Personal reflections on needs and services for young people leaving care

From local to international to national (1996-2005)

Mike Clare

This paper describes and reflects on a Western Australian initiative in which a university Department of Social Work and Social Policy developed a partnership with a major bank's staff charity and the West Australian Association of Young People in Care (WAAYPIC) to develop a preparatory Life Skills Workshop and a Peer Mentoring programme for young people about to leave State care. The programme was designed and provided by WAAYPIC members.

The paper reflects on partnership processes in securing funding and implementing two pilot projects for care graduates. There is a review of predominantly United Kingdom and Australian research literature on the experiences and life-chances of young people leaving the care of the 'government as parent'. Notions of social justice and 'good enough parenting' are challenged. While their peers living with birth parents are leaving home in their mid-20s, able to rely on emotional and financial support from their families, the average age of leaving care is 17 years and the quality and continuity of emotional and financial support is problematic.

The author describes and reflects on local initiatives in leaving care policies and programmes and goes on to reflect on the growing arguments for a national system of service standards and necessary funding to achieve these standards. Recent UK initiatives are reviewed in the context of the 2005 FACE TO FACE Workshop on leaving care needs and policies in Australian States and Territories.

Associate Professor Mike Clare
Discipline of Social Work and Social Policy
The University of Western Australia
Nedlands, WA 6009
Email: mclare@cyllene.uwa.edu.au

In this paper, I reflect on 10 years of planning meetings, workshop design, funding submissions, conference papers and managing hope and despair in activities leading to the introduction and implementation of two workshops designed to enhance the preparation of young people leaving care in metropolitan Western Australia. Throughout the first half of this journey, I worked in partnership with Helen Moschini from the Western Australian Association of Young People in Care (WAAYPIC) – now CREATE (WA) – and Dr Paul Murphy who managed the provision and evaluation of the two pilot projects.

The time frame and process of these activities fall into four phases:

- 1996-1998 and the Looking After Children Project – vision and frustration

- 1999-2001 and the ANZ bank funding – the WAAYPIC Projects

- 2001-2004 and policy development by the State Government (funding and legislation)

- 2005 and opportunities to reflect on leaving care policies from a national perspective.

PHASE ONE: VISION AND FRUSTRATION

During the 1996 pilot project of the *Assessment and Actions Records* – the major practice tool in the Looking After Children case management system – I was able to attend conferences and visit researchers in England to learn about UK research and the subsequent development of leaving care services. I began to recognise that the experience of leaving care contrasts with the drama of admission and raises important questions about the accountability of governments who assume 'parenting responsibilities' for children in need of care and protection. Child placement practice appeared to privilege admission for protection (*an event*) rather than considering the obligations and responsibilities for 'parenting' (*a process over many stages*) of children in and leaving care.

Throughout the 1990s, numerous leaving care studies were published in the UK (Barnardo's 1998; Coleman & Warren-Adamson 1992; Department of Health [DoH] 1997; Smith 1994; Stein 1991; Stone 1990). They documented the

downward spiral of unwanted pregnancies, unemployment, homelessness, prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse, admission to psychiatric care, crime, and suicide which many 'care graduates' experience (Biehal et al. 1994; Broad 1994; DoH 1996; Horrocks & Waters 1996).

The major findings summarised in a House of Commons publication, *Children Looked After by Local Authorities - Volume 1* (House of Commons Health Committee 1998), presented below, contextualised and contrasted the life patterns of many care leavers with those of their peers in the broader community.

EDUCATION – between 50% and 75% of care leavers complete their schooling with no formal qualifications compared with only 6% of the general population.

FURTHER EDUCATION – between 12% and 19% of care leavers go on to further education compared with 68% of the general population.

EMPLOYMENT – between 50% and 80% of care leavers are unemployed.

OFFENDING – 23% of adult prisoners and 38% of young prisoners have been in care.

PARENTHOOD – at least one in seven young women leaving care are pregnant or already mothers.

HOMELESSNESS – 30% of young, single and homeless people have been in care.

POVERTY – one in ten 16-17 year old claimants of Social Security severe hardship payments had been in care.

HEALTH – up to 50% of children looked after may be in need of some form of health intervention; up to 30% may have special educational needs; 67% may experience psychiatric disorders compared with 15% in the general population.

This summary of outcomes for care leavers in comparison to the rest of their cohort provides a working set of service standards – illustrating the intention of the *Looking After Children* philosophy (Clare 1995; Clare & Peerless 1996). The likelihood of some care graduates experiencing more than one/most of these separate outcomes makes a strong case for an integrated inter-agency policy and practice framework. Arguably, individualised services are not well placed to recognise and serve effectively young people who are parents, unemployed, without school qualifications, homeless, living in poverty, abusing drugs and offending – living with multiple and complex needs. The need for integrated inter-agency planning and response to meet complex needs and problems is a huge challenge for practitioners and managers of tomorrow's services.

The House of Commons Health Committee (1998) publication concludes with points made by Professor Berridge from the University of Luton (p. xvi):

Most children looked after by local authorities have very severe problems ... unless one realises the depth of damage that these children have experienced we cannot begin to conceive how to put a framework of services into place to deal with that. It is clear that Social Services on their own cannot begin to tackle the major problems that these children have got.

LEAVING CARE OUTCOMES: THE AUSTRALIAN DATA (1996/2000)

The first phase in the WA Project highlighted the fragmented nature of research, policy development and service provision for care leavers in Australia. Only later in this journey did I learn more specifically about the concurrent work of colleagues in other states (Green & Jones 1999; Mendes & Goddard 2000; Owen et al. 2000). All the studies highlighted that, in Australia, the state's legal responsibility as the 'corporate parent' ceased formally when young people in State care attained eighteen years of age, with no further liability for their welfare; this is in stark contrast to the interdependency of most of their peers who either still live at home or are in close contact with their parents with continued access to financial and emotional support, and to 'revolving door' access to secure familial accommodation until their mid-20s (Jones 1995; Maunders et al. 1999).

At this time, there was a growing body of literature in Australia focusing on this issue (Australian Law Reform Commission and Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [ALRC & HREOC] 1997; Cashmore & Paxman 1996; Maunders et al. 1999; Mendes & Goddard 2000; Taylor 1990; Wise 1998, 1999). The picture emerging from this material about the life chances for care leavers differed from the more integrated UK material. The localised nature of State-based studies reflected the fragmented and partial nature of policy and practice. However similar problems were documented in the Australian research reports as illustrated in the Community Services Commission (CSC) in New South Wales (2000) report, *Substitute Care in NSW*, which included a summary of findings of the leaving care process in that State:

- a general focus on entry into care and lack of attention to the situation of young people on exit;

- a lack of clarity about the State's responsibilities for young people leaving care;

- the failure of authorities to maintain family links for children and young people once in care;

- low prioritisation of and limited resource allocation to after care; and

- lack of service coordination (CSC 2000:43).

Locally, the Auditor General for Western Australia (1998) provided an important report about needs, services and

outcomes for children in care in Western Australia – and made the following point in the Executive Summary (p. 1):

> Young people requiring Departmental care are often traumatised and suffering a deep sense of loss or rejection. Enabling them to overcome their trauma and reach their full potential requires a system of care based on individual needs. Components of this system of care include: training, accommodation, education services, psychological counselling, health services, drug and substance abuse programs and life skills.

The Auditor General goes on to report on assessed needs and necessary services which are not always provided – with the risk of significant consequences for the community in terms of long-term welfare dependency, anti-social behaviour and social exclusion (p.3):

- 47% of those requiring specialist education courses were unable to access these services;

- 50% of those requiring training services did not receive these services;

- 83% requiring alcohol or drug treatment did not receive these services;

- 38% of those requiring mental health treatment did not receive these services;

- 51% requiring psychological counselling did not receive these services.

PHASE TWO: THE WAAYPIC PROJECTS

During this first phase, I was working with Paul Murphy and Helen Moschini to design a Leaving Care Project, made up of two parts – a Life Skills Workshop and a Peer Mentoring Programme. The WAAYPIC Projects were a joint endeavour by a team from the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Western Australia (UWA), the Western Australian Association of Young People in Care and (the Department of) Family and Children's Services.

BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUALISATION

Unlike the United Kingdom *Children Act 1989* which required the state to 'advise, assist and befriend' young people leaving care (Children's Society 1992; Stein 1991), there was no corresponding liability on the state(s) in Australia to provide such ongoing support for care graduates (Maunders et al. 1999). Bath (1994) reported the fragmented situation within the Australian states and, as documented by Maunders et al., this confusion about measuring care leavers' life chances and costing the state governments' 'parental responsibilities' continues to the present day.

One potential strategy emerging from research into the leaving care process was to reconnect young people with one, or more, member(s) of their wider kinship network. Using a 'family of origin' perspective and conceptualising social network as 'personal community' are consistent with practice tools presented in the 1985 UK research summary of social work decision-making (Department of Health and Social Security 1985) and with the core assumptions of Family Group Conferencing (Clare 2000). However, in many cases, this may be neither possible nor desirable. In these situations, an alternative approach might be to establish a personal community through contact with other members of WAAYPIC. Aldgate (1994) refers to this as a 'stability family'.

Some UK leaving care models recommend establishing social workers or youth workers as mentors to provide professional support for young people leaving care (ALRC & HREOC 1997; DoH 1996, 1997, 1999a). Indeed, amendments to the UK legislation (the *Care Standards Bill* and the *Children (Leaving Care) Bill*) made explicit provision, among other things, for a 'Young Person's Adviser' (British Association for Adoption and Fostering 2000). Maunders et al. (1999) noted that models such as the *Big Brother - Big Sister* programmes (operating in some Australian states at the time) were potentially useful sources of mentor support.

The State Co-ordinator of WAAYPIC developed and conducted the two concurrent training programmes – life skills information workshops for the young people preparing to leave care, and preparation for the volunteer mentors (Clare, Murphy & Moschini 2000).

The Life Skills Workshops (Clare & Murphy 2000) were funded by the staff charitable foundation of the ANZ Bank (ANZ Foundation) after two years of applying unsuccessfully to different State Government departments and other research funding sources.

The WA Peer Mentoring Project was funded by the George Alexander Foundation. Many care graduates within the WAAYPIC network were very supportive of the concept of peer mentors to assist their transition to independent living.

PROGRAMME ONE: LIFE SKILLS TRAINING AND INFORMATION WORKSHOPS

The workshops were developed after consultation with a number of young people preparing to leave care and with some care graduates. These consultations identified what the young people considered important (and what was not), what they feared, current issues such as whether they were obtaining support (or not), and what their expectations were. The programme was in line with the framework offered by McDonald (1994) in the Conference Edition of *Illusion Free Zone*, the AAYPIC magazine.

Seven workshops (each approximately two hours in duration) were held at fortnightly intervals. The first evening was an informal introductory session designed to engender a

supportive learning group. Each of the subsequent workshops was addressed by two 'experts' who spoke on subjects such as: legal issues and individual rights; money matters, banking, and accessing various financial services; accommodation options; health, hygiene, personal fitness, and relaxation; and employment and training. The seventh, and final, evening was a celebration of the project which was attended by representatives of the corporate parent, senior staff from Family and Children's Services, some of the 'experts', members of the Fremantle Dockers and Perth Breakers sports teams, peer mentors, and the young people who had participated in the project.

During the project evaluation, the young people reported that rather than merely accepting agency decisions about services, they now ask to speak to someone of higher authority to put their case. Two typical comments were:

> It was really good that we got to know a bit about how the people in these various organisations operate, and the right words to use to cut through some of the crap [sic] – we can work things out much better now.

> I got behind on my rent. I did exactly as they said at the meeting, and popped in to the agent and explained what had happened. They were pretty cool, and I'm paying the arrears off a bit each week. I would never have done that before and would probably have been chucked out.

All of the presenters provided detailed answers to all questions posed, and frequently suggested alternative strategies to the problems that were raised. This willingness to explain alternative options invariably led to lengthy discussions, and all of the workshops extended beyond the scheduled finishing time. The young people who attended the workshops reported not only enjoying the experience but stated that they had also learned things which they have since used to improve their situation

One recommendation from a number of participants was the provision of some consolidated package of the information – a Leaving Care Guide.

> The stuff they talked about was really useful, but it would be nice if we had some sort of book-type thing that we could use later on. I tried to make notes but I don't write very well. So I feel I might have missed something or won't be able to remember it when the time comes. So, yeah, some sort of booklet thing would be real handy for me anyway.

PROGRAMME TWO: TRAINING FOR PEER MENTORS

The Peer Mentoring Programme sought to train volunteer 'care graduates' to act as peer mentors. Rather than an advocate (as envisaged by the UK legislation), the primary role of the peer mentors was to be a source of support during the transition to independent living, especially when young people faced the difficulties of isolation and loneliness after they leave care; access to a mentor might lead to contact and

support in their transition to independent living. It was also hoped that the pilot project might provide clear guidelines for social work and welfare practitioners, policy makers, and carers about the requirements for successful transition to independent living and inform the development of a Leaving Care Guide.

An informal focus group met and discussed issues, needs, and deficiencies in their experiences of leaving care. This data was used to develop training for the care graduates who volunteered to be mentors. The training concentrated on the skills required to initiate support, and related issues (such as establishing realistic boundaries, ensuring privacy, and reducing the temptation for dependency situations to develop too quickly).

An audit was carried out twelve months after the project was introduced. Of the five matches, one pair chatted weekly on the Internet while two others met regularly. The other two matches had ceased as the two young people had moved interstate. The project evaluation suggested that the mentor relationships were highly valued by the young people. Unlike *Big Brother - Big Sister* matches, there was no expectation of weekly meetings or outings, with most of the contact through telephone conversations.

None of the mentors reported being overly involved with their mentee's life but assumed a more passive role of being available when required. All five of the mentors reported that they had gained something from the mentoring process; they understood that this was a pilot project with limited resources, and made a number of suggestions about possible improvements. These suggestions included:

- better preparation for the mentors;
- a longer and more integrated approach to establishing contact with the prospective match;
- regular support meetings;
- continuation training for mentors; and
- a possible time-limit on their commitment.

This project broke some new ground in the continuing search for better ways of managing the integration into adult society of young people who cannot be cared for by their families. Notwithstanding the limitations of assessing long-term outcomes and the small size of the pilot study, our evaluation suggested that this project had immediate benefits for the young people leaving care; it has the potential to ameliorate some of the difficulties experienced during their transition to independent living.

PHASE THREE: LEAVING CARE POLICIES AT THE STATE LEVEL – FUNDING AND LEGISLATION

Towards the end of the UWA/ANZ/WAAYPIC Project, the project team applied successfully for further funding from the ANZ Foundation to refine the Life Skills Education and Peer Mentor Training components of the programme and incorporate many of the suggestions from the evaluation of the pilot projects. These continuation projects began in April 2001 in partnership with colleagues from Crossroads West, the newly appointed service provider for young people (aged to 25 years) in Transition from State Care programmes. Once again, funding proved elusive, and an essential aspect of this project, a Leaving Care Guide which was to be prepared by care graduates, was eventually completed by a UWA Social Work student during her final practice placement with Crossroads West.

These projects contributed to the impact of local, national and international efforts to advocate for funding and legislation for improved services for young people leaving government care, including important decisions by the Department for Community Development in Western Australia to fund new leaving care services and to change the relevant legislation for these services. Care leavers were explicitly considered in the WA Homelessness Taskforce Report, leading to three funded Leaving and Aftercare Services which began operations in mid-2003. WA now has State-wide services for care leavers.

These funded services are contextualised by new legislation, the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*, which was proclaimed in 2006 and provides that the CEO of the Department for Community Development must ensure that a young person aged between 15 and 25 years leaving the CEO's care is provided with any social services considered appropriate having regard to her/his needs identified in the care plan. The range of such services includes accommodation, education and training, employment advice, health and counselling services – including the provision of financial assistance as contribution to accommodation, education and training expenses.

The UWA/WAAYPIC Projects had been successful and the Project Team went on to new projects. There were national and international conference presentations (Clare 2001a, 2001b). The project also informed the new research-based Standards for After Care Support to assist the transition to independent living for care graduates (Clare 1999).

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE POLICY AND PRACTICE?

Both the Looking After Children and the Leaving Care Projects in Western Australia underline the importance of effective cross-government, inter-agency partnerships. These must include Centrelink, the Disability Services, Health, Education, Justice and Housing Departments as well as the many non-government service provider agencies. For these partnerships to work – in line with such attractive phrases as 'joined-up thinking' and 'a seamless service' – there is need for significant culture change. There must be premium placed on policies, practice and management designed to enhance respect and understanding of respective roles and responsibilities, training and work practices between the many professionals involved. There is more to the delivery of a comprehensive and integrated leaving care policy than a detailed map of services.

This will require changing the practice culture at the local community level – and at the level of corporate policy, planning and evaluation. One possible template for change is provided by the national UK Labour Government which has taken a more 'hands-on' position; the implementation of the *Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000* raised the age of 'corporate parental' responsibility to 21 years. Also, of great significance, performance indicators have been introduced for government agencies working with children in care. National *Priorities and Strategic Objectives* (DoH 1999b) are monitored through independent central government audit processes, and include:

A1 Stability of placements of children looked after – The percentage of children looked after at 31 March with three or more placements during the year.

A2 Educational qualifications of children looked after – The proportion of those young people leaving care aged 16 or over with at least 1 GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) at grade A to G or a GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification).

A4 Employment, education and training for care leavers – The proportion of young people being looked after on 1 April aged 16 or over who are engaged in education, training or employment at the age of 19.

C19 Health of children looked after – For children looked after for at least 12 months:

- percentage with routine immunisations up to date;
- percentage whose teeth have been checked by a dentist in the previous year, and
- percentage who had had an annual health assessment in the previous year.

C24 Children looked after absent from school – Of children looked after at 30 September who had been looked after continuously for at least 12 months and are of school age, the proportion who have missed at least 25 days of schooling for any reason during the school year.

CONCLUSION ONE:
ROOM FOR LOCAL IMPROVEMENTS

There are significant deficiencies in the current out-of-home care system and its capacity to respond effectively to the emotional, educational and physical needs of increasingly damaged children entering and leaving care. To minimise the long-term effects of the care experience on vulnerable young people, one key early intervention strategy to provide greater stability and enhance their resilience (Gilligan 2001) is to retain them within the education system; remaining in school and in further education will increase their life-chances for further education, training and employment.

Clearly, preparation for independent living needs to occur throughout the child's life in foster care and/or residential care with opportunities to learn basic skills in cooking, shopping, managing money, etc. – as most children do in their own families. An effective local leaving care policy must include a three-stage process of 'preparation for independent living', 'managing the transition' and 'post-care mentoring and support'.

The Looking After Children system's *Assessment and Action Record* could be the framework tool for the preparation stage when Care Plans are under annual review (Clare 1997; Kufeldt, Simard & Vachon 2003), enhanced by the introduction of Life Story Work with all children in care for more than 12 months; this would facilitate an informed sense of their identity and family history prior to a 'Family Group Meeting' with the young person's active involvement. There is consistent research evidence of the loneliness and isolation of many care graduates – and of their ambivalence about continued dependence; creative solutions need to be negotiated with each care leaver (Mendes 2005; Penglase 2004).

CONCLUSION TWO:
ROOM FOR NATIONAL IMPROVEMENTS

When reflecting on the last ten years of activities to design, network, fund and implement the various leaving care projects in Western Australia, I am convinced that we need a paradigm shift in the organisation and planning for 'good enough' services for vulnerable children (Clare 2003). The Brisbane FACE TO FACE Workshop (CREATE Foundation 2005) was an important opportunity for key stakeholders in out-of-home care –practitioners, managers, carers, young people, policy-makers and researchers – to meet and workshop. From my perspective, we need to work to promote a National Agenda for Child Welfare to include leaving care. The necessary steps include:

- The development and implementation of National Standards for Out-of-Home Care based on sound economic costings for a sufficient quality of services, including case management, therapeutic responses for the inevitable trauma of admission, education and

training, medical and dental care; the Looking After Children tools provide the developmental dimensions and the values framework for 'good enough' standards as the community's standards but these to be costed and funded by Treasury.

- The development and implementation of National Standards for Leaving Care policy and practice in partnership with care graduates, the Care Leavers of Australia Network (CLAN) and CREATE.

- The formulation of key performance indicators for a leaving care programme and the reporting on agreed outcomes by non-government and state agencies to a national institution such as the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

- The auditing of the annual progress of young people from their 15th birthday until they become 21 years of age – in line with the auditing dimensions and processes to the Department of Health in the UK.

- The auditing of care graduates' progress and life chances at 25 years and then building a database every five years through adult life; publication of annual reports and trajectories would be a visible commitment to a Duty of Care and accountabilities for agreed outcome standards.

'Joined-up thinking' and 'whole-of-government' analysis of needs and responsibilities demands a systemic appreciation of essential 'inclusive' and integrated services for vulnerable children and families. If it takes a village to bring up a child, it clearly requires a 'whole of government' costed, funded and audited approach when the 'government is parent' for that child. If we can act nationally for Industrial Relations and for test match cricket, let's do it for child and family welfare – including preparation for leaving care. ∎

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