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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a study of how care leavers access and use housing services, and what they said had helped them to do so. The sample comprised 80 care leavers, and, for comparison, a group of 59 young people (termed 'in difficulty') who met certain criteria of disadvantage. Care leavers were found to have fewer crisis transitions and less experience of homelessness, together with a much higher level of autonomy and support in their first accommodation, relative to other young people in difficulty. Several factors are identified that, from the care leavers' point of view, contributed to their better access and use of housing services, including having family and friends to turn to, and leaving care teams that negotiated on their behalf with housing services. The paper concludes that care leavers had more positive housing experiences than other young people in difficulty, helped by the improved preparation for independence and ongoing support available to them from leaving care teams.

Introduction

The housing needs of care leavers and other young people who leave home early are well documented (Biehal and Wade 1996; Broad 1989; Ford *et al.* 2002), as are the risk factors that contribute to youth homelessness in these groups of young people (Jones 1995). Research findings indicate that housing is widely recognised as a key priority for young people, being "the life area most closely associated with mental well-being, outstripping the contribution made by involvement in education and training" (Wade *et al*. 2006, p.203). Therefore understanding what leads to successful housing outcomes and what is working well, is key to supporting young people moving into independent living.

In the early 1980s, it was widely recognised that current legislation did not go far enough to support young people leaving care, and many advocacy agencies, supported by research evidence, campaigned for an overhaul of the way young people were discharged from care (Save the Children 1995). This led to a reinvigoration within policy of the concept of corporate parenting to discourage local authorities from discharging young people so early, with many practical implications for how to improve the housing situation for young people leaving care.

Care leavers and other young people leaving home early are likely to share a number of vulnerability factors, such as an unstable childhood, a history of running away, family problems and lack of supportive social networks (Simon and Owen 2006). It is important that research studies differentiate between care-leavers and other young people in difficulty when examining their housing

careers and the role played by housing-related services in reducing youth homelessness. This is in order to ascertain how well care leavers' transitions to independence are supported compared with the experiences of other vulnerable young people.

Drawing on findings from a recently completed research study funded by the Department of Education and Skills, this paper evaluates how young people accessed and used housing services, and what made a difference, from the young people's point of view, for those with positive experiences of housing.

Leaving care and housing legislation

The Children Act 1989 introduced a number of important principles which continue to exert a powerful influence on child care practice today (Department of Health 1989). Among these was the practice of working in partnership with parents, and for local authorities to have powers to provide the necessary services, including support and protection, for all children and young people in care. However, no extra money was provided to enable local authorities to carry out the additional powers as set out within the Children Act. As a result, Jackson (2006, p.20) argues that the Act was deliberately vague on details of how many of the principles of the Act might be carried out and many local authorities therefore felt free to ignore them. An example of this is the Guidance to the Act, which clearly states that children in care have the same entitlement as all children to further and higher education (Department of Health 1991a & 1991b),

but without the duty to provide the financial support this requires, this guidance has proved somewhat ineffective (Jackson *et al.* 2005).

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 was designed to remedy some of the shortcomings of the 1989 Act in respect of care leavers. The overall aim of the Act was to reinforce local authority responsibility, both financial and practical, for all young people in its care. The Act had three particularly important aims. The first was to delay young people's discharge from care until they have been adequately prepared. The second was to improve the assessment, preparation and planning around the leaving care process. The third was to secure the availability of financial and personal support to young people once they had left care. The Act also lays a duty on local authorities to keep in contact with young people formerly in their care beyond the age of 21 if the young person is on a full-time further or higher education course. Taken together, this meant that local authorities would become the young person's primary source of income, and it was their responsibility to provide financial support and accommodation costs as well as a range of other expenses associated with transport and of young people's pursuit of training, education and leisure (and for those continuing in full-time education, to provide this up to the end of their educational course; Department of Health 2001). In this way, it was hoped the local authorities would 'mirror' the responsibilities parents have for their children.

Ways of meeting these new responsibilities were provided for local authorities in the Guidance accompanying the Act (Department of Health 2001). Personal support packages would enable an account to be taken of the individual

needs and preferences of young people, with 'pathway plans' set up to cover all the key areas necessary for independent living, including access to personal advisors, who would provide advocacy, advice and support to the young people making the transition to independent living. To aid this, a minimum income level to cover housing costs and a personal allowance was set in line with current benefit rates, with the plans reviewed at regular intervals (approximately every 6 months), so as to address the ongoing needs of young people.

The Housing Act 1996 also has relevance to care leavers, along with a subsequent statutory instrument (SI 2002 No. 2051) which designated care leavers as a priority group for housing and access to a wide range of housing services. However, this legislation did not specify which local authority department (housing or social services) was responsible for making sure care leavers were given priority. Broad (1998) points out this resulted in considerable difficulties for care leavers trying to access housing. Section 189 of the Housing Act 1996 set out who would have a priority need for accommodation. This referred to section 24 of the 1989 Act, which stated that all 16 and 17 years olds who had left home, and those who had been looked after, accommodated or fostered, as particularly vulnerable (ODPM, 2006). However, in practice, it was difficult for individuals to prove that they were lacking family support (Niner *et al*. 1996).

Another feature of this Act, still applicable today, is the Single Room Rent regulation which meant many young people under the age of 25 were likely to be priced out of the private housing stock market by those entitled to higher housing

benefit levels on the grounds of age. Finally, the Homelessness Act 2002 placed on local authorities a duty to draw up interagency strategies to combat homelessness in their area and to provide dedicated services for young people, as a separate group with specific needs. This included issuing good practice guidance so that arrangements would be made for "joint assessment between social service and housing authorities, as part of a multi-agency assessment necessary to inform the pathway plan of individual young people" (DCLG, 2006, p.188).

Aims and Methods

The study aimed to evaluate how young people who left care accessed and used a range of different services, including health, education, and housing, and to compare the experiences of care leavers with other young people who had 'difficulties' but had not been in local authority care (the latter group were termed young people in difficulty), and to identify features of young people's lives that facilitated service use. The study also aimed to evaluate how leaving care practice was responding to these new changes in legislation, and to map the service landscape for these young people. The emphasis of the study was on documenting young people's perceptions of services: whether they thought the services they used had been helpful to them, in what ways they had been helpful or unhelpful, their reasons for seeking assistance, and their reasons for rejecting

formal support. The study took place between 2003 and 2006, which was shortly after the implementation of the Children Leaving Care Act (CLCA) 2000.

Multiple methods were used to collect and analyse the data obtained for the study: a literature review focusing on studies since 1990 on care leavers and service use, secondary analysis of a number of large scale national data sets to review how young people in the general population use services, interviews with a sample of 80 care leavers aged 17-24, and 59 young people in difficulty aged 16-29, and interviews with 29 managers of leaving care, housing, health and employment services.

Recruitment of most of the care leavers (54/80) came from four geographically contrasting 'case study areas': a metropolitan authority in the North-East, a shire county in the North-West, an inner London authority and a unitary authority in a Southern county. Forty-six were recruited in these areas through social service leaving care teams, and eight during the process of recruiting the other young people in difficulty. The remaining 26 care leavers were recruited from other local authorities around the country who were contacted for participation in this study but produced so few young people that they could not be designated a case study area. To achieve a sample size of 80 care leavers, recruitment took place almost two years ahead of when the interviews were carried out (in 2004). Leaving care teams were asked to produce names of young people who would be willing to participate in this research study who were aged at least 15 years in 2002 and available for interview two years later (by which time the youngest interviewees would be 17 years old). Contact

was maintained until the point of interview via short questionnaires, which enabled a picture of care leavers' experience of independent living to be built up in the elapsed time (Wigfall and Cameron 2006). Incentive vouchers were offered for participation.

The other young people in difficulty were recruited from the case study areas. Access to these young people was negotiated through a range of services, including housing support projects and advice centres for young people. Researchers visited these premises and approached young people directly to obtain consent for a subsequent interview. The criterion for inclusion in this study was that the comparison group of young people had at least two of the characteristics identified as 'risk factors' by the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU 2000; SEU 2005). Young people who matched these characteristics were likely to have a high level of disadvantage and are therefore broadly comparable to care leavers, who have high levels of disadvantage relative to all young people (Simon and Owen 2006). These criteria were similar to those used in other research studies (SEU 2005; Webster *et al.* 2004). These young people were also offered an incentive voucher for completing an interview.

Almost all of the interviews with care leavers were conducted in their homes, whereas interviews with young people 'in difficulty' were mostly conducted on the premises of the services through which they had been recruited, such as private meeting rooms in housing projects. Confidentiality was respected for all participants in whatever setting they were interviewed. There was no difference between the groups in the length of interview or topics

covered. Therefore the different locations are unlikely to have affected the data findings. However, as care leavers and other young people in difficulty were voluntary participants, it is acknowledged by the research team that the findings may capture the views of more research-willing participants.

Demographic characteristics of the samples

Young women were over-represented among care leavers in this study which possibly reflects their greater willingness to participate in research (Wigfall and Cameron 2006). Over one-half of care leavers and young people in difficulty in the sample were female (Table 1: 69% and 58% respectively). This is slightly higher than for all care leavers (46%; DfES 2005). Over a quarter of care leavers and young people in difficulty were from minority ethnic backgrounds (Table 1) - higher than that found by Broad (13%; 2005) but similar to Wade *et al.* (25%; 2006). A quarter of care leavers and young people in difficulty had self-reported physical or learning difficulties (Table 1) - slightly higher than other research studies (Broad 2005; Wade *et al*. 2006). The study aimed to recruit care leavers aged 17 – 24, and all those interviewed were within this age band. The average age for the care leavers was 18 years (Table 1). This is also the most common age for leaving care (DfES, 2005). The average age for the other young people in difficulty in this study was 20 (Table 1). As time had elapsed between the point of leaving care and being interviewed, some participants were older than 24 at the point of interview (the oldest participant was 29 years). Young people who were older or younger than 17-24 at the point of interview were excluded from the

analysis presented in this paper. The study care leavers were also more likely than children entering care overall in England for 2003/4 to have entered care between the ages of 5 and 15 (DfES 2005).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Early housing transitions

Care leavers move into independent living at approximately 17 years (Biehal *et al*. 1995; Ford *et al*. 2002). In this study, the other young people in difficulty left home at 18 years on average. Care leavers and other young people in difficulty therefore leave care or home at a much younger age than the general population, which is around the mid-twenties (Heath, 1999).

Biehal *et al.* (1995) found two main paths for care leavers moving into independence: crisis moves and planned moves. Planned paths involve the young person, the social worker, the leaving care team, and the foster parents or residential care work staff, working with the young person *before* they leave care on their options for accommodation upon discharge from care. This process usually involves (as part of their pathway plan for those leaving care following the CLCA 2000) practical skills workshops, such as how to budget, as well as strategies for coping with loneliness. Crisis paths on the other hand, occur when the young person leaves care suddenly, for example on the break-down of a long-term foster placement.

In this study, half of the participants had experienced accommodation changes that were a result of crisis situations, but they were more likely to characterise the young people in difficulty (where 67 per cent had experienced a crisis move) than care leavers (where only 33 per cent had experienced a crisis move). Biehal *et al.* (1995, p. 31 & 33) also found nearly two-thirds of care leavers had made planned moves from care.

Young people in difficulty also had more experience of homelessness than care leavers. Homelessness was defined in this study as those who had to rely on friends and family to put them up to prevent them from sleeping rough, as well as those who had slept rough, and those who had to spend more than a week in bed and breakfast, or refuge or other emergency accommodation. This characterised 30 per cent (22) of the care leavers in this study, which is broadly consistent with the 22 per cent of care leavers who had been homeless at some point during the 18-24 months period after leaving care, found by Biehal (1995, p.21). However, 53 per cent of other young people in difficulty had experienced homelessness.

Without a fixed abode, many young people found themselves in a downward spiral, unable to maintain educational courses and either seek or continue with employment. One eighteen-year old man in difficulty offered a clear example of this. Having been homeless for six months prior to interview, he spent most of his time at friends' houses rather than in education, training or employment, after trying unsuccessfully to gain employment without a permanent address. Exhausted by his inability to resolve this situation he had taken to

drinking heavily. He was dependent on the goodwill of his friends, but like other young people interviewed who had experienced homelessness, he stressed his need to be physically and psychologically settled before he could contemplate re-engaging with education, training or employment.

How young people accessed and used housing

Young people living in England and Wales can access housing through:

- housing officers and departments (which operate 'housing lists' to regulate access to social housing through priority point schemes)

- housing associations (these typically have vacancies that are filled through local council nominations, but some also accept direct applications and operate their own waiting lists and points schemes)

- and voluntary sector housing projects

Study care leavers reported having limited direct contact with housing providers and instead relied on mediating services, such as leaving care teams. Fifty-seven per cent (39) of the care leavers in this study reported they had never used housing offices and 65 per cent (51) reported they had never used a housing support officer. Leaving care teams often set up first accommodation on leaving care, liaising with housing providers as advocates for care leavers. Only those care leavers whose contact with leaving care officers had broken down, or who failed to receive adequate support in the first place, had to negotiate direct access to housing themselves. However, once accommodated, care leavers then went on to have more direct dealings with housing services.

In contrast, many of the young people in difficulty, having left home in a crisis, generally lacked an advocate to speak on their behalf with any of the housing providers. For some, this gap was filled by the voluntary sector. Voluntary organizations played an important role in brokering access to housing services for young people in difficulty (and also for care leavers who had lost contact with their leaving care service). Many such young people received help from personal advisors or key workers in these types of organizations with filling in forms for applications to housing providers. Voluntary organizations were also, in some cases, able to make direct referrals to housing projects on behalf of young people.

Participants were asked what type of accommodation they were placed in, either after first leaving care or after leaving home in the case of the young people in difficulty (Table two). In this study, first accommodation for care leavers was often living with other people, including relatives (especially birth parents) or friends (together accounting for 35 per cent of the study's care leavers), or they were living in flats or rooms within housing projects (33 per cent of care leavers). Housing projects offer supported housing for care leavers, and are often used by leaving care teams as 'trainer flats' to provide a gradual introduction to living independently, before moving on to a more permanent social tenancy, for example, in a local authority or housing association property (Wade, 2003).

Participants were also asked where they were living at the time of the interview. Care leavers were more likely than other young people in difficulty, to be living in 'supported' lodgings within bed and breakfast accommodation or flats

or rooms provided by social service departments in housing projects. These types of lodgings provide 'institutional support' for young people through staff living or working on the premises and working with tenants to enable them to find and keep a place of their own, to develop practical living skills like budgeting, shopping, cooking, and to access education, training and employment. Young people often have a named housing support officer in housing projects or hostels who identifies their support needs and aids them with developing skills to move towards fully independent living. This includes building confidence in young people, providing counseling and advice, signposting to relevant professional services and helping young people gain a greater understanding of their housing rights and obligations. Non-residential young people can also access the 'floating support' provided by referrals from housing associations, local authorities, resettlement teams and social services.

Most study participants were in accommodation provided by local councils or housing associations. Table two shows that 39 per cent of care leavers and 20 percent of young people in difficulty were currently doing so, which is a similar proportion to that found by Wade *et al.* (2006, p.201) for care leavers. Beyond this, young people in difficulty were most commonly living in 'rooms within a housing project' (34%), usually comprising a single room, with shared bathroom and kitchen facilities, or flats within housing projects (24%) such as hostels, foyers or YMCA, where they had their own kitchen and bathroom (and more responsibility for keeping it clean, paying for fuel and so on).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

In both instances, some additional institutional support was often available. However, this type of accommodation was less common for care leavers in this study, who more often were living in 'autonomous' accommodation – tenancies where they could shut their own front door, had privacy and responsibility for the upkeep and finances of their home. Half of the care leaver sample was in this situation.

Differences between the accommodation type of care leavers and young people in difficulty at the time of interview could be attributed to the ways each group was sampled. Young people in difficulty were recruited from housing projects and young people's advice or day centres, which may explain the higher number living in this kind of supported accommodation. Differences in accommodation between the two groups could also be attributed to the age and gender of the young people. For instance, older young people in difficulty were more likely than care leavers to be living at the time of interview in supported accommodation and the young people in difficulty were on average slightly older than the care leavers. Females were also more likely than males to be living in social tenancy accommodation, especially if they were care leavers (24/33 female care leavers were living in social tenancy accommodation). In addition, males (especially those in difficulty) were more likely than females to be living in housing projects or other people's places.

The interview findings suggested that relative to other young people in difficulty, care leavers had access to and were in receipt of more consistent housing support (largely due to leaving care teams who supported care leavers), both at the point of leaving care/home and for some time following first transitions to independent living.

Care leavers' experiences of accessing housing

Living alone for the first time was described by one care leaver (male, aged 17), as being 'a big shock' and he found being 'dumped in a flat' all on his own very difficult. Feeling unable to cope with the responsibility of managing their own lives was a common theme for care leavers, with many struggling with 'having to do everything yourself' (female care leaver aged 18 years). In addition, some care leavers in this study, who had left care prior to the CLCA 2000, reported having had no preparation to help build the skills needed to live alone (such as budgeting and cooking skills), or found the guidance they had received to be lacking.

Leaving care also brought great pleasures for care leavers, who reported that it made them feel 'free' and 'not constantly watched' (Male care leaver aged 17). Other care leavers in this study, who had left care after the CLCA 2000, reported they had received the choice of housing they had requested prior to leaving care thanks to the mediating efforts of their leaving care officer. Such accounts suggest an improving picture in the collaboration between housing

departments and social services, which is important for avoiding a tenancy break-down later on.

However, young people's involvement in decisions about their housing varied considerably between local authorities and even between individual key-workers (also noted by Broad, 2003). Other young people in difficulty encountered similar, if not greater, problems in trying to gain the housing they needed. One such young person (female, aged 18) commented that her local council asked her to seek accommodation elsewhere because they felt she was the responsibility of an adjacent local authority. Eventually she found housing by declaring herself homeless to that local authority. Such young people commented they lacked an appropriate advocate to speak on their behalf with the relevant authorities.

Young people in this study with direct experience of using housing departments rated the service as one of the least helpful they had accessed. They complained these services were impersonal, not appropriate for the specific needs of young people, were poor at listening to their wishes, and were prone to long waiting times. Housing projects were also poorly rated on account of their shared facilities and inadequate personal space. Therefore, whilst housing projects could be beneficial for some, it clearly was not the solution for all.

During the interviews, several young people (care leavers and other young people in difficulty) who had been keen to leave care or home early said that in retrospect, they would advise other young people to avoid such a move for as long as possible because of the support they had received whilst in care or at

home. Three care leavers at the time of the study, who were receiving a lot of support with living in their accommodation, commented that they felt in a more fortunate position compared with other young people who lacked the support and financial assistance they had been given to afford to live independently.

What helped young people access and use housing services

In terms of accessing housing, a key factor was having friends or family that they could turn to. Ford *et al.* (2002) commented that transitions to independence are often marked by spells of return to the parental home before young people finally have the resources and confidence to sustain stable accommodation. This was the case for many of the care leavers interviewed. For example, one female care leaver aged 19 found that turning to her mother for an interim period of time was a useful stepping stone between leaving care and gaining permanent accommodation. However, this kind of support from birth parents was not the experience for all care leavers and was not helpful for other young people in difficulty who relied more on friends or partners.

During the interviews, respondents were questioned about the levels of different kinds of formal and informal support they received. Analysis of the interview data showed that two-thirds of care leavers (mostly those who had left care after the CLCA 2000) and young people in difficulty considered they had 'enough support'. Those reporting wanting more support with their daily lives were care leavers living in social tenancy accommodation or young people in difficulty living in temporary accommodation. In addition, support was more likely

to be described as 'intense' for care leavers than other young people in difficulty, and for those care leavers living in residential homes/supported lodgings or rooms within housing projects (which had professionals on site).

Analysis of the interview data also showed that care leavers were more likely than other young people in difficulty to assess their life as 'easier than a year ago'. Sixty-one per cent of care leavers reported this compared with just over a third of the young people in difficulty. This view was more likely to be expressed by care leavers living in private tenancies and for both groups of young people living in flats within housing projects (i.e. those with more housing autonomy). However, a third of young people in difficulty reported life had 'got harder' over the same period. These young people were more likely to be living in rooms in housing projects (where privacy and space were more likely to be compromised) or within social tenancies (who had reported wanting more support to cope with their finances). Therefore, it was clear from the transcripts that how young people felt about their lives closely related to the type of accommodation they were living in and the associated problems it brought with it.

Support for young people in the study was also assessed by who they defined as their closest 'key worker'. This was the professional they saw most often and rated as most helpful. Although care leavers defined a wide range of workers as being helpful, the leaving care officer was most frequently mentioned by them as the closest person to seek advice and support from (characterizing one third of care leavers). This was particularly the case for care leavers living in private tenancies or residential homes/supported lodgings. But for those care

leavers living in housing projects, the housing project worker was equally likely to be mentioned as their closest key worker. Similarly, other young people in difficulty reported feeling most supported by their housing project worker (41 per cent), especially if living in housing project accommodation. Those young people in difficulty living in temporary accommodation (with no access to a resident professional) or living in another person's place (which characterized more of the other young people in difficulty) were the least likely to be in receipt of any key worker support.

Voluntary organizations were one way young people were supported in accessing good accommodation. For example, one care leaver, who at the time of leaving care was living outside the local authority responsible for her care, found herself without accommodation when she turned 18 years old. As she preferred not to move back into her old local authority (who were responsible for her care), she sought the help from a voluntary organization. They placed her with a family until she could negotiate appropriate housing in her chosen area. In such cases, voluntary organizations used their knowledge of the housing legislation to advocate for the young person with the relevant authorities.

In addition, the young people demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness with accessing appropriate or better housing. Examples of this include young people's accounts of declaring themselves homeless and seeking help under the Homelessness Act 2002, such as one care leaver, who after becoming homeless and sleeping rough for a couple of weeks, approached the council under the Act and was eventually allocated bed and breakfast accommodation for about a year.

Another care leaver was resourceful enough to make her housing wishes known when she was offered inappropriate accommodation by her leaving care service. She recommended to her leaving care team a voluntary organization that had housing she was interested in, and after this had been looked into as an option for her, the leaving care team negotiated with the voluntary organization to offer her a place in one of their London hostels.

Conclusions

This paper has analysed housing pathways for two groups of young people: those who have been in public care and those who have had difficulties but have not been in care. The former group usually had access to different resources than the latter and the young people in the in difficulty group could have been admitted to care had their difficulties arisen earlier in their lives. In addition, there is some bias in the way the two groups were recruited. Nevertheless, comparisons are useful, as they situate the position for care leavers and raise awareness of the position for other young people.

In this study, care leavers who left prior to the CLCA 2000 reported having many difficulties with both accessing and choosing accommodation that was appropriate for them. Through the provisions made available in the CLCA 2000, for care leavers in this study who left care after this act, transitions to independence were smoothed by leaving care teams who provided them with both practical and emotional support. Indeed, leaving care officers were the most

frequently person turned to for support, with one third of care leavers citing them as their closest key worker. As a consequence, many of the care leavers that had left care after the CLCA 2000 reported receiving adequate planning prior to leaving care and receiving the accommodation they wanted at first placement. In addition, two-thirds of such care leavers reported receiving enough support with their daily lives. This suggests that the CLCA 2000 is making a real difference for care leavers accessing and using housing services.

However, even for those leaving care after the CLCA 2000, the leaving care service was found to be variable between different parts of the country and even within leaving care teams. Care leavers who experienced variable delivery, reported relying more on housing support workers or other voluntary service workers. Therefore, successful transitions to independence hinge on good relationships between the care leaver and leaving care team and good communication between leaving care teams, housing providers and voluntary services to provide a multi-agency service to these young people. In addition, a more consistent application of the CLCA 2000 across all local authority leaving care teams would aid this process (especially to ensure finances are in place that will enable care leavers to feel secure in their accommodation, and to pursue education, training or employment).

Young people in difficulty were much less likely than care leavers to assess their life as 'easier than a year ago'. This difference in outlook was partly due to the informal support received from friends and family and partly due to the type of accommodation they were offered and the formal support they received.

Unlike care leavers in this study, who seemed to have developed better coping strategies that included a network of informal support such as family and friends they could turn to in times of crisis, many other young people in difficulty were distanced from their families. Relative to care leavers, other young people in difficulty in this study were also over-represented in their access and use of temporary or transitional accommodation and experiences of homelessness. Young people in difficulty in these types of accommodation were the least likely to have received support with their daily lives. In addition, a third of young people in difficulty reported life had 'got harder' in the year preceding the interview. Such young people were also more likely (than care leavers) to be living in rooms in housing projects, where privacy and space were more likely to be compromised.

Particularly lacking for other young people in difficulty was the evidence of formal support structures to help them access or use accommodation. While leaving care services have a statutory responsibility for care leavers, there is no such equivalent status for the voluntary sector services and no legal requirement to determine what is offered by these services. Users are therefore free to choose to take up these services and if they fail to provide what they need are likely to walk away. As a consequence, other young people in difficulty arguably rely much more than care leavers on their own resources for finding a suitable service and finding an appropriate person who will advocate on their behalf with the statutory services.

Although care leavers and other young people in difficulty are severely disadvantaged relative to the general population, in many cases care leavers,

having access to a whole package of support (especially for those leaving care following the CLCA 2000), were often in a more fortunate position relative to other young people in difficulty who leave home at a similar age. Evidence from this study suggests other young people in difficulty could greatly benefit from the resources provided by leaving care teams to care leavers. This could be developed through partnerships or through fostering better links (where these already exist) between housing providers, social services and voluntary sector services. This may help to identify and prioritize this often hidden but equally vulnerable group of young people within the housing arena.

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Table 1: Demographic characteristics

Characteristic	% Care leavers	% Young people in difficulty
Gender: Female	69	58
Male	31	42
Ethnicity: White British/European	73	71
Minority ethnic	27	29
Self-reported and defined learning difficulty	25	25
Average age	18 (17-24)	20 (17-24)
Total N	80	55

Table 2: First and current accommodation

Type of accommodation	First accommodation		Current accommodation	
	% Care leavers	% Young people in difficulty	% Care leavers	% Young people in difficulty
Private Tenancy	3	6	9	4
Social Tenancy: council or housing association	11	4	39	20
Temporary accommodation with/without support[1]	1	10	8	5
Flat in a housing project, more responsibility, with some drop in support	18	4	8	24
Not in own place. Living in other person's place (including family), with or without support[2]	35	68	23	13
Room in a housing project, lots of shared facilities and support	15	8	9	34
Residential home or supported lodgings	17	0	6	0
Total N	71	45	80	55
Missing data	9	10	0	0

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[1] Such as Bed and Breakfast accommodation

[2] Young people in this category were living with: ex-carers, birth parents, friends (often on the sofa for limited amounts of time), grandparents, and partners