

RESEARCH SUMMARY:

# FROM CARE TO INDEPENDENCE

## FINAL FINDINGS MAY 2017

This summary by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) presents key findings of the final phase of From Care to Independence (FC2I), a five year project focusing on support for care leavers participating in the Fairbridge programme, delivered by The Prince's Trust. The research draws on survey and interview data from young people and practitioners.



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# FOREWORD

The Prince's Trust works with 11-30 year olds who are unemployed or struggling at school, to help them transform their lives. Often when they come to us, these young people are facing a variety of complex issues, and find it hard to believe things can change for the better.

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Our programmes give young people the practical, emotional and financial support they need to turn their lives around. We help young people to develop their skills and boost their confidence, so that they can take the first steps to re-engage with education or progress into employment. Over the last year, we worked with just over 4,000 young people who were looked after children or care leavers.

We know that care leavers face some of life's toughest challenges, and are more likely to face a number of barriers than their peers. However, with the right support, care leavers are capable of fulfilling their ambitions and aspirations. By understanding the challenges and barriers that care leavers face, we can all play our part in supporting these young people to fully realise their potential.

From Care to Independence is a five-year research project funded by the Big Lottery Fund, and delivered by The Prince's Trust. As part of From Care to Independence, the National Children's Bureau (NCB) has been conducting research predominantly with young people and Programme Executives on the Fairbridge programme, delivered by The Prince's Trust. I would like to thank the National Children's Bureau for their thoughtful approach to the research over the past five years.

This executive summary presents the key findings from the final stage of this research. Here at The Prince's Trust, we are already starting to deliver change in response to the project's findings. The findings will also inform the future development of support offered by our partner organisations and other agencies who provide support to care leavers.

I am delighted to be able to share the outcomes of From Care to Independence, and look forward to seeing the positive impact that this research will have on care leavers on Prince's Trust programmes and beyond.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Martina'.

**Dame Martina Milburn DCVO CBE**  
**Chief Executive**  
The Prince's Trust



# INTRODUCTION

Around 11,400 young people left care in England, aged 16 and over, in the year ending March 2016<sup>1</sup>. This represents an increase of over 40 per cent in the last decade. As recognised by the Government's "Keep on caring" strategy<sup>2</sup>, the quality of support varies considerably. As a result, care leavers often struggle to cope with independent living, placing them at heightened risk of social exclusion, homelessness, unemployment or involvement in crime. Many also have poor mental health, and need support to recover from past harm.

From Care to Independence (FC2I) was supported by the Big Lottery Fund and focused on supporting care leavers through the Fairbridge programme, delivered by The Prince's Trust.

The Fairbridge programme aims to empower disengaged and marginalised young people by helping them to gain the skills needed to stabilise their life circumstances and eventually move into education, employment, training or volunteering (EETV).

The programme begins with a week-long Access course where care leavers participate in challenging activities and a residential stay. Following this, they participate in a number of one to one and group sessions, which focus variously on steps towards EETV outcomes (e.g. CV writing workshops), life skills (e.g. cooking classes) and personal or social skills (e.g. teamwork). Delivery is young-person centred, and tailored to individual needs.

One of the strands of the From Care to Independence project was to research 'what works' in supporting care

leavers. NCB carried out this research by gathering data from care leavers on the programme and the practitioners who support them; known as Programme Executives. In the context of a renewed Government focus on improving provision for care leavers, the research aimed to inform the future development of support offered by The Prince's Trust and other statutory and voluntary organisations.

## THIS SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS KEY LEARNING IN RELATION TO:

- The profile of care leavers who took part in the programme;
- The outcomes they achieved;
- Obstacles to achieving and sustaining progress; and
- What works, in relation to recruitment and engagement.

<sup>1</sup> Department for Education (2016) Children looked after in England, year ending 31 March 2016. SFR 41/2016. <sup>2</sup> HM Government (2016) Keep On Caring: Supporting Young People from Care to Independence. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/535899/Care-Leaver-Strategy.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/535899/Care-Leaver-Strategy.pdf)

# METHODOLOGY

The findings are based largely on data from surveys, monitoring forms and interviews with staff and young people, completed between November 2014 and September 2016.

This includes survey data from young people (301 Baseline and 107 Follow Up surveys) and forms completed by practitioners for each young person (763 Session logs and 212 Final Session forms).

To explore their experiences in more depth, interviews were conducted with: care leavers (20), during and, in some cases, after their time on the programme; Fairbridge practitioners (19) and managers (5); and social workers/ Personal Advisers (3).

In addition, analyses drew on data routinely collected by The Prince's Trust via:

- profile forms, which are completed when young people join Fairbridge, and capture information about their backgrounds and situation at the start of the programme; and
- surveys issued by text message three months after the young people leave the programme, which ask questions about their current activities and how they found the programme.

# WHAT CHALLENGES DID THE CARE LEAVERS FACE?

Those involved in From Care to Independence had similar backgrounds to looked after children and care leavers profiled in official data and previous research. On average, the young people had entered care aged 10½. Most had been in the care system for more than three years and almost one third had experienced six or more placements.

The majority of care leavers had been enthusiastic about leaving care and becoming independent, though they had mixed experiences afterwards. Alongside loneliness, those taking part in the research faced a range of persistent challenges.

TABLE 1. CHALLENGES AFFECTING CARE LEAVERS ON JOINING THE PROGRAMME

	%
Having fewer than five GCSEs, including English and Maths, at Grades A* to C	87%
Not being in education, employment, training or volunteering	78%
Mental health problems	49%
History of offending	46%
Problems in family relationships	37%
Problems with reading/ writing	33%
Problems with numbers/ maths	29%
Alcohol or drug use preventing participation in day-to-day life	15%
Problems with debt	10%
Being a young parent	9%
Being an asylum seeker or refugee	3%

Source: Profile forms. N = 711 – 730.

Despite typically drawing on various sources of personal, statutory and non-statutory support, a recurring theme among interviewed young people was not feeling supported, and an overarching sense of loneliness.



**“I FEEL LIKE I’VE GOT NO ONE TO TURN TO, AND SOMETIMES I FEEL REALLY ALONE EVEN THOUGH EVERYONE’S AROUND.”**

Of particular concern, on joining the programme, 49 per cent reported having mental health problems, though fewer than half who did so (48 per cent) were accessing mental health services. In fact, a substantial minority described not receiving support from anyone across a range of specific areas<sup>3</sup>. In some cases, the young people may have been coping well. However, those receiving no support with health and wellbeing and relationships were less likely to report feeling able to manage in these areas. As Table 2 shows, overall, around a third or more lacked confidence around managing money, education, work and training, family relationships and housing.

**TABLE 2. AREAS OF LIFE YOUNG PEOPLE LACKED CONFIDENCE IN MANAGING ON JOINING FAIRBRIDGE<sup>4</sup>**

	%
Money and benefits	39%
Education, work and training	38%
Relationships with family	36%
Housing	32%
Making good use of services	25%
Staying safe and avoiding trouble	23%
Health and wellbeing	21%
Friendships and networks	19%

Source: Baseline surveys. N = 284-288.

<sup>3</sup> Education, work and training (12% were receiving support from no-one); health and wellbeing (17%); staying safe and avoiding trouble (22%); managing relationships (24%); housing, money or practical issues (18%); accessing services (15%); social skills (24%); motivation and encouragement (19%). Source: baseline surveys, N = 284-289.

<sup>4</sup> For simplicity, figures presented in Table 2 combine the proportions answering 'no, not at all' and 'no, not really' – as opposed to 'yes, mostly' or 'yes, completely' – to the question "Do you feel able to manage these things?"



# OUTCOMES FOR CARE LEAVERS

**BASED ON EXIT DATA FOR 231 OF THOSE LEAVING FAIRBRIDGE, THERE ARE MANY ENCOURAGING FINDINGS:**

- 62 per cent had progressed to one or more of the following positive outcomes: a place in education; training, volunteering, paid work, an apprenticeship, self-employment, or a place on another Prince's Trust programme (the figure was 53 per cent, excluding moving to another Prince's Trust programme).
- Other gains included steps towards education, employment, training or volunteering (EETV) outcomes, such as improved readiness to work, commitment to achievable goals and more impressive CVs.



**MY GOALS BACK THEN WERE JUST TO BE MYSELF AND TRY TO KEEP OUT AS MANY PEOPLE'S WAY AS POSSIBLE. WHEREAS NOW IT'S [TO] BUILD MY CONFIDENCE, GET A JOB, MOVE UP IN THE JOB, AND PROBABLY MOVE FINALLY ONTO A JOB THAT I REALLY WANT.**

- The vast majority of young people were considered by their Programme Executives to have boosted a range of skills during the course of the programme; most commonly teamwork, communication and confidence. Young people who completed surveys or took part in interviews after leaving Fairbridge also described making progress in these areas.



**I WASN'T REALLY THE TALKATIVE TYPE, BUT NOW I TALK TO EVERYONE. I'M NOT SCARED TO TALK TO ANYONE.**

- Other positive steps included improved peer relationships and better use of services and support.

# BARRIERS TO POSITIVE OUTCOMES

## THE RESEARCH ALSO IDENTIFIED A NUMBER OF OBSTACLES TO YOUNG PEOPLE ACHIEVING OUTCOMES:

- The few young people who had not made perceptible gains tended to have disengaged from the programme – i.e. simply stopped attending without explanation or discussion. Overall, around a third of young people appeared to have disengaged or ‘dropped out’, rather than leaving due to achievement of EETV or other goals, or because of other changes in their circumstances (such as moving away from the area).
- Risk factors for disengagement included behavioural and relationship problems, substance misuse, difficulties with mental health or wellbeing; a perceived lack of support from social workers/ Personal Advisers; financial or housing problems and low self-esteem/ confidence.
- Challenges around relationships, social support, mental health, motivation, debt, transport and substance misuse were linked with lower rates of EETV achievement. These issues were ongoing concerns for many leaving the programme, as were housing and behavioural problems.
- Practitioners argued that sustaining progress beyond the programme depended on young people having good support networks, and having their underlying needs met, particularly in relation to mental health.





# WHAT WORKS?

**Recruitment:** Factors which helped with recruiting care leavers to the programme included: time for (outreach) staff time to build and maintain relationships with external organisations; advertising associating Fairbridge with The Prince's Trust brand; taster sessions for young people; and word of mouth – self-referrals resulted from peers having positive experiences on the programme.



**A comprehensive package of activities and support:** All aspects of the programme – the week-long Access course; the one to one sessions and Follow On courses – were seen as important, by practitioners and young people. The Access course boosted confidence, provided challenge, and prepared young people to engage with the rest of the programme. Group activities enabled working on skills; while the one to ones allowed young people to discuss their plans and choices, and receive practical and emotional support.



**A positive relationship with an assigned practitioner:** Having an assigned Programme Executive from the start of the programme was seen as key to building trusting relationships and commitment, particularly for some who struggled to engage or open up. Facilitators of strong relationships included: showing a genuine interest in the young people, being positive, approachable, firm and challenging but non-judgemental, making an effort to understand any challenges they were facing, and offering support.



**Empowering sessions which addressed care leavers' own priorities:** Care leavers were more likely to achieve EETV outcomes if their sessions with Fairbridge practitioners involved features such as: review and reflection, action planning, advice and support around EETV, discussion of family relationships, support with other areas (such as housing or money) and liaison with other agencies.



**Effective partnership working:** Commonly, Programme Executives worked with external professionals and other sources of support for young people to maximise their engagement with, and gains from, Fairbridge. Facilitators of effective partnership working included having consistent points of contact in partner agencies, young people having strong relationships with the people in question, and those people having a good understanding of the programme and its aims.



# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research found that the Fairbridge programme was seen as effective, by both practitioners and young people, as a means of helping care leavers develop skills and achieve their goals. Most of those tracked through From Care to Independence achieved at least one EETV-related outcome, and almost all made progress in other areas, for example in relation to confidence, skills and addressing personal or practical challenges. Each element of the programme – the Access course, Follow On group activities and one to one support from a dedicated practitioner – appeared to play a part.



Participants' satisfaction with Fairbridge argues for maintaining the existing provision without drastic changes, whilst redoubling efforts to reach more care leavers and others who could benefit.

- **RECOMMENDATION 1:** Continue recruiting care leavers to the programme, drawing on findings from the research in demonstrating its value to partner agencies.
- **RECOMMENDATION 2:** Involve care leavers, alongside other young people participating in Fairbridge and their practitioners across sites, in shaping recruitment and engagement strategies. Initial ideas from those involved in the research included further use of social media, and visiting schools and other settings to share young people's experiences on the programme.

The diverse group involved in the research tended to look for similar things from Fairbridge. However, the programme's flexibility was important. Young people wanted – and generally reported receiving –

support tailored to their individual needs and goals. These could differ, depending upon factors such as: anxieties about features of the programme or about engaging with peers or practitioners; care status or experience of living independently; learning needs; and pressing problems, including around mental health, family relationships or debt. However, a substantial minority of those involved in the research disengaged rather than completing the programme – typically due to other pressures and challenges in their lives. Based on feedback from young people and practitioners, the programme could further build on its existing strengths to provide more tailored support for young people in different circumstances – thereby increasing engagement and reducing the risk of them dropping out.

- **RECOMMENDATION 3:** Review the range of courses and activities on offer, with input from young people. Consider, for example, adding more tailored courses on functional and life skills, adapted to the learning needs and experience of participants and, if possible, offering further

opportunities to earn qualifications, as young people valued these concrete outcomes.

- **RECOMMENDATION 4:** Continue to develop and roll out training for Programme Executives on supporting looked after children and care leavers, including to update their understanding of leaving care processes and entitlements.
- **RECOMMENDATION 5:** Introduce specialist mental health support woven into or running alongside the programme and ensure Programme Executives are trained to signpost to this provision, as well as offer lower level support, within the boundaries of their existing roles.
- **RECOMMENDATION 6:** Build in greater flexibility to devote time to the most vulnerable or isolated young people. This could include more one to one support, mentoring or life coaching, out of hours work, home visits, visual materials or translators for those with additional learning or language needs.

Based on feedback from practitioners and young people, Fairbridge could be particularly effective when Programme Executives worked together with other sources of support in care leavers' lives.

- **RECOMMENDATION 7:** Build on best practice across Fairbridge centres to further develop partnership working with external agencies including NHS Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (NHS CYPMPS) and schools/ colleges, and with young people's families and carers.

Partnership working was especially challenging to achieve for those most in need of help; those who had weak relationships with, or limited support from, other people. Devoting more resources to these young people within Fairbridge (see Recommendations 5 and 6) may help to maximise their gains from the programme, but to help them sustain progress, practitioners should make additional efforts to encourage their engagement with other potential sources of support.

- **RECOMMENDATION 8:** For young people not involved with other services, there should be a particular emphasis on supporting their

engagement with further sources of help and advice, including statutory support as well as, for example, peer support groups. The Children and Social Work Act will extend the right to request support from Personal Advisers to all care leavers under 25, including those not in education. Programme Executives could usefully raise awareness of this and encourage more young people to pursue and make best use of this entitlement.

Finally, although these conclusions and recommendations focus on the Fairbridge programme, many of the delivery challenges facing its practitioners and much of the learning from the research may be relevant to other organisations. In the context of continuing challenges around care leavers' access to, and engagement with, support from statutory services, there is more to be gained from collaboration and sharing of best practice between voluntary sector providers and corporate parents.

- **RECOMMENDATION 9:** Consider if longer-term mentoring is something The Prince's Trust and/or partners could provide. This type of informal and accessible support may be of use to many more care leavers than are currently involved with the Fairbridge programme.

- **RECOMMENDATION 10:** Stimulate further sharing of experience between Fairbridge centres, local authorities, and other programmes catering for care leavers, to maximise learning about best practice and what makes a difference – from the point of view of the young people accessing the support, and the practitioners providing it.





Interested in finding out more? Get in touch:

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