

Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on the following project: Neagu M., Robson J., & Tah, P. (2024). Who influences the career choices of young people in care? Vocational identity formation in the absence of family support and influence. Study funded by the John Fell Fund, Oxford

## Who Influences the Career Choices of Young People in Care? Vocational identity formation in the absence of family support

### What is this research about and why is it important?

Young people who grow up in care constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Many of them enter care during adolescence, a critical time for development, when they form their identities, set their future aspirations and make education and career choices, usually with support from their family. In the absence of family support and influence, the risk of young people leaving care to end up not being not in education, employment or training (NEET) is much higher than in general population and only a small proportion of them go into higher education.

### What did we do?

To understand better how young people in care decide what they want to do in the future, who or what influences them and who supports them, we undertook a small exploratory study, funded by the University of Oxford's John Fell Fund. We spoke to 12 young people (over 18) from three local authorities who spent their teenage years in foster care or in residential care, and to three professionals who work with young people supporting them with their education and employment in different local authorities. Two of the young people we spoke to were not in employment or training at the time of the interview but were involved in volunteer work.

### What did we find?

- Young people were generally supported by personal advisors (appointed by children's services) and their support was effective if they 'could be trusted', they acted 'like a friend', and if they advised the young people on how to prepare their moves by giving them 'tips and tricks'. Several of the young people felt that their success was due to the luck of having a 'good' professional they interacted with. Young people criticised personal advisors who recommended specific professions to the young people without listening to their interests.
- Much of the work carried out by professionals with the young people was intended to take time and to empower young people and boost their confidence. This is important because theory tells us that selves of the past are carried within the self-concept as possible selves. To instigate a positive change, practitioners must take the time to listen to them, to get to know them and to help them boost their confidence. A young woman studying healthcare recalled the professional from the 'Through Care' team telling her 'you're a lot smarter than you give yourself credit for', encouraging her to go to university, a decision she did not regret.

- Apart from professionals, three young people mentioned friends as either inspiring them or advising them, for example in taking apprenticeships. One young person mentioned an independent visitor as the person who changed her life because they told her how to apply for a prestigious university. Importantly, the advice was not part of a formal meeting but the outcome of a conversation they had while they were going for a walk.
- None of the young people mentioned parental figures as a source of advice or inspiration but a few of them reflected on their childhood experiences and their passions (e.g. storytelling or dance) and two of them were motivated by specific health conditions of their family members.
- Surprisingly, foster carers and social workers did not come across as playing a key influence in supporting young people in care in the same way families do. Only two young people mentioned career conversations with their foster carers. This might be because many of the young people who took part in the study had been through multiple foster placements and did not feel they belonged in the families where had been placed with. One young person who was placed with a family at age 14 as unaccompanied asylum seeker, asked to be placed in residential care. Interestingly, he regarded family-type care as 'prison' and residential care as a space where he could express himself.
- Some of the young people in care described career guidance services as impersonal and hard to engage with.
- A few of the young people who participated in this study were motivated by helping others, by taking a health or education degree to help children with special needs, doing community work, or choosing a degree which might lead to wider social change.
- Entering adulthood from care is a great challenge for young people and they need personalised support which varies from being able to ask an instant question about casual matters (for example how to change an electricity card) to more serious conversations about study, work, choice and their talents and aspirations for the future.

### What does it all mean anyway?

- The key message from this study was that young people need to be supported by others who act as good parents do in advising them. That involves listening to young people and helping them to gain confidence to work to fulfil their aspirations.
- While the professionals we spoke to were passionate about their work and deeply committed to the young people they worked with, our data suggests that support services for young people leaving care should be redesigned with young people and that this should be flexible and cover advice on minor matters as well as mentoring.
- Leaving care journeys are complex and young people need to be able to seek advice sometimes in a more spontaneous manner, for example on everyday matters.

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