and linked into the Hear by Right process.

What is common to these groups is that they all develop some role between gathering young people, providing oversight of the Pledge, being an easy source of views and comments for service managers or members and in some cases a more formal part of a structure that involves young people directly in policy and decision making with members and officers of the local authority. What is clear is that different authorities are approaching it in different ways and over time as the Care Matters stocktakes happen and authorities and young people evaluate effectiveness, good practice models will evolve.

Case Study

Oxfordshire's Children in Care Council is established and linked into the range of participation opportunities that the authority offers. Its mission statement is:

"The CICC has been set up in Oxfordshire to ensure that children and young people are able to put their experiences of the care system directly to those who are responsible for it, and for children and young people to be involved in decision making in the planning, development and evaluation of this service. PARTICIPATION IS A RIGHT!"

The Children in Care Council has two co-chairs who oversee its work. The Council meets regularly with staff, senior managers and elected members and comments on service delivery and policy development. As with all of Oxfordshire's participation work, membership of the Council also offers accredited learning opportunities.

Employability

A significant number of the Benchmarking authorities provide some form of employability related activity for their young people. This can include anything that provides young people with skills and experience that will enhance their employment options in the longer term. For some authorities this has involved providing work experience opportunities or placements; for others, the provision of longer term posts for care leavers within their leaving care service has been made. Equally, employability can mean the provision of good advice and support for young people as they plan their job and career options, explore training opportunities and seek help with job applications.

Employability will form a significant plank of the Benchmarking Forum's work in 2009-10 as the government agenda moves towards the provision of apprenticeships and employment support and opportunities for young people who have left care.

Case Study

Blackburn with Darwen have been providing apprenticeships for care leavers for three years. The first opportunities came from one of their children's centres where a young person completed two years on the apprenticeship scheme and all the relevant qualifications for the post. When an appointment was made for the post, the young person was able to apply and was successful.

One other young person has completed an apprenticeship and is now working within the Leaving Care team. The post has an extensive job description with the main tasks being focused around securing the involvement in the service of other young people. The post also has responsibility for developing the guidance on how young people should be engaged. The postholder receives regular supervision and has a supporter from within the team. There are opportunities to work with outside agencies and receive ongoing training through the local authority.

Those young people who are studying at university are offered work experience during the holidays if they need a placement. This year one student has worked with the legal team and another has sat on the fostering panel.

Currently there are five apprentices working in a range of placements in business administration, childcare, mechanics and youth work.

The main area for development is to establish links with the private sector so that the authority can offer apprenticeships in partnership with the engineering, construction, media and scientific sectors.

Employability schemes for care leavers already exist in many of our Benchmarking authorities. Critically, they are often the point at which leaving care provision slips over the line into the broader corporate parenting agenda. Some of our authorities have faced barriers in trying to develop and support work experience and employment opportunities for care leavers from within their own local authorities, never mind resorting to the private sector. Where it can be easier to support the development of sessional work opportunities or even a post within a leaving care service, asking



the wider authority to provide opportunities across all departments can lead to walls going up.

However increasingly, there are examples of local authority departments working effectively together to provide these kinds of opportunities from within the “family firm”; in some cases not only to care leavers but other vulnerable young people as well. The Government’s agenda is strongly in favour of this move, seeing the development of skills and work experience for care leavers as critical to their success.

Case Study

In December 2008, at a Benchmarking meeting in Belfast, colleagues from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust presented work on Employability, focused around guidance for all five Northern Ireland Trusts in the region. Each of the Trusts has developed its own workplan in relation to the Employability Guidance.

The Guidance sets out the service, operational and practice arrangements for improving the employability options for young people in care, proposals for creating enhanced employment opportunities and specifies how the barriers to employment can be removed.

The initiative’s main objective is to improve post-16 education, training and employment outcomes for children who are looked after and leaving care. This will be achieved through the provision of dedicated employment support workers and access to work experience, supported training placements and employment opportunities based on collaborative working with statutory, voluntary and private organisations and businesses. It will seek to provide in-job mentors to support young people as well as support young people through financial incentives.

There will also be personal development and pre-vocational options to assist young people to progress towards mainstream provision including access to literacy and numeracy programmes and access to volunteering.

Lessons Learned

The National Leaving Care Benchmarking authorities are on a journey, as all authorities are when it comes to engaging with service users. What this year's work on the Making a Positive Contribution theme tells us, is that they are going in the right direction.

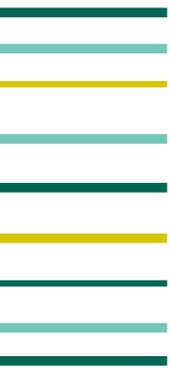
There is a wealth of good practice in the Forum and particularly a lot of strong engagement with service users in one form or another. Having the event in Care Leavers' Week also showed us what a great group of young people our authorities are working with - young people with enormous enthusiasm and talent.

The next step is to establish what we have learned from this year's work on the theme, the practice sharing that has gone on and the inputs from outside the Forum that have been received.

There are some clear lessons to be learned from this year:

- Quality engagement and involvement of young people in service planning and delivery takes time and will-power and will not happen overnight
- Planning is critical to successful engagement and empowerment of young people in leaving care services and the wider authority
- There are a lot of initiatives around Care Matters that are focused on Corporate Parenting, drawing in the authority as a whole. It is vital that care leavers and the expertise of leaving care services do not get lost in this agenda. Leaving care services should not be afraid to engage with those authority-wide initiatives and make sure care leavers and their services get the opportunity to participate.
- The practice included in this document is clearly linked to corporate parenting and it falls to leaving care services to promote their good work alongside a strong corporate parenting message
- The young people you work with will have great ideas, so involve them right from the start in your planning process and ensure that a range of ways to participate is open to them.

There is a wealth of good practice out there to learn from. Sharing our ideas is the key to ensuring that young people can have an active role in our work and their lives



Engaging young people

One of the main questions regarding this work is how to engage young people in it at the start. The answer to this question lies in three places.

1. Firstly, it is in the aspirations you have for the young people you work with and the aspirations that those young people have for themselves. How can you help your young people think more freely and creatively about the opportunities that could be out there for them in life? How do you help them identify their interests or passion?
2. Secondly, once you have identified their aspirations and their passions, you can start to show young people how the opportunities you offer will help them work towards them.
3. Thirdly, your planning process should be about goal-setting to reach those aspirations.

Once the motivation for involvement in participation activities is centred on the young person, they will want to start to get involved. As they begin to do that, they will see the wider influence of their involvement and its benefits to not just them but to those around them.

At the October Event in 2008, some of our Benchmarking members identified actions that would take forward their Making a Positive Contribution work. Although the Forum moves onto a new theme for the coming year, this work will continue. Looking at those lists of actions two things stand out. Firstly, how can we create more opportunities for others and secondly, how can we apply what we have heard from others?

The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum continues to work to improve its services to care leavers.

For further information and links to the practice database visit:
www.leavingcare.org.



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ADVISORY SERVICE
making the difference for young people in and from care aged 13-25