

The background of the cover is a photograph of a sunset or sunrise seen through the vertical bars of a prison cell. The sun is a bright, glowing orb on the horizon, partially obscured by a layer of clouds. The sky is filled with soft, golden light and wispy clouds. The bars are dark and create a grid-like pattern over the scene.

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Always Hope: New approaches to improving support networks for young adults with experience of care whilst serving prison sentences and on release

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Jessie Ben-Ami is a Senior Innovation Consultant at Innovation Unit. She is currently leading Innovation Unit's Always Hope project, aiming to transform the professional and personal networks that support care leavers in prison and on release. For the past 25 years she has been designing and delivering interventions aiming to improve outcomes for young people in a wide range of contexts. These include those affected by gang activity and knife crime, young people not attending school, young people with looked after status and those serving prison sentences.

DM: Can you tell me about the Innovation Unit?

JBA: Innovation Unit is a not-for-profit social enterprise with a 15-year track record of developing and scaling new solutions that improve outcomes for vulnerable people. Our mission is to 'grow and scale the boldest and best innovations that deliver long term impact for people, address persistent inequalities and transform the systems around them'. Our particular expertise is working with people within complex local systems — those with lived experience, practitioners, system leaders and commissioners — to improve outcomes for individuals and the performance of the system. In the UK we work with local authorities, clinical commissioning groups, foundations and charities, central government, and internationally we work with governments and foundations. Over the last five years we have incubated and launched IU Australia New Zealand.

In practice, our work includes coaching leaders and their teams as they introduce difficult changes. We help to build local capability to ensure that new ways of working will be maintained long after our work is

complete and dig deep to find root causes of problems, challenge assumptions, design and test new ways of working and help to implement change. Finally, we support organisations to collaborate with one another and build strong partnerships that can transform a system or a place.

DM: What do we know about the challenges for care experienced people after they've served prison sentences?

JBA: Well we know that the experience for young adults with experience of care on release from prison is uniquely challenging; they are more likely to have been separated from family or other support networks and to have been living in a placement outside their community and home town. In addition, they are more likely to be coping with early experiences of trauma, neglect and abuse. They are at high risk of homelessness, poor mental health, and victimisation by criminal gangs and at greater risk of reoffending on release from prison.

We also know that according to the cross government 'Keep on Caring' policy paper written in 2016 to highlight how to improve services, support and advice for care leavers, that 'overwhelmingly, the biggest issue raised by care leavers was one of isolation and loneliness: and the difficulty navigating the way through their late teens and early twenties without a strong and stable network to support them'¹

DM: What do you think could help to resolve these issues?

JBA: In terms of what our programme aims to achieve, we believe there needs to be targeted and coordinated support to prevent reoffending for those care experienced young adults that serve custodial

1. HM Government.2016 Keep on Caring

prison sentences. While some progress has been made in diverting young people from custody, not enough work and attention has been paid to targeting those young people that do end up in prison. There is however, an opportunity to improve outcomes for young adults in prison who are also designated as 'care leavers' as they are entitled to support from their local authority beyond their 18th birthday, to age 21 or 25 depending on their circumstances.

DM: How is the Innovation Unit involved with this?

JBA: Innovation Unit started work on this challenge in 2018, thanks to funding from the Oak Foundation. This first phase of our work generated insights from multiple interviews with young adults with experience of care and of prison, as well as with the senior leaders and frontline staff tasked with supporting the cohort. In addition, we conducted desk research to review the evidence and literature. We wanted to understand, from multiple perspectives, the strengths of the current services that are responsible for supporting this cohort, as well as identifying the challenges faced by the young adults.

In the second phase of our work, funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust, Innovation Unit facilitated an extensive codesign and testing process with young adults and professionals. The outcome was a proposed new model and approach aiming to prepare and support the young adults on release from prison and reduce their risk of reoffending.

We are now ready to pilot these new models in the West Midlands and we have generously been supported by Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, Barrow Cadbury Trust and the Ministry of Justice Local Leadership Integration Fund to do this.

DM: What did you learn from that first stage?

JBA: Well firstly, identifying this cohort wasn't straightforward. Without clarity as to which young adults in prison have care experience, and which local authority has responsibility for them, it becomes very difficult to offer targeted and appropriate support.

In some cases, the support worker from Leaving Care services (Personal Advisor) knows where a young person is serving their prison sentence, however when this isn't the case, and the Personal Advisor suspects they may have been incarcerated, they have to access the

online 'Find a Prisoner' system that informs them of the name of the prison where the young adult is being held.

Once either the prison staff or the Personal Advisor have information that a young person they are responsible for supporting is serving a custodial sentence, we learned that it is not always easy for them to locate their counterpart in the other service. Sometimes this communication was smooth, but we heard of many occasions where it was difficult to locate the appropriate practitioner, and once located, it wasn't unusual for there to have been no response from them when contact was made.

When neither the prison or the local authority is aware that the young person in question has experience of care, the young adults may choose to disclose their status when asked. We found that many young people are reluctant to acknowledge their care leaver status. For example, we heard from some young women who were reluctant to self-identify as they were fearful it might result in their children being taken into care.

DM: What impact does that then have for the young person and the professionals involved?

JBA: The absence of coordination between Justice and Leaving Care services can result in young adults and the professionals tasked with supporting them being unclear of who is responsible for offering what type of support. The young adults do not know what support is available to them and the staff do not always understand each other's roles and responsibilities. We heard that when there are disagreements, staff are not always clear who to contact to resolve these issues, or how to escalate a situation if things go wrong.

There are duplications and gaps across services, especially in relation to developing plans with the young adults for their future. Personal Advisors have statutory responsibility for writing a Pathway plan, Prison staff have responsibility for a Sentence Plan (or a BCST2) and Probation staff have responsibility for a Resettlement plan. Assessment and planning tends to happen in isolation and information is not routinely shared between organisations. It is often the Personal Advisors who have a long-standing relationship with the young person prior to them going into prison and on their release, but the Pathway Plan rarely contributes to the plans made by the Prison or Probation services. Positive social networks are rarely

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identified and tapped into by professionals to provide support.

DM: The aim in Phase 2 was to codesign a new approach to reducing reoffending with care experienced young adults. Can you tell me about that?

JBA: Between October 2019 and January 2020 we ran a series of seven workshops with the stakeholders in the West Midlands that we had worked with in phase one. Together, we dived deep into the insights that had been generated and codesigned a powerful set of responses.

Fundamental to the success of these workshops was being able to draw on the expertise of a wide range of stakeholders. Our partners included young adults serving sentences at HMP Swinfen Hall, senior staff with national and strategic responsibilities as well as frontline staff with day-to-day responsibilities for supporting the young adults. Our partners also included HMPPS leads for care experienced young people; staff from prisons within the West Midlands group; Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire probation service; Reducing Reoffending Partnership (CRC); Birmingham Children's Trust; Wolverhampton and Coventry local authorities; Prison Reform Trust; Care Leavers Association; Catch 22 (NCLBF) and Barnardos.

In the early workshops with stakeholders, we agreed on a set of design principles that would underpin the new responses we would develop. These principles emphasised: early identification of care leaver status being crucial for maximising support; clarity about who is responsible for offering what support; and, care experienced young adults being at the centre of all decision making and service provision. It was also important that staff from the range of services working with this cohort have a shared understanding of the young adult's strengths, needs and vulnerabilities and a collaborative, joined up approach.

DM Clearly a crucial part of the approach you adopted was to hear the voices of the young adults involved. What did they tell you?

JBA: Our conversations with young adults confirmed the importance of designing a model in

which staff were working together in a coordinated way. The young adults also reinforced the importance of the model being fluid enough to respond to their specific and individual needs.

When we asked them what would encourage them to self-identify as having care experience, they told us it would be helpful to be told how they might benefit from such disclosure. They also thought that having a peer talking to them about how self-identifying had helped them would be good.

From their Personal Advisor and Probation Officer the cohort said they would like support specifically with employment, housing and education. From prison staff they wanted support with issues that impact on them whilst they're serving their sentence. The things which were important to them were a connection — someone to talk to and support with family and reaching their future goals.

Many young people reported getting lots of support from prison staff and from family (both birth and foster/adoptive). There was also a large number of young people wanting support from physical and mental health services as well as drug and alcohol services on release.

DM: So you have now reached Stage Three of the Project. What are the aims for this?

JBA: The aim of the Always Hope project is to pilot a holistic new approach based on coordinating and integrating support from the young adults personal and professional networks. We are looking at three approaches. The first is to create protocols for statutory service providers that encourage working in a joined-up way. The second is to increase and align understanding between the statutory services on each other's roles, responsibilities and the experiences and needs of care experienced young people. The third is reconnecting young adults to a sustainable and coordinated support network of friends, family and community members who will agree to a plan prior to release — we will do this using an evidence-based approach called Lifelong Links developed by Family Rights Group.

DM What does the Lifelong Links model involve?

JBA: Lifelong Links reconnects the young adults to positive support networks during their prison sentence, with the aim of reducing their likelihood of reoffending

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on release. Given that prosocial positive networks are a protective factor against reoffending and our cohort have less access to these, we believe that offering Lifelong Links will provide the support and coordination needed to develop and maintain these networks and reduce the likelihood of reoffending. In the Lifelong Links model, a Lifelong Links specialist practitioner will agree with a young person that friends, relatives and supportive adults can be invited to a group conference. They use specialist tools to track down the adults who care about the young person and agree a lifelong support plan at the conference.

Family Rights Group (FRG) is the leading authority on Lifelong Links and has been at the forefront of developing and promoting high standards of Lifelong Links practice. FRG has been piloting this approach with young people leaving care as part of the DfE funded Children's Social Care Innovation Programme. Evidence gathered in evaluation of the Lifelong Links model demonstrated that the size of young people's social networks increased and the quality of relationships improved for those young people who were offered the model.

During phase two we worked closely with practitioners from Coventry local authority Looked After Children services who had previously prototyped a similar approach with three young men in custody, based on the Family Group Conferencing model. One of the positive outcomes of locating and bringing the network of support together for one of the young men, was that the network agreed a schedule of writing letters, visiting and sending money so that there wouldn't be gaps in contact with him. This became particularly significant for maintaining his welfare at a time when he received bad news. We are excited to further develop this model to support young people through the gates, incorporating their Lifelong Links plan into their Pathway, Sentence and Resettlement plans.

DM: How do you envisage developing the joint working systems?

JBA: We want this element to create a newly designed protocol of coordinated, person centred assessment and planning between Prison, Probation and Leaving Care staff. This approach supports the pooling of information between the staff in the statutory sector who are responsible for working with the young adult to develop plans for their future. The approach involves improving methods for identifying young adults who have experience of care when they first arrive in prison, including the involvement of peer mentors in prison helping with the systematic identification of the cohort.

We will also develop new systems and protocols for sharing information between the prison and social care when a young adult with experience of care receives a custodial sentence. There will be clarity of

who is responsible for contacting other professionals, an agreed timescale in which this should happen and a clear process in place if they do not get a response from the service provider they are contacting. Finally, we will develop protocols for staff from prison, probation and leaving care services to meet and jointly develop plans with the young adults. This will include templates for the joint planning meetings to ensure that in one meeting with a young adult, the staff from the three services are able to collect the required information for their respective plans.

In phase two we prototyped parts of this protocol and brought together the Personal Advisor, Community Rehabilitation Company worker and Probation Officer to discuss the release plan for a young man due to be released from custody. The result of pooling information was recognition from the CRC worker and the Probation Officer that the Personal Advisor had significant information about the young adult that they weren't aware of. The consequence was that there was a change to his release plan and he was released to the care of a family friend, rather than to a supervised and monitored 'Approved Premises' hostel, which had previously been unsuccessful.

DM: Where is the pilot taking place and what do you hope the impact of it will be?

JBA: We are first starting to pilot these new ways of working in January 2022 at HMP Brinsford with young adults with care-leaver status under the care of either Birmingham, Coventry or Wolverhampton local authorities, later in the year will spread to other prisons in the West Midlands region.

We believe that the direct impact of these activities will be to reduce reoffending, enable rehabilitation and increase the chances of a positive future for our cohort of young adults. We also hope to facilitate greater alignment of support across the young adult's personal networks and participating organisations as well as clarifying for young people what support they can receive and how they can better access it.

Finally, we will provide a protocol for Prison, Probation and Leaving Care support services which outlines a coordinated approach to assessing and planning with young people who have experience of care. With the evidence from our external evaluation, we hope to demonstrate the impact of the project and to scale it to other regions in the UK, ultimately aiming for the approaches to be adopted nationally.

We are keen to begin conversations with people interested in exploring the learning from this work, with a view to diagnosing local conditions, mobilising coalitions and spreading the model to other regions. To follow up on anything you have read please contact: jessie.ben-ami@innovationunit.com