

The background of the cover is a photograph of a sunset or sunrise seen through the dark, heavy metal 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 in the foreground, creating a grid-like pattern that frames the view of the sky.

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**Special edition:  
Care Leavers and the Criminal Justice System**

# Care Leavers in Custody in HMPYOI Deerbolt

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**In this article Debbie McKay speaks to Gail Kirkby, Project Worker for NEPACS at HMYOI Deerbolt and Dawn Simpson, Service Manager for NEPACS. They share details on the work completed by NEPACS during their HMPPS Innovation Grant Project and go on to talk about the continued work within HMPYOI Deerbolt with young adults with care experience.**

**DM: Can you tell me a bit about the organisation you work for, NEPACS?**

**DS:** NEPACS is a North-East based charity which has been operating for over 130 years. Our principle aims are to promote a positive future for prisoners, offenders and their relatives by supporting family ties at every stage of the criminal justice system.

**DM: How did you come to be supporting young people in custody?**

**DS:** In October 2018 NEPACS were privileged to be awarded HMPPS Innovation Grant Funding to develop a new project at two north east prisons to support young men and women who have experienced being in care. The project ran to March 2020 and worked with over 260 care experienced prisoners in HMPYOI Low Newton and HMPYOI Deerbolt. Low Newton is a female establishment in County Durham and Deerbolt is a young offenders establishment in Durham. Following the project, we were able to sustain work at HMPYOI Deerbolt due to funding from NEPACS Charitable Board, Swire Trust and the Prison Service.

The project's main objectives were to explore ways to work with care leavers in custody; this included one to one casework and the co-production of an intervention resource.

**DM: Why do you think this work is so crucial?**

**GK:** Young people who have experienced care have often faced adverse circumstances in childhood which continue to have an impact in adulthood. One of the key recommendations from the Lord Farmer review of 2017 was that:

*'Governors should be intentional about ensuring all prisoners who do not have family or other support — for example if they have been in the care system — are helped to form relationships with people outside or peers inside.'* (Farmer review 2017).

We feel very passionately that care experienced people have overcome so many adverse circumstances and that custody should not be another barrier or hurdle. Giving these young adults a voice and empowerment to inform decision on their future rehabilitation can be extremely powerful.

**DM: What were the initial challenges? How did you overcome them?**

**GK:** The first hurdle was definitely identification of care leavers in the establishment; in HMYOI Deerbolt, governors felt the demographic was around 5 per cent of the population. However, we know that care experienced young people are statistically over represented within the criminal justice system and from the Lord Farmer review of 2017 that '24 per cent of the adult prison population have been in care, yet the leaving care population represents about 1 per cent of young people.' (Farmer Review 2017)

We developed a process for recording each care experience prisoner upon reception to ensure no one was missed moving forward. This involved checking daily admissions lists for prisoners that had a 'care leavers flag' on the prison computer system, PNOMIS, but also checking details on the prisoner records such as family members, social worker details and visits.

Within a few months we had 128 care experienced prisoners in our population of 472.

Dr Chris Hartworth from Barefoot Research independently evaluated the grant project and it was discovered the most important thing by a long way was being recognised as a care leaver. He spoke to one man who told him ....

*'Just a bit of recognition that we have grown up in care ... this [project] has made me realise a lot of things about being in care ... like I used to think it was only me but coming here has made me realise that there's loads of us and we should help each other.'* (Barefoot evaluation, Dr C Hartworth 2020)

**DM: What were the aims of the project?**

**DS:** The aims of the project were to improve the contact care leavers have with their local authority personal advisers, families, carers and significant others; and also to improve resettlement outcomes by supporting this group of young people to feel more connected to their communities.

**DM: Can you tell me some of the ways you were able to do this in relation to local authorities?**

**GK:** We did this in many different ways based on the needs and wants of the individual care leaver.

Firstly, we often had to act as an advocate for the young people, liaising with the Local Authority on their behalf in the beginning, before equipping them with the skills and resources to advocate for themselves. Care leavers are allocated a Personal Advisor (PA) who becomes their single point of contact with the Local Authority, responsible for providing them with their entitlements. The project workers would contact the service user's PA to; make them aware of the young person's location, gather information, provide key updates (e.g. court dates, achievements, release plans), organise financial support, and arrange visits.

We also found that many young people were not receiving the 6-8 weekly visits that they were entitled to and the project workers would often call or email to remind [them] of their duty of care and explain to them how to book a visit. In some cases, the PA's were willing to visit, but were unable to due to issues beyond their control. When a PA (who had travelled for 6 hours to attend the prison) was told that her visit had been unexpectedly cancelled, the project worker stepped in. They were able to speak to the security department and escort the PA in to see their young person. This escorting of PA's was also utilised often when a service user was self-isolating and would not leave the residential wing.

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As well as facilitating visits, project workers would help the young people to access their financial entitlements from the Local Authority. Usually this was a weekly/monthly allowance on the condition that they were in employment, education, or training, but sometimes included other funds such as a payment on birthdays and religious holidays. Finally, in a small number of cases, the project workers were required to advocate for a young person as they navigated serious shortcomings by the Local Authority. This involved; helping the young person to make complaints, having cases reopened when they had been inappropriately closed, and contacting independent care leaver advocates to work with the service user post-release.

**DM: And what about other organisations?**

**DS:** As well as Local Authorities and Personal Advisors, the project workers worked closely with a wealth of other agencies, teams, and individuals to achieve the best outcomes for their cases. Some of these were prison departments or staff (e.g. healthcare, education, mental health, prison officers, and chaplaincy) and some were external agencies working within the prison (e.g. resettlement services, drug and alcohol recovery, sexual violence counsellors). There was also lots of work involving people external from the prison altogether, such as housing providers, solicitors, probation officers, and social workers other than those in the

Leaving Care teams (e.g. mental health social workers).

Much of this work was around signposting and referrals. This might include filling out housing referral forms for supported accommodation upon release, signposting to the drug and alcohol recovery team when cravings were discussed, or submitting a referral to the mental health team after a service user disclosed they were feeling depressed in a session.

**DM: You mentioned Lord Farmer earlier. How does working with families link into your project?**

**DS:** Family Support is crucial and it is another service that the project workers found themselves offering. For some young people, this was the beginning of a journey to reconnect with estranged family members, such as birth parents, or siblings who were also taken into care.

In many cases, family visits were few and far between for the service users. The project worker would help arrange visits for the families and, in one

case, they even sourced funds from the NEPACS grant to support a family travelling over 250 miles. Another service user was aided in applying for 'accumulated visits', a procedure whereby unused visiting orders can be exchanged for a temporary transfer to an establishment closer to home. This meant he was able to see his mother and learning-disabled younger brother, who had not been able to make the journey up to HMYOI Deerbolt. Where necessary, the project worker may have even sat in on family visits and offered the young person support. One young man requested this of his project worker after feeling unable to express himself properly to his adoptive parents. During the meeting, the project worker advocated for the young man, and diverted their conversation away from 'how their lives had been ruined by his adoption' (this is a quote from the adoptive parents).

**DM: This sounds like it could have been very traumatic for those involved?**

**GK:** Absolutely. However when service users were experiencing emotional distress, the project workers were always on hand to offer support, as well as referring to the prison mental health team when necessary. Through one-to-one sessions, the young people had a chance to talk openly about what was bothering them. Project workers would make in-cell distraction packs, print off helpful online resources, and even provide art materials, all to support the emotional wellbeing of their service users. One young man, who had been self-isolating due to his fear of other prisoners, was provided with books about self-help and mindfulness. The project worker also adapted and delivered some online modules to him, focussed on confidence building and personal strengths.

As well as receiving support specifically tailored for wellbeing, the young people also benefitted emotionally from their general involvement with the project. They developed strong therapeutic relationships with their project worker, who remained a consistent, friendly, and non-judgemental face. Furthermore, the project allowed service users to connect with each other and form support systems of peers who had similar life experiences, greatly benefitting their mental health by promoting belonging and empowerment.

**DM: I understand that the young people were very involved in shaping the progress of the project?**

To support this work we ran a series of group based workshops to identify the themes and issues the care experienced young people felt needed to be addressed.

**GK:** Indeed they were. The coproduction was an exciting element of the project and not only did the young people embrace the task they took ownership of it; helping to design the themes, content of the modules, art work and colours used on the final course materials

To support this work we ran a series of group based workshops to identify the themes and issues the care experienced young people felt needed to be addressed. They freely shared ideas in the sessions and created a supportive environment, recognising that everyone had different and individual stories however, they had a shared experience of being a care leaver. The group's priority was to ensure the programme and module was engaging and fun.

One young man in particular described how he had been in care from an early age due to his parents being drug dependent, leading to them being unable to take care of him or his siblings. He went on to explain that having 54 placements in 8 years, ranging from foster care to care homes and finally secure residential schools, he found it difficult to trust people or make relationships and that he suffered with mental health and anxiety issues. Although grateful for the support he didn't think he would achieve anything and wouldn't have anything to offer. It was explained to him that by sharing

his experiences it was recognised that he was the expert and therefore had exactly what was needed to help develop the project.

**DM: Tell me a little about the intervention which came out of this work**

**DS:** The final co-production product is 'Paving the Way', a group work intervention created by care leavers for care leavers. Specifically the programme has four modules to support care leavers in custody. The modules address people skills, care leaver rights and entitlements, Lifestyle and Housing.

The title of the programme, Paving the Way was chosen by our care leavers and means:

*'Paving the Way — designed to create a situation that makes it possible or easier for something to happen....'*

This is the ethos of the work overall, to work with individuals to create their own future choices.

The original young people who helped develop the programme have assisted with delivery to their peers, ensuring that they understand how important their input was to the process and allowing them to see how their hard work supports other and that they truly are experts by experience.

We are proud to report that Paving the Way is now a recognised intervention at HMPYOI Deerbolt and serves as a lasting legacy to the work of the group and project overall.

**DM: So what next for NEPACS and Deerbolt?**

**DS:** NEPACS have been able to sustain work at HMPYOI Deerbolt due to funding from the prison, NEPACS Charitable Board and Swire Trust. The project continues to deliver one to one casework and delivery of Paving the Way. We have had to adapt and flex resilience during covid and working in the pandemic however, we have remained committed to the young men on our caseload.

Next steps are to fully launch a peer-mentoring scheme as requested by the original group in the coproduction. This will involve two care experienced prisoners on each wing, trained in listening skills, confidentiality and care leavers entitlements, and would provide first contacts for any care experienced prisoner, hand out information leaflets and refer to NEPACS on the behalf of their peers where necessary. NEPACS staff will support the peer mentors but the prison has also identified 30 Care Leaver Champions across all departments and grades. We have delivered care

leavers awareness sessions to the new care leavers champions and these staff will help to support the peer mentors, and to promote a positive culture for care leavers.

Work with cases has become more imbedded in prison and probation processes over the last 18 months, with NEPACS supporting men through re-categorisation applications, parole hearings and in segregation. It is crucial we continue to work together for the best outcomes for the care leavers in our care.

The last three years working with care leavers in custody have been a continual learning curve, with the work completed at HMPYOI Deerbolt exceeding all of our expectations.

Without the engagement, support and interest from the care experienced prisoners none of this would be possible. Their commitment to the project and to shape a service for care leavers has been commendable, often stepping outside their comfort zones to talk to HMPPS professionals about their experiences and to our independent evaluator. One young man in particular committed to travel over 250 miles on release to talk at a NEPACS conference, he has a lasting legacy at Deerbolt by inventing the phrase 'every jail needs a Gail'. This phrase continues to be repeated by our care-experienced prisoners on a regular basis and is a real recognition of the work undertaken by Gail, as the main Project Worker.

Additionally we need thank the governors at HMPYOI Deerbolt for their continued support and recognition of the importance of the work undertaken.