



Response to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's Regional Standards for Leaving Care Services in Northern Ireland

“The thing is that when you get to age 16, you can take some responsibility for what you're doing about choices and decisions, so the leaving care planning should give you some leeway to do that as a young adult.”

July 2009

Introduction

Include Youth promotes best practice with young people in need or at risk of social exclusion. We achieve this through the development and promotion of resources, the provision of training, information and support of practitioners and organisations. We also undertake activities aimed at influencing public policy and policy awareness – both locally and nationally.

Amongst the young people at risk with whom, and on whose behalf, Include Youth works are young people from socially disadvantaged areas, those with a learning disability, those with special needs, those who have been truanting, suspended or expelled from school, those from a care background, those who had a negative parenting experience, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs or alcohol, undertaking unsafe sexual behaviour or other harmful activities, or of being harmed themselves.

Include Youth runs the Young Voices project, a participation project for young people who have been involved or are at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, with the aim of supporting these young people to become involved in decision-making processes which impact on their lives. Young Voices runs groups in custody and in the community, particularly North Belfast. Include Youth manages the LACE (Looked After Children in Education) Project which is a multi-agency partnership with the aim of promoting better educational outcomes for children and young people in care.

The Give and Take Scheme aims to improve the employability and increase the self esteem of young people in need or at risk from across Northern Ireland. The Scheme works with approximately 150 young people from generally from a care background. The Scheme aims to support young people to overcome particular barriers that prevent them from moving into mainstream training or employment and towards independent living

In addition, Include Youth runs the YOYO Practitioners Forum, which draws together professionals from a range of statutory, voluntary and community organisations working directly with young people in need or at risk, and meets on a quarterly basis.

General Comments

Include Youth welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposals set out in the regional Standards for Leaving Care Services in Northern Ireland.

Include Youth supports the aspirations for a consistent regional approach in practice to support young people leaving care. The development and implementation of these standards offers a real opportunity to influence the future development of services for this group of young people and ultimately improve their experiences of transition to independent living.

In preparation for our response to the document we consulted our own staff and young people from the Give and Take Scheme. These young people are all care experienced and have or are going through the “leaving care” process. It must be recognised that many of the young people that Include Youth work with can be considered to be some of the most marginalised and challenging in our community.

The young people speak candidly about their experiences of the care system and have drawn our attention to aspects of the system which they feel continue to fail to address their needs.

Rather than give our answers under the given format we have addressed our comments under those topics which we have opinions on and have expanded on these under each standard.

Specific Comments

Values Underpinning the Standards

We welcome the description of the value base which outlines the standards. We acknowledge that the UNCRC is mentioned in the document and the intention is stated to underpin the standards in the rights of the child. However, we would recommend that the associated articles of the UNCRC are explicitly listed in the document. The articles which are of particular relevance are 20, 21 and 25. Article 20 outlines the rights due to children who are temporarily or permanently deprived of their family environment and states that all such children are entitled to “special protection and assistance “ from the State who must also ensure appropriate alternative care arrangements for each child. Article 21 address the particular needs of children who are adopted and Article 25 places a duty on the State to ensure all children have the right to a periodic review of their placement or care.

The UNCRC Committee as well as paying particular attention to the needs of children and young people in care within their concluding comment in both 2002 and 2008, also held a Day of General Discussion on the issue of children living without parental care in 2005. They then issued a set of recommendations in March 2006. The 2008 recommendations made specific reference to the need to address placement instability, family contact and inadequate preparation for aftercare.

It is vital that there is comprehensive training on these values for all professionals coming into contact with young people in care/ leaving care. Include Youth recommends the development and delivery of clear protocols providing guidance, training and support for staff around the meaning of parental responsibility and the proper discharge of their duty as a corporate parent. Professionals should attend training in human rights and advocacy as a mandatory requirement.

We cannot underestimate the importance of ensuring that these standards are publicised within the professional care community and would suggest that creative methods are developed to highlight them. One example would be to produce the values in a poster format and display them in all relevant locations to remind staff and stakeholders of the values that underpin their work and to set the context for the support they are offering to young people.

Is the structure and layout of the draft Standards clear and easily understood?

We would like to see a clearer outline of who these standards are aimed at. We appreciate that they will act as a guide for service users on what they should expect from services but believe that the document would benefit from actually listing those agencies and

organisations whose responsibility it is to uphold the standards. For example, are the standards aimed at HSC Trusts only or all “corporate parents”?

We would be keen to see the final agreed standards produced in a young person friendly format and distributed widely.

We note on the paragraph on the development of standards that a wide range of stakeholders were involved in developing the standards. However, the Department of Education is not listed as participating in this development. We would hope that as a Department with a significant role and responsibility in the lives of all children and young people, they would sign up to the implementation of these standards and that their support has been secured at this stage in the process.

We are supportive of the intention to develop standards which are measurable through self-assessment, monitoring and inspection. We would be interested to know how often the standards will be monitored and inspected by the RQIA.

We would stress the importance of ensuring young people participate in any monitoring and assessment process and are subsequently informed of the outcomes of the monitoring and inspection reports.

The young people we consulted did on the whole understand each of the standards. The only standard which they were less clear about was standard one. We will expand their reasons for this in more detail under the specific response to Standard 1.

How important are the standards to young people?

The young people spent some time going through the list of standards in order to rate them in order of importance. The group agreed that it was difficult to select an absolute one standard that was any way more important than any of the others and an agreement was reached where 3 standards were considered to be jointly important, as follows:

Standard 2: Planning, preparation and review,

Standard 5: Living in safety and with Stability

Standard 8: Living in a society which respects your rights

Thereafter, the remaining 5 standards were considered to be of equal importance to each other.

Do you agree with the eight core Standards Statements?

Include Youth are content that the standards are relevant.

Standard 1: Corporate Parenting Responsibilities

While there is mention of the Trust having ‘a corporate parenting policy and strategy for assessing and meeting young people’s employment needs.....’ there is nothing specific in terms of how they will do this. We have some Trusts already progressing with this while others have yet to start.

We would like to see an action criteria which would ensure effective publicising of corporate parenting policies as well as details on the implementation of the policies. This

should include making sure that information is disseminated to ‘partner organisations’ and young people.

We support the action criteria in 1:8 which states the need for the Trust to have in place effective governance arrangements. We would however, welcome an action which would ensure that young people and agencies working in the field are informed how each Trust has performed in relation to complying with these standards.

Young People’s Comments:

There was a sense from the young people that parents were “*a real life person/ people*”, i.e. physically there 24 hrs a day, a person who you called your mum or dad, that they lived in a house as a family with other brothers and sisters, they lived in a community that you had an identity with and you had a wider family network there and you did your day to day things with. The idea that a Social Worker would replace that role was very far removed for all the young people – they displayed very strong body language and verbally were very strongly against the idea that the Trust, the ‘corporate parent’ i.e. the Social Workers, would ever replace the notion of ‘*real life*’ parents:

“Parents are there for you for life or they should be there for you for life – Social Workers are only there for a couple of years.”

“You only see them (the Social Workers) for 10 or 15 minutes at a time – how can you call them ‘a parent’? They’re not parents, not like your real parents, even if your parents haven’t been great to you or done something they shouldn’t have, they’re still your parents. You can’t change that.”

“Social Workers clock off and go to their own homes every evening, they’re not about after 5pm on a Friday, at weekends and holidays and so, we’re not part of their family things and we don’t get to know personal things about them.”

There was a real sense of mistrust of Social Workers and having the importance of the child protection work and the need to record their activities highlighted, the young people remain very frustrated about what they see as intrusion into their private lives. This was a theme that came up time and time again throughout the discussions.

“You feel that Social Workers are always asking questions to try and catch you out, and they can ask the same thing but in different ways.”

“If you say ‘It’s none of your business’ then the Social Worker assumes something is wrong or if you say you’re ‘just tired’, they think there’s something wrong. They shouldn’t need to know absolutely everything about you or your family, or to know everything that’s happening to you in your life right now. Where’s our rights’ to privacy when you feel they are constantly harassing you?”

“They could be more reliable and work with me and family to suit us as I’m working, it would be better if they were more flexible so I can get regular visits and contact.”

Standard 2: Planning, Preparation and Review

We note the intention in 2:4 to include within the care plans and pathway plans a section on the young person's relationship with their birth family. We would welcome the inclusion of the relationship with other significant adults such as foster carers.

In point 2:8 we would welcome a re-wording of the statement to further enhance the role of the young person in the completion of care plans and pathway plans. Young people's participation must be central to the development of these plans.

We believe the wording of point 2:9 is inadequate with regard to providing evidence that young people have participated effectively in the assessment and pathway plan. For example, we note and applaud the action criteria which will ensure that care plans and pathway plans are comprehensive and holistic, but do not think there is an associated outcome measure which adequately measures the outcome of this criteria.

We welcome the intention noted in point 2.12 to provide evidence of the impact of young people's participation in decision making about matters affecting their lives. Include Youth strongly supports actions to encourage the participation of children and young people in care planning processes. We recognise that such participation is not always consistent across Northern Ireland and are hopeful that the development of these standards will encourage consistency of approach.

Young People's Comments:

Planning Preparation and Review:

There was a real agreement from the all of the young people that planning is vitally important and that young people need to know what is happening and that they should have a role and a voice in influencing what happens to them. There is an underlying, and at times a very overt sense that young people feel that the Social Workers are the ones in control of the process and ultimately are the ones who have the final say on what happens. As a result the young people feel that the reasons for a particular decision are never fully explained to them, leaving them feeling that their views are surplus to requirement.

Regarding aspects of the leaving care process, the group felt that the Personal Adviser is a helpful role in the leaving care process. They however, still frustrated by the high turnover of staff within social work and find it hard to deal with the changes.

"Some PA's and some Social Worker's are ok, they tell you what things you are entitled to but they don't help you to actually get it and you have to do everything yourself, which can be hard to do on your own and when you are not 100% sure if you are doing the right thing."

"Some PA's are very laid back and other PA's will fight for you."

*"They f**k you up when you get a new Social Worker – you're having to tell them all over again things about you and your family. I had a new Social Worker just 3 weeks before my 21st birthday and when I was about to finally leave care – where was the sense in doing that?"*

"I've just had 3 different social workers in the last four months – crazy situation!"

'My social worker has changed loads of times, then my family visits don't happen'

“Choice? How can you try to make a decision about things if you get different information? Maybe they tell you something different than what your PA tells you.”

Pathway Plan:

The young people spent a considerable amount of time discussing their experiences of the pathway plan process. Unfortunately they were able to point to the weaknesses in the process all too readily and felt very strongly that things are not as they should be.

The issue of **privacy and confidentiality** came up time and time again and is clearly an emotive, thorny and highly charged topic for young people:

“Why do you have to fill in information about other things in your life, your family, your relationships – you don’t want to tell them (the Social Workers) your life, you just want to get the meeting over and done with and just get the bus home.”

“I had sent letters to my younger brother and I get really annoyed when I know that they get read by the Social Worker (of the young boy). I know it’s in case of me saying something that will upset him or is something he shouldn’t know but it still gets up my nose when they read them.”

“You get Social Workers listening in to your phone conversations, they practically analyse everything you do.”

“Say, if you are staying over at a friend’s house and then the Social Worker’s saying well, they’ll have to meet your friends or suss them out – it’s not on, it’s not normal.”

“They (the Social Workers) are power crazy!”

Some of the young people talked about the need to **tailor the planning process to suit individuals** as how a person reacted to change could be very different depending on their experiences, background and personality.

“Some young people take longer to settle into somewhere, like into a hostel or into a new foster family home. You need to allow time to get used to things and to new people, to get to trust them and for them to get to know you.”

Too many of the young people were able to talk about times when the pathway plan process had not worked in their best interests and the outcome had exacerbated their vulnerabilities.

“At 16, I was ready to move on but I wasn’t able to afford it. I was getting £44.50 a week to live on but it was an impossible situation as I felt I was forced out of the children’s home I was in. That’s how I got into the debt I’m in.”

“At the start it sounds like a lot of money but you have all these things to pay for, that you didn’t have to really think about in care, like electric bills, your gas, heating, your shopping and the cost of the bus to go anywhere. Then there’s your cigs and sometimes alcohol, but I’m not going to be able to stop the cigs immediately, right now, just because I have left care, but I know I want to give them up.”

“They move you out of places where you are happy, into somewhere where you’re not so happy – how can that help?”

There was a palpable sense of negativity in relation to the experiences of the young people engaging in the pathway planning process and the materials that the Social Workers used. None of the young people could see the reasoning behind the process, or what potential benefits it could have for them as young people in the care system. The young people felt it was intrusive, perhaps somewhat antagonistic and at times was used with a sense of bribery. Finally, they viewed it as just another thing (*‘a form’*) that the Social Worker had to use in their repertoire of ever increasing administration demands.

“Pathway plan? I’m an 18 year old coming out of care and I’ve never seen one.”

“I started a pathway plan but I’m not sure where it’s at or what’s happening with it.”

*“It’s just another thing for them to judge you on. Why are they asking this sh**t, when they have the information on you anyway?”*

“The Social Worker said she was under pressure to get this form filled and that I would only get further help if I filled the whole form in and saying that I had to fill the form out. It then put me under pressure even though I really strongly felt I didn’t want to fill it all in. It was too painful for me: I didn’t want to bring up thoughts about my past. But I felt that I couldn’t be let go to university down the line unless there was info about my emotional health and well being.”

“You ask for things and they don’t happen.”

“My life story work has gone to the dogs and that was put into my pathway plan.”

When asked how the situation could be improved one young person said:
‘Do what they say they are going to do’

Standard 3: Being Healthy

Action Criteria 3:2 should read, “are informed by an assessment of their physical, mental, emotional health needs as well as their general well-being and lifestyle.”

Under point 3:11 we are concerned that the statement refers to the intention to link with CAMHS, when there is clearly a current lack of suitable CAMHS for 16 and 17 year olds.

We recommend that an outcome measure should be included around the whole issue of CAMHS.

We note that the Department of Education is once again omitted from the list of partner agencies in point 3:12. We believe this is an oversight and would urge the need to ensure that the Department of Education is recognised as a key partner in preparing children and young people for a healthy adult life.

We recommend linking back to the recommendations contained within the Bamford Report ‘A Vision of a Comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service’ as well as that found in the report of the Casper Project by VOYPIC, ‘Don’t be so Formal, I’m Normal’.

The Bamford Review recommended development of a model to meet the needs of looked after children, based on close collaboration between social services and the network surrounding the child or young person.

Any action criteria and outcome measure related to the health and well being of young people leaving care must take account of the mental health needs of this group. The impact of poor mental health for these young people can be devastating and has long lasting implications for their future. Many of the young people who participate in Include Youth projects have suffered as a result of the lack of effective CAMHS services. While the rates of prevalence of mental health problems for children in care and custody are much higher than in the general population, these children do not have greater access to appropriate health services. It is estimated that people in custody exhibit three times higher rates of psychosocial and psychiatric problems than the general population; whereas up to two thirds of young people in care have mental health needs, with a higher rate for children in residential care than for those in foster placements, with one estimate of 96% for adolescents in residential units (DHSSPS, October 2004).

We remain concerned that custody is being used as a form of ‘quasi-care’, as highlighted in an inspection of the Juvenile Justice Centre in November 2007 (CJINI, 2008).

Young People’s Comments:

The discussion on this topic at first did not seem to have a level of importance for the young people except when talking about medical appointments with the dentist and the GP but the issue of mental health and general well being came up in later discussions on other Standards:

“I haven’t been to a GP or a dentist in I would say, 6 years. I chose not to, I didn’t really want to go, maybe I was a bit afraid of the dentist but I know the support should be there if you want to go.”

“The things about your dentist depend on your age and what treatment you are getting done. Maybe young people need more information about how dental costs are worked out as you get older and are leaving care.”

“They did help me with my implant and emergency contraception.”

“Helped me with my dentist appointments.”

The proposal of getting fit and being healthy through going to a gym seem to appeal to the young people, though they were acutely aware of the perceived financial costs, if not the personal push to take part in these activities, like any other person:

“How do they (the DHSSPS, as proposed in the consultation document) expect you to go to the gym on the little money you get each week? Sounds a good idea, (to go to the gym) maybe they could work out a system to help pay towards getting you into a gym or leisure centre.”

Standard 4: Enjoying Learning and Achieving

Include Youth welcomes the emphasis on the importance of enabling young people to reach their highest potential with regard to education.

We welcome the Action Criteria 4:1 that each HSC Trust should have a written education, training and leisure policy and would suggest that this should be disseminated to all related partner agencies, as well as young people.

The LACE partnership is currently embarking on developing a regional PEP and examining the ways in which this process could incorporate educational and training information into the LAC pathway planning process.

We agree wholeheartedly with the Action Criteria 4:4, but would suggest that it be amended to read:

*“The Trust has in place **working** arrangements for partnership working with careers, schools, colleges and educational support services, to ensure that young people have access to education, training and prevocational opportunities that meet their abilities, needs, preferences **and potential.**”*

We would welcome more detail on what exactly the ‘working arrangements’ will be and what their status will be. For example, will they be formal and binding?

Given the onset of the ESA in January 2010, we would suggest that the authority be named as a partner agency in the outworking of this action criteria. It is vital that we work towards consistency of practice, to promote equity of access to services and a shared commitment to the principle that education should have one common approach to support the needs of all children.

Point 4:4 does not make reference to the existing protocols which are in place between some Trusts, ELBs and the education services within ELBs, and a number of schools on a pilot basis. This existing work should be reflected within this point.

Point 4:5 we would suggest that a prerequisite to ensuring that young people have access to a range out of school opportunities is that staff are made aware of what is available. In our experience, many social work staff are not well informed about what is available within the community.

Point 4:6 we would suggest that there needs to be a reference made to the need to set up a fair and equitable process of financial support and incentives. There is also a responsibility on those working with young people to be fully aware of what funding opportunities exist.

We would welcome the addition of action criteria around supporting young people leaving care accessing summer schemes. This could be included under Action Criteria 4:5. Taking part in summer schemes is an activity which many young people take for granted but this opportunity is less accessible for those young people in and leaving care. We believe that the Trust as a corporate parent should ensure that young people in care are actively engaged in positive activities over the summer months and that they all have at least one holiday a year.

The educational outcomes for children and young people in care have been a cause for concern for many years. It is well documented that looked after children have lower “educational” attainment than their mainstream counterparts. The recently published NI Care Leavers Statistical Bulletin unfortunately continues to highlight the poor performance in educational attainment of care leavers in 2007/2008, with care leavers almost 18 times more likely to have no qualifications than school leavers in general, and

over four times more likely than other 16 – 18 year olds to be unemployed. (NISRA/DHSSPS, 2009)

We welcome the outcome measures 4.8 and 4.9 regarding providing evidence to show that young people's outcomes in education, training and employment have improved, but at present we think they are too vague to be measurable. We would suggest that these goals should be time-bound with associated measurable targets. For example, we would welcome information on how these outcomes relate to the goals outlined in Care Matters to doubling the proportion of care leavers who are in education, training and employment at the age of 19.

Young People's Comments:

There was a range of experiences with regards to social worker involvement with education.

"You get paranoid – why are the teachers involved with the social worker? What information do the teachers know about me? Maybe I am doing things that the teachers are reporting back to the social workers – do you know what? Either way, you can't win."

"You are monitored 24/7. Really, you might not be monitored all the time, but it feels like you are."

"My social worker just turned up at my school. I didn't know she was coming that day, I just got another girl coming to the classroom and saying my social worker was there and that she wants to see you – I could've just crawled under the table."

"My social worker didn't even bother with me while I was at school and then I got kicked out."

Standard 5: Living in Safety and with Stability

We would strongly recommend that the action criteria and outcomes for this section are revisited. We believe that 'living in safety and stability' is not solely about providing suitable accommodation but rather this outcome needs to be more ambitious and see it as securing child protection and safeguarding rights. We need actions that recognise that looked after children and young people can be vulnerable in the community; that will keep young people safe and free from exploitation; and that will develop services which will prevent and protect young people from such harm.

The detail of this standard was made clear to the young people and although initial comments were concerned with accommodation or housing trying to get their own accommodation or housing very quickly and without any additional prompting, the discussion moved on to '**feeling safe**' which is a very different concept or principle to just dealing with housing on its own with no regard to self-realisation of personal safety.

Whilst we concur with the comments below:

"Corporate parenting is about more than keeping children safe from harm: it is about ensuring that young people in and from care are given the support and opportunities needed to achieve their aspirations and the tools to lead fulfilling adult lives." (NCAS, 2009)

We would strongly suggest that the focus of this standard is reworked considerably to reflect the requirement to keep young people as safe as possible.

We do, however, have a number of specific comments to make on the subject of suitable accommodation.

The transition to independent living is a highly problematic area which must include provision of suitable and supported living arrangements for young people leaving care. Children leaving care experience a range of problems which often leaves them at increased risk of entering the criminal justice system. The lack of suitable accommodation for care experienced 16 – 17 year olds often means these often “at risk” young people are placed in extremely inappropriate environments, including bed and breakfasts and homeless hostels.

Ensuring safe and suitable accommodation for care leavers remains a challenge. There is a need to develop clear minimum quality assurance standards for accommodation for young people leaving care and impose a duty on authorities to ensure that such standards are met. . These should simply be a set of guidelines that any parent would use when selecting suitable accommodation for their children.

Young People’s Comments:

There was a degree of confusion amongst the young people with regards to the leaving care process. There was **no sense of an actual occasion or significant event to recognise that young people had indeed ‘left care’** or having received anything legally to acknowledge as such from the Court or the Trust.

“You have a couple of options. If you want to get your Care Order removed, you have to go to Court to get it revoked if you are aged before 18 but once you are 18, you can go back to Court and then that’s it done, can’t you?”

“GEM (Going the Extra Mile) sounds like a really good idea, if you want to - but only if you and the foster family want to keep on living together for another while. You should have some say in the decision, I don’t really know enough about it and how it works.”

“GEM, yeah, a good idea, but me personally – nah, nothing against them, I never want to live with them (his former foster carers) now I have moved on, I just want to have a place of my own.”

A number of the young people talked about the continuing difficulties they have in finding suitable and safe accommodation.

“I’m living in a b&b away from my family and friends, I don’t feel safe and secure living there, I’m still waiting to be moved as 6 weeks.”

“They should put more money into places for young people to live.”

“In my house, yes, I feel safe. In my neighbourhood, I would say no, I don’t feel that safe. There’s always trouble and I just try to keep myself to myself, don’t really talk to too many people there.”

“When I finally got to leave care, I had been living in the Ormeau Road. I didn’t really know the Ormeau Road; I had no family there so I moved across Belfast as soon as I could.”

“I do think that my PA really cares for me: she speaks up for me on things like where I would like to live.”

“They (the Social Workers) think they are doing their job right as long as they have a roof over our heads.”

“Do you know what? You just get really dependant on the Social Worker. That’s the way the system works. I really hate them. The only reason you are with them is because you need the money and whatever else they can really, definitely offer you that will help you. And then you can’t get them away from you. They’re your only hope. You don’t get it from anybody else.”

Another young person called it a ‘catch 22 situation’.

“They’re in your lives and you know you have to work with them but you don’t really want them to be there at all.”

Another young woman talked about the boundaries about confidential information in the relationship between young people and social workers:

“The Social Workers say things like, I can’t tell you that (information) for your own security but then that means you can’t trust anybody because you don’t really know who has what amount of info on you.”

Regarding their leaving care plans, if they did not work out the way that the young people and their respective Social Workers had planned, there was no sense of another alternative, immediate plan being in place:

“I didn’t have back-up plans really.”

“We’re made to feel we need the Social Workers. It’s the thought they could help you one day that you stick with them.”

The discussion concerning point 5.9 raised a number of issues concerned with family contact.

“I know my baby brother is adopted and I hope he wants to see me when he’s 18 but it really hurts that I can’t see him and that’s a long time.”

“I still want to see my family. It doesn’t matter what happened – they are still my family.”

“Why is it.....I often think about this.....the young people haven’t done anything, but it was our parents..... and the Social Workers aren’t hounding them like they do with us.”

“Families, the brothers and sisters, should be in care together. End of story.”

“Do they do a family book for all your siblings? I don’t know enough about what information they get about me or my other brothers or sisters.”

Standard 6. Experiencing Economic and Environmental Well-Being

It is imperative that the children and young people who challenge us and fall outside of the mainstream, have access to appropriate high quality, flexible, targeted, needs-led pre-vocational support services to ensure they are able to fulfil their potential and enhance

their employability enabling them to become fully participating citizens in our society. Otherwise these young people are destined to a life of unemployment, poverty and dependency on the State system.

We welcome the action criteria 6:1 to develop written employability policies that detail support arrangements and would recommend that these policies are disseminated to partner agencies and young people.

Under point 6:5 we would welcome more detail on what exactly the ‘working arrangements’ will be and what their status will be. For example, will they be formal and binding?

There is mention of incentive payments but these need to be made explicit and standardised across all Trusts. Also young people engaging in a Trust’s employability scheme should be treated as young people in mainstream training and receive an Educational Maintenance Allowance of £40 per week. This may require greater collaboration between DHSSPS and DEL. Indeed the two departments should talk with regards to the proposed employability schemes within Trusts. Within these schemes there will be attempts to engage positively young people in or leaving care who are not in employment, education or training such as the Give and Take Scheme.

The House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee’s recent report on Looked After Children (June 2009) where states:

“We recommend that national standards for leaving care services should be developed with local authorities so that these services can be objectively assessed. The standards should include a greater degree of consistency and transparency in the financial support available to care leavers and the criteria on which it is determined. Each authority should include details of what it will provide in its pledge.”

Under Outcome Measures for this section we would like to see included evidence which would demonstrate that there are fewer numbers of looked after children and young people showing up in the figures for young people Not in Education, Employment, Training and Employment (NEET).

We welcome the Action Criteria 6:10 and would urge that there is consistency of approach across Trusts with regard to this information.

We welcome the action criteria and outcome measures related to the support of young people to access training and employment opportunities. However, we would welcome the inclusion of the term ‘tailored’ opportunities.

We remain concerned that some of the mainstream training schemes are not adapted to suit the most marginalised of young people.

Include Youth welcomed the revision of the Jobskills programme in general in the hope that it would begin to address the needs of our most disaffected young people. However our view is that the Training for Success programme, which was launched in September of last year, is still unable to meet the needs of all the young people it aims to. A significant gap exists in the provision of ‘Training for Success’ for certain groups of young people and in particular those young people in or leaving care.

The first few months of operation of the TfS programme has demonstrated that it is unable to be sufficiently flexible in order to engage with the young people that schemes such as Give and Take have been working with for over 20 years: - those from a care background, those with mental health problems, those with accommodation problems, those with low self esteem and confidence, those with alcohol or drug problems, those involved in risky lifestyles and those who have committed or are at risk of committing crime. Many of these young people have truanted from school or have been expelled or suspended from school. They have low educational attainment and many lack the concentration and social skills necessary to be able to sustain a job or a placement on mainstream DEL schemes such as Training for Success.

These young people need programmes that are tailored to address their individual needs, to reflect their interests and to engage them at their level of ability. Schemes such as Give and Take pride ourselves on an individual needs led approach. Each young person is supported to agree an individual work plan that will comprise of work placement, training, social and vocational development programmes and a mentoring relationship. Our impression and limited experience of TfS programmes indicate that they are not currently structured to be able to provide such an individual and flexible approach.

These young people need to be supported to engage at a level they are able to cope with. With an increase in skills and confidence the young person will be able to commit to more as time goes on. This is based on the premise that it is better to stick with a young person and support them to take small steps that will eventually lead to progress rather than confronting them with an unrealistic challenge that further demoralises them and leads to opt-out again. This incremental approach has been proved to work for young people on the Give and Take Scheme.

Young People's Comments:

There was a mixed response to the idea that the Trust should continue to provide support or should stop supporting young people leaving care:

"Why do Social Services stop giving you support at 21? Parents wouldn't just stop looking out for you when you hit 21."

"I certainly agree it should stop at 21. They've had enough involvement in your life; I don't want to have anything more to do with them if I can help it. No way."

"See, there's the same feeling having to fill out info for applying for EMA. I got as far as filling out the form until the point where they ask you 'What do your parents earn?' and then I just get so mad and annoyed and I hate filling out forms anyway, being asked questions, about personal stuff. It's just because of what I had to go through coming into care and being in care and now trying to move on."

"I don't get financial support from my social worker while I'm on Give and Take."

A number of the young people said they would welcome more support on how to manage their money.

"We were never taught how to budget, we were never given money into our hand while we were in a care home, If someone blew there pocket money we all didn't get money."

"Care homes shouldn't be able to hold young people's money so much."

Standard 7: Contributing Positively to Community and Society

We note that at the Leaving Care conference in March 2009 it was agreed that there would be a commitment to:

“improve cross agency working with Youth Justice agencies to put in place preventative and early intervention services for young people in care or on the edge of criminality.”

Under point 7:4, we would like to see the following aims added under the written protocol which is in place with Youth Justice Services and the PSNI:

- That the HSC Trusts would take responsibility for young people who come into conflict with the law to
- Encourage no criminal justice intervention
- Provide relevant and safe accommodation
- Develop challenging behaviour policies

We are also interested to know if there are proposed different levels of formality that the Trusts will put in place according to the partner agency they are working with.

Include Youth recommends the development of frameworks to include clear protocols between police and residential care homes which allow for more creative responses to dealing with children who present behavioural challenges. Include Youth would urge that residential care facilities have sufficient resources and staff support to be able to continue to provide a home for the children in their care even when they have committed “minor” crimes as any good parent would.

The Leaving Care Conference in March 2009 did agree that there would be an improvement in cross-agency working with Youth Justice agencies to put in place preventative and early intervention services for young people in care or on the edge of criminal activity. This is in line with a recommendation from the Bamford Review which stated that there should be the development of close working relationships and care pathways between specialist CAMHS services and youth justice teams.

Standard 8: Living in a Society which Respects your Rights

The UNCRC Committee explicitly called for the government to ensure that all looked after children are provided with appropriate and accessible complaints mechanisms.

Under Action Criteria point 8:3 we would recommend that this statement is made much clearer and more specific. The development of effective personal development programmes are vital in ensuring young persons best chance at succeeding in independent living. This point would benefit from being more descriptive and outlining who will deliver the personal development programmes, who will fund them, monitor them and how will they specifically make a difference to young people’s lives.

We have some concern about the wording of point 8.5 and wonder as to the relevance of listing organisations other than VOYPIC as providers of advocacy services. We do not believe that it is necessary to mention other agencies except to state that they exist – however should it be deemed appropriate to do so we would suggest that there is a comprehensive list to include ourselves amongst others.

The Outcome Measures do not take account of evidence with regard to best interest, anti-discrimination practice, protection and having a voice.

Include Youth strongly supports the promotion of and action around the rights of looked after children to have their voices and opinions heard.

All children have, under Article 12 of the UNCRC, the right be heard, to have their views given due weight and to participate in decision making processes which impact upon their lives. It is well established that children without parental care and those who are detained in custody are a particularly vulnerable group, for whom advocacy services are extremely important in terms of enabling them to exercise their Article 12 participation rights. We believe that Action Criteria 8:2 and the associated Outcome Measure 8:10 are insufficient with regards to young people's experience of and access to complaints mechanisms. Many young people who have left care remain fully uninformed of existing complaints mechanisms, and even when they are, they have little confidence in them.

“Social workers never listen to what you say, they just say they are doing what they think is best.”

What areas of Leaving care/ 16+ services do you feel need to be improved?

Young People's Comments:

“Social Services in general need to improve – everything!”

“The PA person – is working when you get one – but it's the time taken to get one in the first place.”

“The thing is that when you get to age 16, you can take some responsibility for what you're doing about choices and decisions, so the leaving care planning should give you some leeway to do that as a young adult.”

“Stop being as strict just because we are in care.”

Concluding Comments

Include Youth welcomes the opportunity to comment on these standards and applauds any initiative which seeks to improve the lives of young people in and leaving care. We do not underestimate the difficulty in developing a set of comprehensive standards which takes into account the many layered and varied aspects of the leaving care process. We hope that our comments and particularly those of the young people prove helpful and as always, we are more than happy to discuss with you in more detail. We look forward to hearing about the next stage of the process.