

If one had to identify a social group who were the most disadvantaged, 'at risk' and poorly served it would almost certainly be those 50,000 young people who are currently in residential and foster care. Over the past decade a dozen or so reports have detailed the problems which this group of young people face and the inadequacies of existing provision. Charges of neglect, abuse and lack of guidance have been laid at the

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# Leaving care

**Roger Matthews reports on a new initiative from The Prince's Trust.**

door of local authorities and those responsible for looking after young people in care.

Many young people who enter care are victims of various forms of abuse or parental neglect, while others exhibit behavioural and emotional difficulties. The experience of care, according to a number of reports, is that rather than address these problems it tends to compound them. The net result is that many of these young people have low levels of education and training and limited job opportunities.

Recent research commissioned by the Prince's Trust revealed that the nature of support

dren and young people in public care is less than 1% of the population, more than one third of young homeless people in the UK are care leavers. Care leavers are also over-represented in a range of other depressing statistics: 75% complete their compulsory education without gaining any formal qualifications; less than 20% go into further education and less than 1% into higher education; between 50% and 80% are estimated to be unemployed; 38% of young prisoners and 23% of adult prisoners have been in care, although less than 1% enter public care because of criminal behaviour.

A new initiative by the Prince's Trust is underway which aims to direct more resources towards this disadvantaged group and to provide practical help and advice. Like most other Prince's Trust initiatives this will involve engaging a number of different agencies as well as the business sector.

There are a number of component parts to this initiative. The first is mentoring. This approach has been in operation for some time but has recently gained a considerable amount of support following its effectiveness in relation to a number of projects including the widely acclaimed Dalston Youth Project. The use of mentors in this context may be particularly appropriate since they can potentially give young people both support and guidance and can simultaneously provide a good independent point of reference which can extend the accountability of residential and foster care. Recent mentoring projects carried out by the Royal Philanthropic Society and the National Children's Bureau have proved extremely promising and the aim will be to develop this form of intervention with the young people involved.

The second element is housing. It has long been recognised that young people face particular problems in finding suitable housing and that for young people leaving care this is an acute problem. One initiative developed by the East Bristol Housing Group involves the provision of a centre

which will be run by young people who have left care. Its aim will be to give housing and welfare advice to people with a similar background. This project, therefore, aims to give responsibility to one group of young people while providing another group with an accessible and safe environment.

There are also a number of initiatives which are associated with schemes which the Prince's Trust already operate. These include educational and employment schemes. Young people leaving care experience particular difficulties in trying to gain access to training and employment opportunities, because the limited education which many of them receive means that they have few qualifications. Besides the difficulties this raises in relation to possible employment it also tends to adversely affect their level of self esteem and confidence.

The Leaving Care project is still at an early stage but looks extremely promising. Most of the key agencies have offered their support and experience. The task of the Prince's Trust over the next few months is to encourage businesses to support this project by providing work opportunities, training and equipment. They will also ask businesses to provide sponsorship to develop projects which will complement those currently pursued by local authorities, leaving care teams, and other local agencies in order to provide the kind of help which these young people urgently need. If this initiative is successful, and all the signs so far is that it will be if it can get the right kind of support, the beneficiaries will not only be the 8,000 young people leaving care each year but also members of the wider community.

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given to young people leaving care varied considerably by region. It was found that less than 5% of Social Services Departments work with employers on a regular basis and only 12% worked regularly with TECs. In general care leavers have limited access to employers and have received relatively little in the way of practical advice.

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