

# Growing up

Supporting young people  
to a successful adulthood



*as long as it takes*



## Overview

Action for Children is committed to working with the most vulnerable children and young people in the United Kingdom. This report is part of Action for Children's ongoing campaign to provide consistent, dependable support to children and their families throughout their lives, no matter what challenges they face. In other words, to be there for children for 'as long as it takes'.

This study follows two earlier reports published in late 2008 and early 2009. *As long as it takes* examined the way confusing and inconsistent policy making over the past 21 years has affected children and young people. In particular, it highlighted the 98 separate acts of parliament, 82 different strategies and 50 new funding streams that have been implemented by successive governments across the UK over that period, and assessed what impact this constant churn in policy and practice has had on vulnerable families. *Stuck in the middle*, published in February 2009, went on to look at one of the most crucial periods in any childhood – the ages between six and 13. The report looked at the changes and transitions that children experience in mid-childhood, and used new, in-depth research with vulnerable young people to explore their experiences and views.

This report, *Growing up*, moves on from *Stuck in the middle* to look at the 16–25 age group – a time of tumultuous change and great challenges for all young people, made all the more difficult as a result of the severe downturn in global economic conditions.

Through our work we understand that for all children, adolescence is a time of great change. Most will make the transition to successful adulthood with help and support from family and friends. But some young people struggle to make sense of the physical and environmental changes they face. Challenges will vary according to the age of a young person and may include changes to family structure, school and friendship networks, to changes marking the transition to adulthood such as leaving school, residential care or entering the employment market.

While challenging and confusing for most children and young people, they are especially difficult for those in marginalised, vulnerable or unstable homes.

Where timely support is not available from family, schools or other services that children and young people come into contact with, these difficulties can lead to disengagement – from school and friends and ultimately from employment. Such disengagement puts the young person's chances of emerging from this tumultuous period into a successful adulthood in jeopardy. Research suggests that young people who don't receive ongoing support to engage with employment, training or education during the transition are more likely to end up long-term unemployed, to live on a low income, to become teenage parents, and to suffer poor mental and physical health.<sup>1</sup>

Action for Children recognises the positive efforts being made across the devolved administrations and central government to ensure that this group of young people are given the opportunities, and support, to avoid the long-term outcomes associated with disengagement.<sup>2,3,4</sup> However, emotional, behavioural and financial challenges faced by particularly vulnerable groups mean that such opportunities remain out of reach. Often, even where financial assistance is available to encourage participation, disincentives created by the benefits system can affect young people's practical choices.

Action for Children is committed to seeing all children and young people fulfil their potential by supporting those who need it the most. This report highlights some of the issues affecting vulnerable young people, including the risks they face as they move from childhood into adolescence and beyond, and looks at some of the interventions that are effective in supporting them.



## About this report

This report looks at the huge changes that young people have to negotiate between the ages of 16 and 25, and why, for the most vulnerable, staying in touch with services matters so much for their future wellbeing. It draws on a wide range of research to look at both the problems and the solutions. It describes the widely varying policy picture for this group of young people in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and looks at some of the innovative services that cater for these diverse and often challenging groups.

The report also includes the findings of two new pieces of research conducted by Action for Children: a survey of more than 330 young people on their views on school, work, home life and growing up; and a set of searching interviews with care leavers, disabled young people and young offenders. This groundbreaking research looked into what young people felt about the dramatic transitions they experience, what problems they encountered and what they thought might help them make the transition to adulthood successfully.

Action for Children believes that governments must recognise the need to design policies and fund services that help the young people who are furthest away from employment, training or education to overcome the barriers to re-engagement. To that end, this report looks at current and emerging policy across the four countries of the UK. A series of project profiles examines how some of Action for Children's most innovative projects are helping young people to tackle these complex issues, and at how services can provide the building blocks for young people to make a successful transition to adulthood.

## What are the key problems facing 16–25 year olds?

The majority of children are able to succeed academically at school, go on to higher education or to fulfilling and successful careers. Unfortunately, for some of the young people Action for Children supports, their disengagement from education is the result of a myriad of influencing factors, most of which are chronic and long term.

### Low educational attainment/ 'disengagement'

Many young people fall away from education at an early age. Such early disengagement is a major factor in determining whether a young person completes their education and successfully enters employment as a young adult.

There are a number of causes for disengagement with education, including bullying and abuse, housing or placement instability, experience of significant loss and bereavement, or issues with drugs or alcohol. Experiences of deprivation,<sup>5</sup> behavioural problems, and involvement with the police are also major reasons why young people can ultimately find themselves unable to sustain employment or training. Young people with caring responsibilities, while eager to attend school, might also face difficulties as a result of having to balance the additional responsibilities they have.<sup>6</sup> Often even those who want to continue in full-time training or education can find it hard because training allowances are lower than benefits associated with seeking employment.



But there can also be more intangible reasons for an early withdrawal from school. For instance, there is strong evidence that children identified as ‘vulnerable’ who were thriving at primary school are often derailed by the transition to secondary school. This is sometimes accelerated by an undetected special educational need (SEN), which has been shown to lead to higher than average rates of exclusion.<sup>7</sup> In fact, research shows that many children who reported being interested in learning and enjoying primary school have often reversed these views by the end of Key Stage 3.<sup>8</sup>

Action for Children’s research, *Stuck in the middle*, found children and young people regularly describing moving school as a difficult and sometimes painful process. One said it was difficult because ‘you hardly know anyone’ although another said they survived the experience because ‘I’m used to being dragged around a lot’. Bullying was particularly troublesome, with one young person reporting: ‘The first high school I went to was fine at first. Then I started getting bullied, moved to the second school and got bullied after nine months.’ Another said: ‘I am annoyed with myself as I got bad GCSE marks because I missed time off school because of the bullies. I look back and think were they worth even worrying about.’

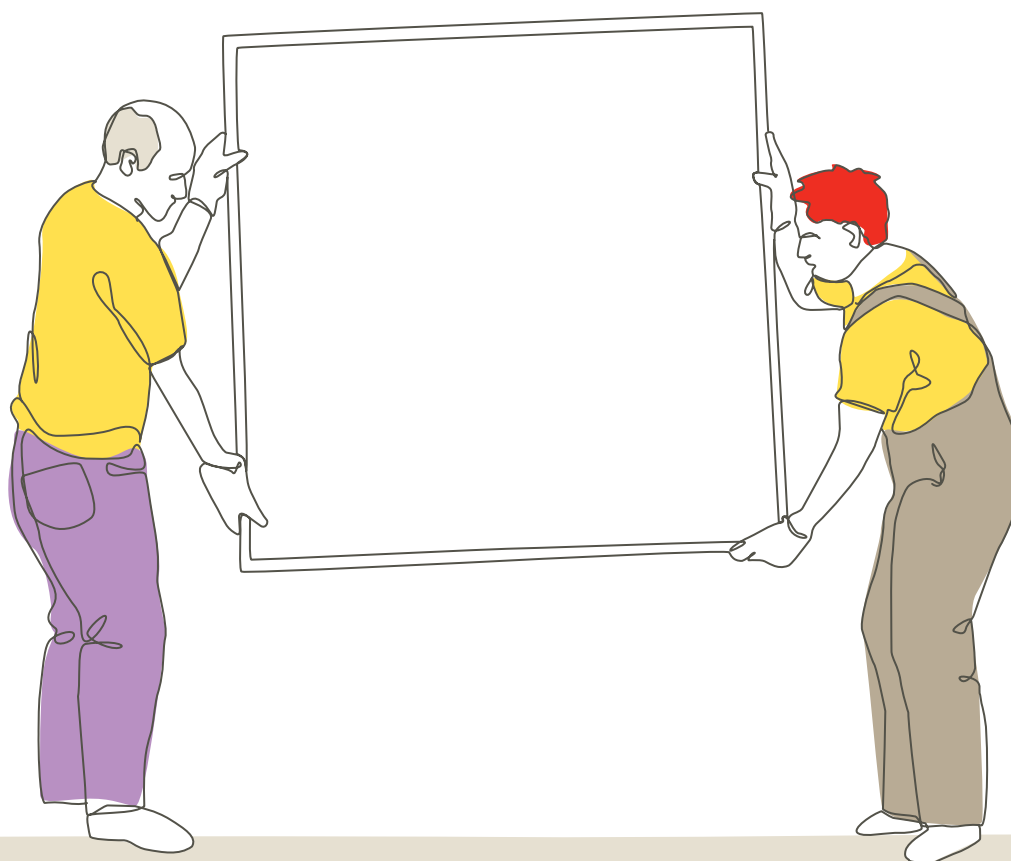
Action for Children’s research with this age group also demonstrates clearly how interest and enthusiasm for school wanes following the transition: the ‘Who’s there for you’ survey of more than 500 young people found that just 4% of 6–10 year olds report having problems at school. But by 11–13 that has shot up to 13%, and remains high until the end of compulsory schooling at 16.

Many vulnerable young people already have doubts about their self-worth and failing at school merely exacerbates their feelings of worthlessness. If being at school makes you feel stupid and worthless, it is perhaps hardly surprising that young people vote with their feet. Unfortunately, by the time disengaged young people reach 16, prolonged absence means they will have missed more than just

qualifications. They will also have missed a variety of beneficial activities such as school trips and work experience, as well as structured discussions about their post-16 options for training, further education and work. In addition, they are very likely to have established a peer group of other disengaged, disillusioned and excluded young people – a peer group that can wield a powerful influence over their ability to make positive choices.

Given this, it seems unsurprising that young people who are not in school at 16 are often still disengaged at 18 and later.<sup>9</sup> Figures across the UK show that about 10% of 16–18 year olds are consistently classed as not in education, employment or training.<sup>10</sup>





## Action for Children Youthbuild Scotland

Youthbuild projects, run by Action for Children in Scotland, provide support and training for socially excluded young people aged 16–24 who face difficulties in entering the labour market, including many who have experience of the criminal justice system.

Youthbuild works with young people directly through intensive one-to-one support and group work. Crucially, it also works with local employers (usually in the building trade) to help them provide the on-the-job training and support that young people with complex needs require. As a result, young people on the programme are often working on construction sites or in regeneration projects in their local areas.

The first Youthbuild project started in June 2007 and there will be nine projects in Scotland by October 2009. The model has been given strong

support by the Scottish Assembly, with Adam Ingram MSP, the Scottish Government Minister for Children and Early Years, launching the Glasgow Great Eastern Youthbuild, and Maureen Watt, the Minister for Schools and Skills, launching the Inverclyde Youthbuild (PICT) Project.

In April 2008, an independent evaluation of the Youthbuild programme found that it had a 70–80% success rate across the three projects for helping young people move into employment following their involvement in the programme. Completion rates were high, with 32 out of 43 young people who entered the programme completing it and moving into construction work or some other form of employment. In fact, many young people who had been through the Youthbuild programme had been offered full-time work and apprenticeships by their employers.



## Action for Children Birmingham Employability Scheme

The Employability Scheme was launched in September 2008 and works with around 40 young people, mostly between the ages of 16 and 21, all of whom are Birmingham care leavers. The project's aim is simply to increase a young person's 'employability', which it does on a case-by-case basis, using group work, one-to-one mentoring and support, and by organising work experience placements and any necessary training.

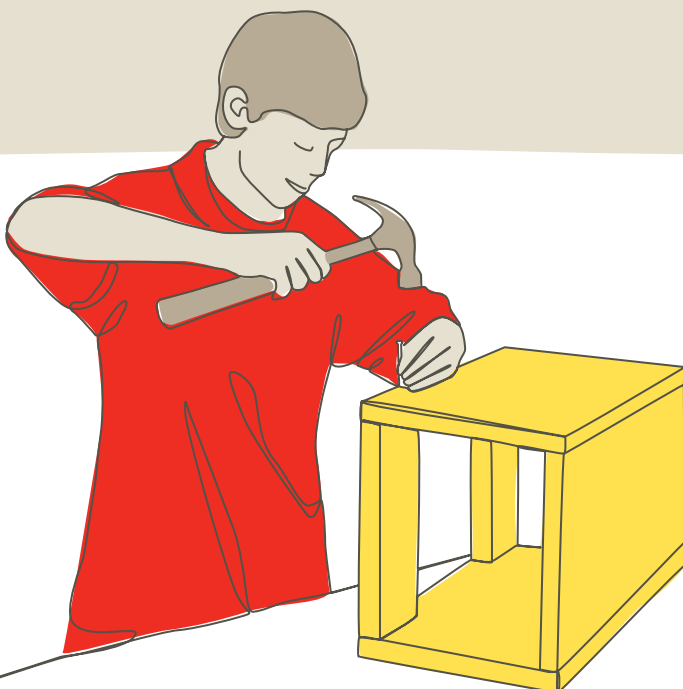
Although the ethos of the project is entirely supportive, rather than coercive, the nature of the support can be quite intense. According to Claire Cahill, Project Manager: 'Depending on what a young person needs, we might organise a work placement for a few weeks, buy them an alarm clock and some work clothing, phone them in the morning to check that they're on their way, meet them off the bus, show them where to buy their lunch and sometimes give them a lift home.'

If this sounds like something a parent might do, that's the idea. Whereas most young people would think nothing of pestering dad for a lift to work in the rain, many young people leaving care are isolated and unsupported, and so have no one to do the conscientious prodding and facilitating that others take for granted. This is the role that the project fulfils for some care leavers, although most do not need such intensive support.

Claire's current job as project manager, and her previous experience on a leaving care team, have convinced her that low or non-existent aspirations are the nub of the problem for some care leavers. 'Work just isn't something they aspire to or can see themselves doing. Some of them come from families where no one has ever worked. They haven't seen people getting the rewards from working.' And they often have very low sense of their own worth, she adds: 'Having been rejected by their families, or having had a tough time at school or having no qualifications, it is very hard for them to have the self-belief that they can do something positive with their lives.'

It can also be hard to persuade young people to actively think about their own goals. 'They simply aren't able to conjure up a vision of what they want. So very often it's the first time anyone has said "what do you really want for yourself?" and listened to the answer, and looked at how that desire can be broken down into achievable steps. We do a lot of looking at a big aim and breaking it down into smaller goals that are achievable.'

'So, someone might say "I think maybe I'd like to work in IT". But they don't have any qualifications, they don't have a computer at home, and they have no work experience. To them it looks impossible, but we break it down into bite-sized chunks. So we might get them on an IT training course, and find them a work placement at an IT firm, and arrange for them to have access to a computer.'



## Aspirations and low self-esteem

One factor strongly associated with poor outcomes in later life is low parental aspirations. In fact, one study found that the home environment, and the involvement of parents 'may have a greater influence on child achievement... than variation in school quality'.<sup>11</sup> It also states 'parental aspirations are... perhaps even more important than other family and parent characteristics' [such as social class, income and education] in determining how well young people do at school.

The aspirations of the young people themselves are also important: the same study found that 'teenage aspirations often predict future attainment, both in occupation and educational spheres' and also that simply having an aspiration to stay in education beyond 16 was enough to boost young people's test results.

Finally, the narrowness of young people's own aspirations and life experiences may also be an obstacle to future economic and academic success. Many of the most vulnerable young people harbour deep feelings of worthlessness and have very low self-esteem, and they may have very few positive adult role models. They find it hard to visualise a happy and productive future for themselves and need sustained and focused help to look at what their own goals and aspirations might be, and how they could achieve them (see MIST project profile).

For young women, issues of low self-esteem can lead them to empower themselves in ways that offer immediate and seemingly easy choices, such as becoming sexually active. For young women leaving or running away from the care system, a lack of qualifications, motivation and support can isolate them from opportunities to pursue education or training. The same combination of factors may compel them to adopt risky survival strategies that may expose them to sexual exploitation.<sup>12</sup>

For other young women, becoming a parent may prove to be a source of comfort and direction, but it can also drive a wedge into existing relationships. According to one young woman who took part in the 'Who's there for you' survey: 'I couldn't tell my family [when I got pregnant] because they didn't want to help me. They just treated me like I'd done something wrong and they were ashamed of me.'

Unfortunately, in the longer term, early parenthood is associated with a range of unwanted outcomes for both young men and women. Not only does parenthood limit their opportunities to pursue education or training, it also makes it more statistically likely that their own children will suffer from the same combination of low attainment and aspirations. In fact, research shows that young women whose own mother had low educational aspirations are more likely to become teenage mothers themselves. Young fathers were subject to similar effects, although the impact was smaller.<sup>13</sup>

The report also found that, by the age of 30, those who had been teenage mothers suffered from higher levels of physical and mental ill health than the mainstream population, and only a small part of this difference could be explained by their disadvantaged backgrounds. The report's authors speculate that higher levels of later ill health experienced by women who have been teenage parents might be partly caused by their increased risks of partnership breakdown, of living in a workless family, of living in social housing and of lacking emotional support.

The study found that by the age of 30, men who had become fathers by their early twenties were almost twice as likely to be unemployed compared to those who became a father at age 23 or above. Young fathers were also less likely to be currently living, or to have ever lived, with their children (see project profile on Gabriel Court).





Given these concerns, there is a real need for sustained work to help young people look constructively at what they really want from life, and to help them overcome perceived and real obstacles to those goals. Programmes such as Action for Children's Birmingham Employability Scheme and our work experience and internship initiative Step Ahead, offer examples of how this challenge can be met.

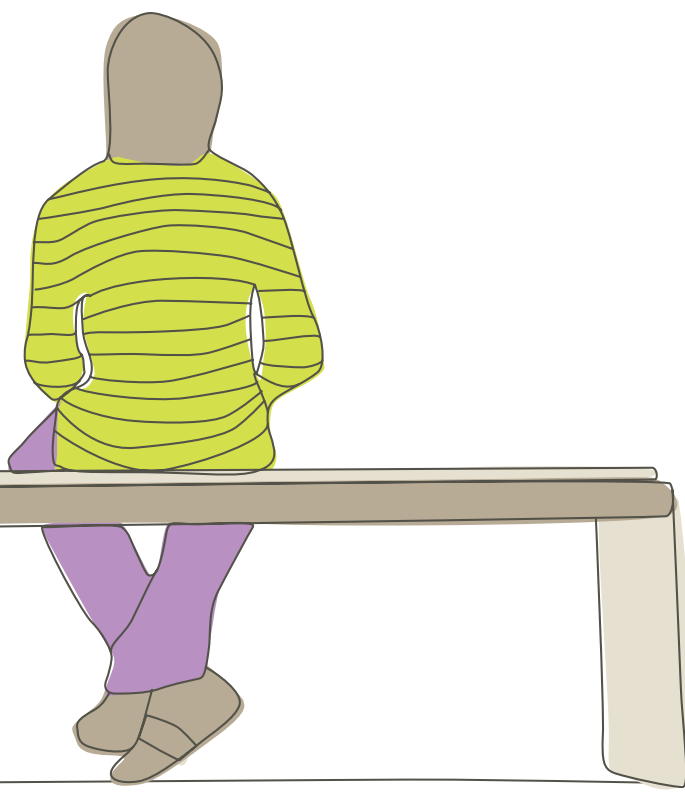
## Instability of placement

For some young people in care, placement instability is known to have a damaging effect on a wide variety of outcomes, including education,<sup>14</sup> and employment – not least because each new placement often means a new school and new friends. Difficult home circumstances can mean that, by the end of compulsory schooling, many young care leavers have such broken and incomplete attendance records that sitting exams is unthinkable.

As a result, despite a recent focus on educational attainment and placement stability for children in care, they continue to attain qualifications below the level that is regarded as the basic threshold for employability. In England in 2008, for example only 13% of children in care achieved five A\* C grade GCSEs,<sup>15</sup> while in Scotland 16.7% of young people looked after away from home had no qualifications at SCQF level 3+.<sup>16</sup> These figures represent an improvement on previous years, but there is clearly still a long way to go.

For young people who have been in care, the expectation that most will be living independently by 16 is also out of step with what happens to other young people, most of whom are now staying in the family home until their mid-twenties or even later. Many care leavers in our interviews said they felt this abrupt end to their time in care was a shock. One said: 'You haven't got the sense of security you used to have with your foster placement. You used to be able to just go home and have your food on the table and your washing would be done, but now you've got to do it all yourself. It's alright to do it yourself, but it can be a struggle.' Another said: 'When you're 18, they [social services] don't care. You're grown up basically. And you're just left, just like that.'

However, one policy development may be a step in the right direction. Research suggests that, in terms of employability, the age at which a young person leaves care is very significant, with those leaving after 18 being much more likely to hold down a job: 73% are economically active nine to 10 months after leaving care, compared to 33% of those who left at 16, and 32% of those who left at 17.<sup>17</sup> Government pilots as part of the Care Matters programme to support care leavers 'in placement' for longer (up to the age of 18) may go a long way to improve the economic success of young people.





## Offending

Young offenders are among the most vulnerable groups Action for Children works with. They make up a small minority of the young people in contact with services (only around 2,500 young people are actually in custody at any one time), but the 6,500 who pass through the system each year often face a hugely complex set of circumstances.

In many cases, offending is a symptom of an unresolved underlying issue. Mental health issues, drug and alcohol misuse, and experience of significant loss, bereavement or abuse, can each trigger behaviour that brings a young person into direct contact with the youth justice system. Figures from youth justice organisations show that as many as 66% of children in the criminal justice system have experienced family separation at some point in their lives.<sup>18</sup>

The same evidence reveals that up to 50% of all inmates in youth offending institutions have been in local authority care at one time<sup>19</sup> and that 84% of young people referred to Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) in England have been excluded from school on at least one occasion – with 50% reporting truanting every day.<sup>20</sup> Evidence from elsewhere in the UK, including surveys of the Northern Ireland youth justice system, reveal a high rate of mental health problems, and also show that learning impairments are common among vulnerable young people in custody.<sup>21,22</sup>

One important obstacle for young offenders trying to re-engage with work or training is literacy and numeracy. A Youth Justice Board review of English young offenders between 2004 and 2006 found that this group is particularly at risk of remaining outside of employment and education as a result of disrupted and incomplete educational histories. The review found that more than three quarters of young offenders had previously been excluded from school, and that nearly half had been out of school before the age of 14.

Evidence suggests that around half the population in young offender institutions function below the level of an average 11 year old in basic literacy, while in terms of numeracy, half of those surveyed had basic skills at or below those of an average seven year old.<sup>23</sup> For young offenders, these represent major barriers to taking up the sustainable education or training opportunities that can help divert them from re-offending.

Unfortunately, the youth justice system itself can compound these problems. According to the Youth Justice Board's *Youth Resettlement: A framework for action* (2003): 'Custody can intensify these difficulties, by dislocating children and young people from their families, communities and from mainstream and children's services. As a result, young people in custody can become particularly vulnerable.' This dynamic has prompted Action for Children and others to call for custodial sentences to be the last resort for young offenders, and for local-based alternatives to custody to be made available.



# Action for Children Wessex Community Project

Barbara Russell is project manager of Wessex Community Projects, which works with young offenders and their families to support them through the youth justice system. Project staff are involved at all stages, from the remand process through to sentencing, post sentencing and continuing to support the young people during resettlement and reintegration into society afterwards.

The project works with the Youth Justice Board, local authorities from Hampshire, Southampton, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight, as well as youth offending teams, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, the courts and approved specialist foster carers. It deals with around 30 young offenders on remand and after sentencing each year, and offers a wide variety of services tailored around each individual young person.

## Remand fostering

The Remand Fostering service provides support and accommodation for children while they await sentencing and post custody. Specialised carers work with the project and advocate with appropriate outside agencies to meet the assessed needs of the children and young people placed with them. Since 2005 Wessex has also been piloting an alternative to custodial sentences where young people are instead offered a structured placement living with a specially trained foster carer. The new Intensive Fostering Programme is funded, commissioned and supported by the Youth Justice Board and follows a groundbreaking regime developed in Oregon, USA.

## Intensive fostering

The aim of intensive fostering is to decrease antisocial behaviour and increase appropriate behaviour through developing social and emotional skills. It relies on a combination of close supervision, fair and consistent limits, and clear consequences for negative behaviour. Young people are provided with positive role models, and involvement with negative old peer networks is avoided. A 'points system' is used to reward good behaviour and to punish bad, by awarding or removing privileges.

The young people live in the home of a highly trained foster carer, while a multi-disciplinary project team works with them to help them increase appropriate behaviour, improve their academic skills and make positive choices about their life. The team also advocates on behalf of young people with other services including housing and education, to ensure services and support are available to smooth their transition back into the community. This placement and support is a court-agreed alternative to a custodial sentence, and can run for up to 12 months.

The service's performance has been exceptional, with 12 young people having successfully completed the course. Benefits include reduced antisocial behaviour, reduced substance misuse, re-establishment of links with birth families, and successful take up of places in education and on training courses. Additionally, project staff have seen a dramatic improvement in the self-esteem of the children who have been through the full programme. The Intensive Fostering Programme is currently being evaluated by the University of York and the Youth Justice Board.

Barbara Russell acknowledges that many of the children and young people the project deals with have committed serious offences, and is dedicated to reducing reoffending as much as possible. However, she says: 'They are still children, and most will have had such inconsistent parenting that they live completely in the moment. They just don't look at what the effect of their behaviour is going to be, at what it's going to mean for them and others.'

Barbara feels that the current arrangements for children and young people leaving custody can be 'akin to abandonment'. She says: 'The average age for leaving home these days is about 24. A lot of these children are 15 or 16. Things have improved within the secure estate, but for most, when they leave custody there is no one in the community to support them. They are almost completely on their own. Most of them do come out wanting to be better, but without support, they end up sofa surfing with old friends, they fall in with inappropriate people, and it all goes wrong and they give up.'

The project recruits and trains its own foster carers, who need to feel positive about young people and

have the capacity to develop specialist skills to work with them, as many can have challenging behaviour. According to Barbara: 'We have a lot of highly skilled and devoted foster carers and their attitude is crucial. They normally visit a young person in custody before release to introduce themselves. After release, they may need to advocate for them with education, training or employment, with the benefits agency and housing department and with family. And once they move into their own supported accommodation they can still provide a steadfast, secure point – even in some cases by making them a regular Sunday lunch.'



Ironically, although children and young people's experiences of custody are often far from positive, their eventual release and resettlement can be one of the most negative aspects of the experience. Despite most leaving prison with a strong desire to 'go straight', a Home Office cohort study in 2003 found that around 70% of young people re-offend within 12 months of their release. Some figures suggest that more than a quarter re-offend within one month of release. For those who have been in custody more than once, the recidivism figures are worse. Sustained support is essential if young people are to successfully negotiate the difficult transition from 'being inside' to 'going straight'.

Therefore, where custody is justified, children and young people should be held in local authority secure units, not in prison service establishments. All the evidence is that children's welfare and safety is seriously in jeopardy in the latter, with significant incidence of suicide, self-harm and bullying.

Too often the prison regime fails to prepare young people for release, or to offer the minimal amount of stability necessary to allow young people to develop the skills to re-engage in mainstream settings on release. Alternatives to traditional forms of custody that can provide a regime that young people can benefit from should be more readily available to magistrates.



## Action for Children Floating Support Service, Northern Ireland

This service works with care leavers and young people aged 16–17 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT) area of Northern Ireland. The aim of the project is to support young people to maintain their tenancy, or where necessary, assist with a planned move to suitable, affordable accommodation in the community of their choice. The project accepts referrals from a wide range of statutory, voluntary and community-based organisations and agencies and also accepts self-referrals. Referrals are mainly forwarded by the WHSCT Leaving and After Care Team and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Other sources include Careers Service, Youth Justice Agency and Family Intervention Services.

Young people are referred for a variety of reasons. Some young people are preparing to leave residential care and need assistance to prepare for and plan a move into the community of their choice. Others are already living in their own tenancies and may be struggling with paying bills, paying their rent or having disputes with neighbours. These young people are in need of support to maintain their accommodation. Many young people referred are living at home with family and due to family difficulties may be at risk of homelessness if support is not provided. Those who cannot remain living at home may need support to move on to appropriate, safe and affordable accommodation.

The service involves key workers and young people developing tailor-made, flexible support plans based on the assessed needs of the individual, with ongoing reviews as the young person develops the skills to live independently.

Floating support workers have a menu of services available for young people, including access to Action for Children's 'Key to the door' preparation for independent living pack. This is an Open College Network-accredited, flexible, young person-friendly tool that helps young people develop skills for maintaining their accommodation.

The project also provides a 24-hour on-call service available seven days a week, a wide range of activities and social events, an A–Z resource library, a drop-in facility with laundry and cooking facilities, and computer and internet access.

According to Shauna McMenamin, a floating support worker at the project, 'Young people feel they are treated like adults when they use this service, they often say it's the first time they feel they have been able to make decisions for themselves... I feel by support planning with young people and encouraging them to take responsibility by identifying the key areas they want to focus on developing, we really do keep young people at the centre of our work and young people are more keen to engage and more likely to develop the skills to live independently.'

Care leavers and young people at risk of homelessness in Northern Ireland continue to be faced with limited suitable accommodation options that meet the young people's varied support needs. This is especially so in the west and in the less densely populated areas of Northern Ireland, despite departmental-led policy initiatives under the Care Matters Northern Ireland strategy aimed at developing joint-agency protocols, standards and commissioning arrangements for a range of suitable supported accommodation provision for such young people.

## Action for Children Gabriel Court, Rochdale

Lesley Foster is project manager for Gabriel Court in Rochdale, which offers supported tenancies for up to a year to homeless or 'insecurely housed' young women who are pregnant or who have babies under a year old. These include a number of young women who were living at home, but whose parents find their pregnancy hard to accept, or where established partnerships have broken down.

The project runs 12 self-contained flats in a purpose-built block, where staff are on hand 24 hours a day to help the young women. But according to Lesley: 'They live here very much as they would live in the community. There are staff here twenty four seven, so they are afforded a bit of security – visitors have to buzz up and if the women don't want to see them, they don't have to. But they have to buy and cook their own food, sort out their own fuel bills and so on. They are very independent.'

The project is run alongside two others, a pre-tenancy support service for young people in the run-up to their first tenancy, and a tenancy support service, providing support and assistance to young people to help them maintain their tenancies. The floating tenancy support element of the project has four frontline staff, providing support to up to 40 young people (male and female) at any one time.

The pre-tenancy support service works with 16–19 year olds who are parents or parents-to-be and who are looking to be rehoused. The main focus is to ensure that they are ready to take on the responsibility of a tenancy, and know what to expect. So the project runs workshops covering all aspects of the process, from understanding your rights and responsibilities, to knowing how to keep your flat secure. Lesley explains: 'Once a young person gets their flat, sometimes you get all kinds of friends and associates moving in and taking over. In other areas, we have known young women to be targeted in their new home by gangs of men, and they feel they just can't shut the door on them.'

The project works mainly with young women who are pregnant or already have a young family. Lesley says: 'It might be young people who are leaving home, or young women who are completely adrift at 16, homeless, sofa surfing, with no money. They're often referred to us by the Sure Start midwife, because as soon as she starts asking questions she realises that the woman in front of her has nowhere to live and no income. The priority is to secure their finances, which can be a struggle. Parents may still be claiming child benefit or child tax credits for them, and if the parent is financially stretched it can be hard to persuade them to give up that money so that their child can make a claim on her own behalf. It also sometimes means they have to acknowledge that they are estranged from their child, which is enormously difficult for some.'

The finances can often prove to be a wake up call for young people. 'Making them look at the budget comes as a bit of a shock. They get their £100 at the start of the week and then party for two days, and forget that they haven't paid the rent or bought food.'

According to Lesley: 'A lot of the women we see have had fairly chaotic teenage years and having a baby gives them a solid focus. Their aspirations can be very low, and their self-esteem is at rock bottom. We've also done a lot of research around the relationship between drug and alcohol misuse and sexual behaviour – that's a huge issue for us. These young people can be very vulnerable sexually.'

'A lot of the women have long-standing partners, so we do have quite a lot of contact with young men. While we do what we can to help, there's a conflict because if the relationship breaks down, we're essentially there to support the woman. What a lot of the men really need is some sort of continuous support. It's frustrating that our ability to help with their issues, particularly around employment and training, is limited.'



## Housing problems

Young people who have been in the care system, or who are estranged from families, are disproportionately affected by homelessness or insecure housing. Data from local authority housing departments indicates that relationship breakdown at home is the most common cause of homelessness. So it is unfortunate that housing stability is a crucial factor in finding and keeping employment. In fact, studies show found that good housing outcomes were associated with an absence of offending and substance misuse, with engagement in education or training, with strong life and social skills and with young people's positive feelings of wellbeing.<sup>25</sup> These findings are borne out by our work with young people as they try to resolve their housing difficulties. When asked what one thing would make the most difference to their life, one young person in contact with Action for Children said that it was 'to be able to keep my tenancy for a year without one complaint'. Another reported that the most difficult time in their life had been 'living in a B&B on my own in a town where I didn't know anybody'.

Insecure housing is an almost insurmountable obstacle to successfully completing training or holding down a job. Having a fixed address is a prerequisite for holding a bank account, for example, so some of the things other people take for granted are denied young people who don't have secure housing. And of course there are the daily practical problems: it is inordinately difficult to manage a job, or even a regular training or employment commitment, when everything you own is stuffed into a rucksack.

Unfortunately access to affordable housing, whether in the social or private rented sector, is now extremely limited, even to those in acute need. In addition, many young people require support to develop the independent living skills required to sustain a home. Without such support, which is often required beyond age 21, many quickly lose their homes as a result of chaotic lifestyles, the inability to budget properly, or simply through immaturity and lack of support (see profile on Gabriel Court for more information on how Action for Children supports young people in keeping their tenancies).

'I have just come to a point where I want more from life, and I think I'm going to get that in the next six months. I'm going to go back to college and I'm going to make a better life for myself.'

Care leaver,  
Action for Children Lowestoft Leaving  
Care Project



## Action for Children MIST project, Torfaen, Wales<sup>24</sup>

The MIST project in Torfaen, Wales, works with young people at the most extreme end of the not in education, employment or training (NEET) spectrum – young people in care and care leavers aged 11–25 who have such troubled histories they are among the most highly vulnerable young people in society. Most have experienced significant trauma or abuse, been through multiple placement breakdowns or been in residential care. Many have mental health problems or are self-harming, others may have problems with substance abuse, be at risk of sexual exploitation or be considered a threat to other young people.

The project is described as a ‘wraparound’ service, designed to support the young person in every aspect of their life. The eight-strong multi-disciplinary team includes staff with a background in CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), clinical psychology, social work, teaching, youth work, family therapy and clinical psychiatry. However, project manager Jennifer Welham is at pains to stress that the work of the project doesn’t follow the ‘medical’ model of mental health: ‘It’s very much a non-stigmatising, non-medical model, which places a lot of emphasis on the importance of trusting relationships, and on the therapeutic worth of those relationships. Our whole ethos is to support the young person, rather than trying to impose labels or diagnoses. We see their behaviour and problems as very much a “normal” response to highly abnormal circumstances.’

Due to the intensive, one-to-one nature of the work, the project supports a maximum of 15 young people at any one time, all of whom are referred by social services. As children are now being referred as young as 11, they can be in contact with MIST for a long time – potentially up to 12 or 13 years. Once they reach 16, while some young people stay with MIST’s specially trained foster carers, others want to regain control of their lives after leaving care, and opt to return to birth families or to live independently.

According to Jennifer: ‘Some young people have had so many professionals in their lives over the years, that they are really very reluctant to get involved at the start – they just say “... and who the hell are you?”. But after three to six months we’re generally accepted, and actually it can be quite hard to say goodbye at the end, because they still want and need that support from someone.’

The project has already received a positive evaluation by Dr Eddy Street and has been found to be extremely cost-effective in comparison to residential therapeutic placements. It also provides a ‘last resort’ for many young people whose behaviour and problems have meant that mainstream services have found them difficult to cope with. For Jennifer, the project offers a vital lifeline: ‘These are young people who have had really difficult lives, who may have never been in a mutually satisfying relationship, who may have never had any sort of family life. We are trying to redress some of those deficits for young people who would otherwise be likely to end up in institutional settings – either prison or psychiatric hospitals.’





## Mental health

Mental health problems in the wider population of young people include conditions ranging from anxiety, depression and low self-esteem, to problems that require an acute intervention from mental health services. While this spread of conditions is present among young people generally (with some estimates suggesting that between 10% and 18% of young people aged five to 16 are affected) they are far more common among young people who come into contact with the law.<sup>26</sup>

For instance, evidence from mental health organisations indicates that among young people within the UK criminal justice system, rates of mental health problems are at least three times as high as within the general population.<sup>27</sup>

Overstretched and under-resourced child and adolescent mental health services across the UK often fail to detect developing mental health issues early enough, with the result that problems escalate unchecked. Eventually, without support, mental health problems bring young people into contact with other agencies, in particular youth justice. Early identification and prevention of nascent mental health problems can help young people to avoid the negative outcomes commonly associated with them, including isolation from education and employment. Current reviews of mental health services for offenders are a good first step towards a shift to a prevention agenda by identifying the mental health conditions that often seem to

accompany offending. However, governments need to be aware that young people with mental health problems are, as a group, disproportionately represented in custody across the four nations and any measures to prevent mental health conditions becoming acute will require greater awareness by the professionals coming into contact with them.

Action for Children's own research has revealed how difficult it can be for vulnerable and isolated young people to find a trusted adult to talk to. When asked about what would have made their life easier when things were particularly hard, one said: 'All the times my auntie and I had really big arguments and she didn't talk to me for months, living in her house, staying in the bedroom, with no one to talk to, just after my mother passed away – someone who could have helped me, someone to talk to.'

Another said: 'My dad died when I was two years old. I have always felt sad and upset about this. I have never been encouraged to talk about it until recently. It would have helped me to be able to talk to someone about it sooner.'



## Action for Children Kingfishers

Action for Children Kingfishers is a supported housing project in Stroud for learning disabled young people aged 18–25. But it does far more than simply provide accommodation: the project also supports young people to take up education, employment and training opportunities. The project team starts this process by supporting the young person to think about their ambitions and what they want to achieve in their lives. Once this framework is in place, staff then work alongside the young person to develop a person-centred plan that helps to outline the available options and to help the young people work towards achieving their goals.

The project provides specific support around:

- ▶ overcoming barriers to education, employment or training through risk assessment training
- ▶ looking for and applying for jobs
- ▶ completing applications and attending interviews
- ▶ working with young people to achieve a Vocational Related Qualification (VRQ) in Employability and personal development level 1 – enabling the young people to identify their skills, interests and abilities and to take up voluntary work
- ▶ working with a local Fast Track scheme and Gloucestershire Industrial Scheme (GIS) – a supported employment service for adults with learning disabilities that gives the young people a consistent approach to accessing education, employment or training. GIS also coaches and supports young people in their placement
- ▶ supporting the young people with time management, appropriate dress and travel

The project also works with the young people to help them to understand that their actions have consequences, which means young people learn that having a job comes with responsibility such as completing the required tasks and getting there on time.

Supporting young people with learning disabilities to gain employment can involve working creatively with employers. For instance, some of Kingfisher's clients are unable to read, so project staff work alongside an employer to create simple/pictorial checklists of required tasks. The young people are then able to understand what is required of them and can manage their job independently.

One young Kingfishers resident says of her experiences of employment: 'Getting a job has been hard, there is not much out there with the recession. I feel more confident in myself now that I have a job. It is only an hour a week but I can now hopefully build up.'

## Disabilities

We know that young people with disabilities face significant hurdles on the route to employment, and, in fact, disabled 16 year olds are twice as likely to be out of work, education or training as their non-disabled peers.<sup>28</sup>

Given the chance, many disabled young people are able to pursue education and training opportunities as well as to contribute fully in a working environment. The challenge for many employers, education and training institutions is to find ways to enable the participation of disabled young people, removing barriers and seeking to enable them to fulfil their aspirations as contributing adults.

However, historically, disabled young people have not received support and encouragement to see themselves as having a valuable role in society. Research on a sample of young people born in 1958 reported that the proportion of disabled young people aspiring to semi-skilled and unskilled jobs was six times that of non-disabled young people.<sup>29</sup>

More recently, the Joseph Rowntree Trust found, encouragingly, that disabled young people do now share their non-disabled peers' aspirations for education, work and independent living.<sup>30</sup> However, it is unfortunate that while many young disabled people now fully expect to be contributing adults in society, they repeatedly encounter barriers that prevent the realisation of their goals and ambitions. This finding is consistent with research that suggests the gap between disabled and non-disabled young people's experiences simply gets wider as they get older.



## Facts and figures from the 'Who's there for you?' research<sup>31</sup>

The survey revealed:

- ▶ Less than half said they felt loved (49%).
- ▶ Nearly half (43%) said they had experienced problems with loneliness, and a similar number had problems controlling their temper.
- ▶ More than half said they'd had problems with their parents or members of their family (55%). A third (33%) said they'd had problems with friends and social life.
- ▶ But nearly a third (29%) had experienced problems with school or college life, and just over a fifth (21%) had had difficulties with reading and writing.
- ▶ More than a quarter (27%) said they'd had problems with their health or their teeth, and a quarter (25%) reported difficulties with eating, or with cooking.
- ▶ A third (33%) said they'd had problems finding somewhere to live, while half (50%) had had difficulties in finding a job.
- ▶ Money was also an issue, with 43% saying they'd had problems claiming benefits or managing their money.
- ▶ Despite public perceptions, crime was a relatively minor concern, with 74% saying they hadn't experienced problems, and only 17% saying they had.
- ▶ Similarly, drugs and alcohol were not viewed by the majority as problematic – 79% said they had not had any difficulties, while 15% said they had.

When asked what should be done to help children and young people, the top priorities were:

1. more things for young people to do when they are not at school, college or work (49%)
2. more money to live on (40%)
3. more help finding somewhere safe and settled to live (36%)
4. more help with getting and keeping a job or earning money (35%)

5. more help dealing with your family (28%)
6. more help managing your money (25%)
7. more help having a social life (21%)
8. more help and support when it comes to moving out of home (21%)
9. better parks and open spaces (18%)
10. more help with doing well at school or college (17%)
11. more help with reading and writing (14%)
12. more help with health or dental problems (13%)

Asked if they could pick one thing to make a big difference to their life, the answers were:

1. doing well at school or getting a good job (20%)
2. getting the right benefits, or having more money (15%)
3. finding a good place to live where I feel safe (13%)
4. eating well or getting more exercise (11%)
5. having someone I can trust to help me (11%)
6. being able to take care of myself and be more independent (9%)
7. getting more help and encouragement from people around me (6%)
8. keeping away from crime (3%)
9. getting on better with other people (3%)



## Policy context

### Wales

The Welsh Assembly Government has adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as its foundation for policy making in relation to children and young people. Extending Entitlement<sup>32</sup> is its flagship policy for youth support services in Wales, which provides young people aged 11–25 with entitlements to a range of rights and services necessary for their successful transition into adulthood.

The Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 enshrines in legislation 14–19 Learning Pathways, which will provide each 14–19 year old with an individual learning pathway. Young people will choose from a wide choice of options including volunteering, training, apprenticeships and ongoing education. There will be a guarantee of a training, learning or employment offer for 16–18 year olds and participation after the age of 16 is on a voluntary basis, unlike in England.

The Welsh Assembly Government now has responsibility for education, health and social services, and vulnerable children up to the age of 25. A vulnerable children strategy will be out for consultation later in 2009 and further legislation is expected for vulnerable children and young people. A strategy ‘Reducing the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training in Wales’ was published earlier in 2009 outlining the Assembly Government’s plans to put in place the right systems, provision and support to reduce the proportion of young people not in employment or training. Additionally, a substantial European-backed ‘Reach the Heights’ programme is being implemented, which will help around 30,000 young people in West Wales and the Valleys improve their career prospects.



## Northern Ireland

Major reform of the education system is underway in Northern Ireland, which includes ongoing work to remove academic selection, implement 14–19 curriculum reforms and the school improvement programme and recent ‘Every School A Good School’ policy.

The 10-year overarching children and young people’s strategy aims to improve outcomes for all children and young people. The strategy includes a ‘whole child approach’, support for parents, carers and communities to help shape young people’s environment, and a sustained shift towards prevention and early intervention. However, while a number of Northern Ireland government departments are responsible for people in education, employment or training (EET), no one department holds responsibility for young people ‘not in EET’ and there is currently no cross-cutting strategy in place to address the needs of such young people.

The Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) is responsible for training and employment programmes and careers advice services for adults and young people aged 16 and over. These programmes include Steps to Work – a flexible approach to finding work, based on advice and support, skills development and confidence building for young people, which along with Apprenticeships Northern Ireland and Training for Success provides the tools and opportunities to enter the workplace.

Training for Success aims to give 16–18 year olds the tools and the confidence to find work and focuses on the extra learning they may need. Once young people gain recognised basic skills and qualifications, they will be considered ready to move into the next level of Training for Success (TfS) or an apprenticeship.

The TfS training programme comprises three key components, including:

- ▶ ‘Skills for Life’ – addressing participants’ personal and development needs
- ▶ ‘Skills for Work’ – helping participants gain skills and a Vocationally Related Qualification at Level 1 to be able to gain employment, to progress to pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship provision or to further education
- ▶ ‘Pre-Apprenticeship’ – aims to ensure that those assessed as being capable of achieving a Vocationally Related Qualification at Level 2, but who have not yet secured employment are prepared for future progression to employment as an apprentice

A tailored package of support to young people with disabilities runs alongside this programme.

Improving outcomes, including education, employment and training for looked-after children and care leavers, is a key objective of the Care Matters (NI) strategy. This includes supporting young people (engaged in EET) to remain with foster carers post-18 and developing a range of transition support services for looked-after young people aged 16 plus, including those with a disability and creating employability initiatives and opportunities for them.



## Case study: Danielle

### Aged 15 – currently studying for her exams

‘The most important thing for me when I leave care is paying my own way and going to college to get as many qualifications as I can. I know you need education to get anywhere in life – employers can have their pick of people, so the more qualifications you have, the more chance you have to get a decent job. Hopefully I’ll be a social worker. I’ve lived it – I’ve had the experience of being in care.

‘Only one of my friends has a job, even though they have applied for things. They are just lazing about doing nothing, basically. I know it must be pretty boring, no school, no money, nothing to do the whole day.

‘I want the satisfaction of doing a job. Being on benefits must be pretty crap because you don’t have money to spend on nice clothes, nice furniture or a nice house. I don’t want a life where I’m scrimping just to get by.

‘The support I receive in care has made a difference to me because the people at the home always talk about your future. It means the plan for your future is made in advance. People staying at home just do what they want really – their mums are more tolerant for them to just sit back.

‘If I had kids, I’d want them to have a decent life – of course I’d want them to work for what they get, but I’d want them have the same opportunities as everyone else.’

‘When I got a job, my whole life changed. Just going to work opened my eyes and made me realise that I wanted to be someone. Now I’m going to college and I’m a bit more grown up. I’m more confident and I know what I want to do. Back then, I didn’t know what I was doing, so I stuck in a dead-end job. But I admit that even though it was a dead-end job, I had some good experiences there.’

Care leaver,  
Action for Children Lowestoft Leaving  
Care Project



## Scotland

Scotland's approach to young people's aspirations and employability is shaped by the More Choices, More Chances policy<sup>33</sup> strategy, which aims to eradicate the problem of young people not in education, employment or training. This strategy includes a range of programmes and policies to support young people at risk of disengagement.

Although it is a national initiative across Scotland, the More Choices, More Chances strategy is targeted at seven areas with the highest numbers of young people outside of employment or training opportunities (Glasgow, West Dunbartonshire, North Ayrshire, East Ayrshire, Clackmannanshire, Inverclyde and Dundee) and also at specific groups that are at higher risk of becoming disengaged. These include care leavers, carers, young offenders, young parents, low attainers, persistent truants, young people with physical/mental disabilities and young people misusing drugs or alcohol.

The policy has specific measures aimed at young people pre- and post-16, but so far Scotland has chosen not to go down the compulsory route for young people leaving school at 16 that the English Education and Skills Act introduced in 2008.

There is a strong interface between the aims of More Choices, More Chances, and those of Action for Children Scotland's Youthbuild projects, which have been successful in securing employment and training opportunities in the construction industry for difficult to reach young people (see Youthbuild profile).

## England

Key transition themes emerging from English policymakers include measures to keep young people in school as the best place to make decisions about the future, the reform of the curriculum to open up less formal learning opportunities, and support for parents of vulnerable children to enable them to make the right choices and realise their aspirations.

This is the policy goal of Raising Expectations – a programme to reform the 14–19 curriculum offer, introducing a new apprenticeships scheme to engage young people in education at a crucial time as they look for increasingly relevant learning opportunities. Supporting this is the Children's Plan – making an explicit link between raised aspirations and educational attainment, and recognising that 'parents remain the most direct influence on young people's outcomes, shaping their aspirations and values'. Outside the classroom *Aiming high for young people: A 10-year strategy for positive activities* notes the effect of parents' aspirations on their children, and how levels of support and advice can be 'influenced and limited by their own experiences'.

Since 2008, the educational offer to young people has been extended through the Education and Skills Act. This changes the law to ensure that all young people stay on in education or training until age 18. This, in tandem with the reform of the education offer and additional support for vulnerable groups such as looked-after children and care leavers through the Care Matters programme, provides the context for young people to engage fully in shaping their own futures.



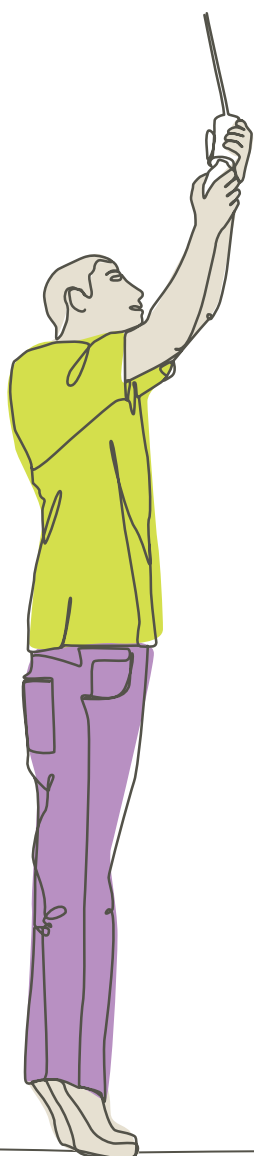


## Summary

The findings in this report highlight the difficulties that many young people experience as part of moving into adulthood. Problems that are usually manageable with support can, for vulnerable and isolated young people, turn into a crisis.

Young people who are classed as furthest from the jobs market require flexible opportunities and are often the most keen to work, once opportunities are provided. Action for Children has seen, through our services, that even the most marginalised young people can develop workplace skills, aspirations and a desire to succeed, given the chance to prove themselves.

Services therefore need to be available to young people at different stages in their development, and for as long as it takes. It's this challenge that decision makers across the four nations need to address if all children and young people are to become successful and confident adults.



### Key points:

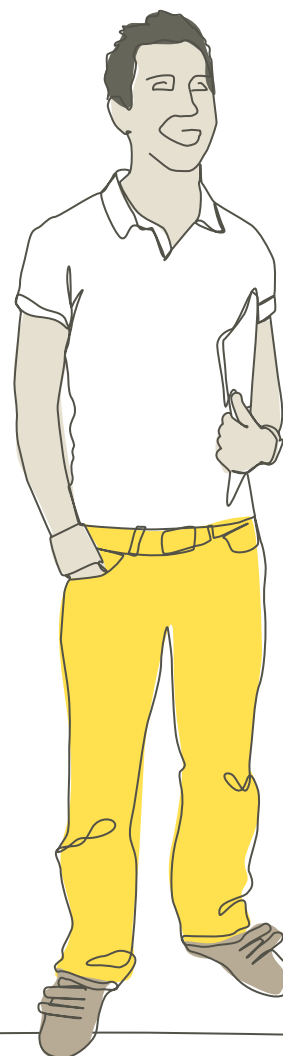
- ▶ Promoting a successful transition to adulthood is about supporting young people to develop the life skills required in later life. Key to this process is providing flexible support to young people as they, inevitably, make mistakes, and being there to help them draw lessons from their experiences.
- ▶ Young people leaving institutional care, including the secure estate, must be confident that the resources are there to support successful resettlement into the community. Inadequate accommodation and housing support for care leavers and young ex-offenders places them a real risk of homelessness, unemployment, and ultimately offending.
- ▶ A child-fair state is one that ensures all children and young people can access the support they need to move into adulthood. Where structural obstacles and financial disincentives prevent young people from moving into employment and training programmes, these need to be removed so that all young people can achieve economic success.
- ▶ Employability and training services outside of school are essential for the most disaffected young people to develop aspirations and plan for the future. Working with this group of young people requires time and patience. Government must recognise the need for programmes that develop a young person's ability to learn, and that focus on achievement and progress made, not simply educational attainment and gaining qualifications.

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31. Action for Children surveyed more than 200 17–25 year olds involved with our services. All figures are rounded to the nearest percent. The sample consisted of: 71% female, 29% male, 50% in England, 16% in Wales, 34% in Scotland, and 0.5% in Northern Ireland. The ethnic make up was: White British: 90.5% (180); Black African: 3.0% (6); Black Caribbean: 1.5% (3); Chinese: 1.0% (2); Black British: 0.5% (1); ‘Other’: 3.5% (7).
32. Some of the entitlements young people in Wales have under Extending Entitlement are: to be heard, to feel good, to have access to information and guidance, to have access to education and training and health and wellbeing ([www.cliconline.co.uk/clicinfo/servera5e6.html?show=nav.658](http://www.cliconline.co.uk/clicinfo/servera5e6.html?show=nav.658))
33. *More Choices, More Chances: A Strategy to Reduce the Proportion of Young People not in Education, Employment or Training in Scotland*, Scottish Executive, 2006, [www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/129456/0030812.pdf](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/129456/0030812.pdf)



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Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

*as long as it takes*

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