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

How the correct support can lead to positive outcomes for people with care experience

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Being a care leaver in custody presents with its own unique set of disadvantages, however speaking from experience this does not necessarily mean it has to be a negative experience. Like many, my relationship with authority of any kind was very combative due the fact I felt they were there because of me and not for me. This was reinforced by it taking 6 months for my personal advisor — someone allocated to an individual post the age of 18 if they have had experience of the care system — the only person who was supposed to be dedicated to my care, to make any contact. Care leavers are used to the feeling of rejection and abandonment. The consequences for any negative action is removal and discrimination so these feelings weren't foreign to me. However, in times of need they become all-consuming and reinforce the negative opinion and unworthiness you already feel towards yourself when the person paid to look after you doesn't even want to know. But this is not a sad story. This is a piece about how an organization recognised a shortfall for one of the most in needs groups who enter the criminal justice system and because of this I was able to flourish into the individual I am today.

During my time in custody, I started to become more aware of the shortfall in services provided to care leavers in prison. When I started my journey in custody there was not any support in place for care leavers and there was a massive lack of awareness surrounding what it meant to be a care leaver. Being a care leaver myself I did not truly understand what it meant, what my entitlements were or what support was available for people like me. I vaguely remember being asked the question upon entry to custody but there was no further significant conversation about why it was being asked or what it even meant; we know what it means to us personally but from a systematic approach it was just another tick box.

While my prison experience is only limited to two different establishments it was the latter one who were

working to develop the support given to care experienced individuals and approached me to help to develop this further. Thanks to the ever-growing awareness surrounding care leavers and the backing of HMP Drake Hall this all changed very quickly. Both I and the care leaver lead at the time came up with a system to identify, support and connect the care leavers within the establishment. The question is always posed surrounding how best to gain care leaver interactions and I am aware it is an incredibly difficult task, so none of us expected the response from the females that we received.

We start by identifying, which was our biggest hurdle as not all residents that fitted those criteria have been identified for multiple reasons. It may have been the question was not asked or the individual did not want to disclose due to the negative stigma attached to people who have been in care. We asked every single resident again individually if they had care experience however this time, we also explained exactly why we are asking them this question and explained that we wanted to learn how to better support this group of individuals. What I quickly learnt was that not even 25 per cent of this group had even been identified but it gave us a new starting point and meant from that point onwards we only needed to cover new intake.

I would reiterate that the peer advisor system was particularly effective when working with care leavers as they sometimes felt more comfortable approaching groups of their peers than members of staff. They are also able to provide a more constant level of support as they are easily accessible within the prison and are there from day to day whereas a particular member of staff may not be. This also removed the reservations care leavers have when declaring their care experience. This made it possible for the important task of identification at the earliest available opportunity which was upon entry to the establishment.

While it is great to make a note of who is care experienced, for the peer advisors to establish a relationship we didn't want to bombard them with further information. During this time it can be very

emotional for any individual, this was addressed by a follow up either the next day or later on in the week once they had had a chance to settle. This time was then used to establish which local authority were responsible for them as well as starting conversations and creating a collaborative approach for everyone involved within the care and rehabilitation process. Due to the trust and freedom I was given and that I had earned during my time at HMP Drake Hall, I was lucky enough to be able to create the log of our care leavers as well as contacting the personal advisors, which not only freed up time for the staff but allowed me to gain and develop transferable and real-life skills.

It didn't stop there; identification and engagement of all parties was only half the battle. We wanted to nurture and develop these individuals — something that they haven't received much of before. This was done by each one being allocated a specific peer advisor who would check in and work on development plans with everyone coming together once a week for a focus group where the voices of the unheard could be heard. We introduced care leavers day dedicated to life sentenced prisoners and young offenders. Most care leavers do not receive visits and rarely have an escape from the day to day of prison routine, and it is important to have a day dedicated to care leavers. These days are not just for unwinding purposes, they were also used to invite external agencies working with care leavers into the establishment. These sessions were used to encourage and educate care leavers so they had a broader knowledge of career prospects and support available post release, making their transition back into the outside world less frightening.

Not only had we identified and continued to identify a whole range of care leavers within the establishment, but we saw a real community being formed. I believe we helped change the way care was given to care experienced individuals, trust was built between peer mentors, care leavers and staff in a unique way. Going back to the complicated circumstances surrounding a care leaver in custody, both the staff and peers began to learn and understand the care leavers and why they behaved and reacted the way they did. They then started to reach a point where they would approach staff before an outburst, so it did not escalate into a negative situation.

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I always say that my world was full of negative people so the last place I thought I would find inspiration and support was from the staff within a prison. None of this would be possible without the work and help of the Custodial Manager¹, who changed my life for the better, he is in every speech I make because he saw something inside of me that no one else ever had. I remember walking into his office for the first time with very little confidence and the quietest voice imaginable and being introduced to him to him for the first time. While I did not yet have the confidence, I had the vision, and he could see this so all he did was push me to be the best version of myself and had enough trust in me to implement all these changes with his support and constant encouragement. My first big event was the 2018 care leavers

conference, where I was able to run a workshop helping other prisons and organizations responsible for the care of people in prisons. I worked to not only implement the teaching that had been working so effectively in our establishment but raise the standard of care given all around continuing into post release.

We all have a bar that we set for ourselves, a set of standards a vision of what you want to achieve but people who have been through the care system always set low expectations which become even lower once they reach the criminal justice system. To be given the opportunities and responsibilities that I had was overwhelming, but it made me want to strive higher and further and to continue to help as many people as I could. It is very easy being confident and assertive while you have your own personal building of cheerleaders but upon release, I took a fall from grace.

The mind is a very powerful thing and my first hurdle, while a simplistic concept for some, was learning self-worth and self-confidence that was not dependent upon another person's praise or encouragement. I had always done everything for other people, I felt my needs and wants were insignificant in the bigger picture of things and became rather subservient to individuals which eventually became my downfall and the reason I ended up in custody. While you are busy concerning yourself with the wants and needs of others you notice that everyone is on their own journey, and no one is concerned with your needs. This is not a negative, and while this level of selfishness

1. In the prison staff system there are 3 rankings of officers before Governor with Custodial Manager being the highest having 3 stripes

was a foreign concept for me, I had realized it was one I had to develop fast if I ever wanted to succeed in life.

There are so many opportunities available when you have contacts within a certain industry such as the Ministry of Justice or the care sector and even third sector organizations, but without those routes in, it can be quite daunting initially making that entrance. My solution was to accept any opportunity that was presented to me even though that meant most of my former work was done on a voluntary basis. This allowed me to network, and I was being introduced and re-connecting with people who had the ability to help me get to the place where I could achieve what others previously deemed unachievable.

For the first time in my life, I had options other than just 'criminal', but I wanted to also be able to build the next generation to come, people to continue implementing the new practices after I leave in order to create change on a wider scale. For me to achieve this, I knew I would have to reach the decision makers and the people in power who could help with building long term suitable change.

This was a farfetched ambition I never thought was possible and would be even more so if I did not have some form of educational background meaning it was time to pack myself off to university to study criminology. I didn't want to lose momentum over the three years my course would take to complete so alongside continuing to volunteer with the Ministry of Justice and starting a degree I also set up a consultancy business working with a range of organizations all with a similar agenda to further the lives of individuals who had been in the care system and the criminal justice system. I see life as a constant job interview, every person I meet or work with, I try and leave a positive lasting impression in the hope they would want to work with me further or recommend me to work with others they may know. While some might have seen this as a pointless exercise and an inability for me to choose a specific organization, I was starting to reap the rewards. My name was the hot topic amongst many organizations, and it helped me to not only achieve the professional experience employers look for, but it really developed my message and what I wanted to achieve.

I get to influence the way other organizations assess the care being given to care experienced people, assisting on huge pieces of legislation towards life changing opportunities for ex-offending going into employment, spreading words and wisdom on the radio, training new social workers to be the best for their young people but most importantly working with the police service directly so these individuals are diverted so hopefully they never end up entering the criminal justice system in the first place. Back in 2018, when I started, never did I ever imagine I would be

stood in front of Members of Parliament and them giving me time to hear what I have to say and to acknowledge the changes that needed to be made but that is because while I had raised the bar for myself, I had not raised it far enough.

As an unapologetic overachiever this was not enough for me, not that these were all amazing achievements that I should have been incredibly proud of, but I still did not feel like an equal. You hear the words 'lived experience' like that's all you are and while you are sat around with professionals within their own right you were still just an ex-offender. I wanted to be something more. I wanted to be an equal so next time I spoke it would not be coming from an ex-offender it was coming from someone who was seen on an equal footing to the others in the room rather than the performing monkey. Like I said the mind is a powerful thing and once you are convinced you are seen in a certain way, it is hard for that to be changed but little did I know the job that was made for me came knocking on my door. Once again, I applied with trepidation not ever dreaming that I would EVER be employed by not only the civil service but the Ministry of Justice.

This world is full of unknowns, and you do not know where you are going to be in the next five years but with all the odds stacked against me, I did not think I would be this far in such a short space of time. I've stopped trying to think where I am going to be later on because my brain will limit my own potential and growth. On entry to custody, I had a very single-track mind, I was there for punishment, and I had every intention of returning to my life before custody. I never imagined that essentially strangers would see something different in me. Yes, I already had the passion however without the platform and support I don't think it would have been my reality. It was not something I was able to do alone and thankfully I was not despite my pre-conceived ideas surrounding prison staff. You never know the impact you will have on another person's life, something simple such as time out of your day can become that lost person's opportunity.

Sometimes we make mistakes, some bigger than others, but it should never be how you fall that matters, it is how you get back up again. This was not easy. I still made mistakes along the way agreed they were not criminal but we all stumble, we fall, we make mistakes, but you never succeed more than you fail it's impossible to the mechanics of learning. There is no point in placing limitations on yourself because I have proven that if you work hard enough and have good intentions then you will always be on the path you should be in life.