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Examining 'Clear Approach': An Intervention for Care Leavers on an Intensive Alternative to Custody Order

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Executive Summary

- Drawing primarily on a quantitative profile of care leavers in combination with 17 semi-structured interviews (6 with young men and 11 with practitioners), this report explores the pilot phase of Clear Approach - a unique intervention available to care leavers on an Intensive Alternative to Custody (IAC) order.
- An analysis of the OASys profile of the young men on IAC showed that those identified as care leavers were assessed as having *greater needs* on all OASys dimensions. The particular vulnerability of care leavers was also reinforced through interviews with a sample of the young men. A needs-focused analysis leaves us in little doubt that care leavers as a group are worthy of specific, specialist attention when they come into contact with the justice system.
- A number of very positive features of the intervention are identified. Firstly, the space to talk to someone about care experiences to someone else who had 'been there' was clearly valued by some of the young men, particularly when they had very little conventional support available to them from elsewhere. The 'user perspective' emphasised in Clear Approach was viewed as very important by both practitioners and young men.
- Also of crucial importance was the knowledge gained about what support individuals might be entitled to under leaving care legislation. A further key factor was the increase in confidence that care leavers reported through being helped to make sense of, and articulate, often difficult past family experiences. That some care leavers engaged with Clear Approach despite non-engagement with other conditions of the IAC order is a testament to both the quality of the intervention and the facilitator.
- However, there were a number of barriers to delivering Clear Approach as intended. These included: defining what a 'care leaver' actually is; identifying relevant young men to refer to the programme; and then timetabling them for an appointment with the project facilitator so that they could actually take part. Even when timetabled, the often-chaotic lives of the young men involved impacted on their ability to participate.
- A lack of knowledge and understanding about care leaver issues and the purpose of the Clear Approach intervention itself led to uncertainty amongst some front-line practitioners and a certain amount of fear about even asking the 'care' question. This linked in with concerns about stigma and labelling the young men
- Despite the obstacles identified, these are not insurmountable and should certainly not detract from the positive benefits that engaging with Clear Approach could bring. Nationally, there is very little specific support available to care leavers in the criminal justice system, and an intervention like Clear Approach has great potential to help fill this gap.
- A key recommendation is that funding and resources should be made available to roll-out Clear Approach on a long-term, sustainable basis so that it has the opportunity to bed-in to mainstream provision. In our view, Clear Approach should be viewed as an integral part of a much wider strategy to address the often-neglected needs of care leavers in the criminal justice system.

Introduction

Care leavers are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, despite the fact that the majority of individuals who have been in care do not commit criminal offences. Indeed, the relationship between prior experience of the care system (e.g. foster or residential placements) and offending behaviour has long been taken as given (Taylor, 2006). The UK government's publication of a cross-departmental 'Care Leaver Strategy' in 2013 and the subsequent practice guidance issued by the National Offender Management Service (2013) on working with care leavers (aged 18-25) in custody and the community suggests that there is some recognition of care leaver issues on the policy agenda. The challenge is to ensure that such strategies and guidance can be translated into real change in practice in addressing the needs of care leavers who come into conflict with the law. With this in mind, this report explores perspectives of a unique pilot programme in Manchester in the North West of England that seeks to provide specialist support to care leavers as part of an Intensive Alternative to Custody (IAC) order.

Background and Rationale

The Intensive Alternative to Custody (or IAC) order is targeted at 18 to 25 year old males who are at risk of a short custodial sentence. It was introduced to provide a credible alternative to custody and piloted in a number of areas in England and Wales between 2009 and 2011 (see Clarke et al, 2012). Manchester is one of the areas that has continued to use the order since this time¹. Offenders sentenced to an IAC order received a 12 month Community Order with between 3 and 5 requirements. During the first three months of the order, contact between the offender and the offender manager is intensive, with up to 4 appointments a week. This then reduces over the course of the order.

Within the IAC programme, there is a unique intervention available to care-leavers which is delivered by the Care Leavers' Association (CLA), a user-led charity. This ten-week intervention is essentially designed to be an empowerment programme where young men have the opportunity to engage (on a voluntary basis) in one-to-one sessions as well as group work in order to explore the links between care and offending. Specifically, the intervention consists of six one-to-one sessions and four group work sessions which take place once a week across a ten week period. It aims also to ensure that care-leavers are aware of their rights and entitlements under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, and receive the support that that they are entitled to.

There are very few such interventions available to care leavers in the criminal justice system, and therefore the Clear Approach pilot warrants serious attention. An exploration of this intervention is also very timely given the current concerns in the wider society about the links between experiences of 'care' and later involvement in the criminal justice system. Nationally, there are currently concerns over the criminalisation of children in care for minor offences, their treatment in the youth justice system, and their effective abandonment by local authorities as care leavers in the criminal justice system, particularly if they are sent to prison custody (see Fitzpatrick, 2014; House of Commons Justice Committee, 2013).

A recent study by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) found 27% of young people in the Young Offender Institutions they surveyed had previously been in care (HMIP, 2011). When just

¹ In April 2014 this order was renamed the Intensive Community Order (ICO) and by June 2014 the ICO had been up-scaled for use across all ten Local Authorities within Greater Manchester.

females are looked at, this figure goes up to 45%. When we consider that a mere 2% of children enter care specifically because of their own behaviour (DfE, 2013a), these figures look very worrying, and raise the question of what exactly is going on?

Official statistics provide us with some useful context on the offending rates of children in care. In the year ending March 2013, 6.2% of looked after children were convicted or subject to a final warning or reprimand, compared to 1.5% of children in the general population (DfE, 2013b). Whilst the proportion of looked after children who offend has reduced (e.g. from 6.9% in 2012, (see DfE. 2012)), the gap between looked after children and all other children has actually increased in the last year. According to these most recent official figures, the offending rates of looked after children in England are now four times that of all other children!

In looking at the local picture in Manchester, the percentage of children in care coming into the criminal justice system is noticeably higher than the national average, and indeed the regional average – both of which stand at 6.2%. In 2013, 8.1% (n=50) of children in care in Manchester were convicted or subject to a final warning or reprimand during the year (DfE, 2013b). Therefore, this is arguably a particularly useful location in which to target an intervention for care leavers. This report aims to explore perceptions of the Clear Approach intervention, whilst also giving a voice to individuals whose experiences and views often go unheard.

Methodology

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were carried out with six care leavers and eleven key stakeholders between April and July 2014 in order to explore their experiences and perceptions of Clear Approach. In addition, we analysed OASys data from Greater Manchester Probation Trust² in order to produce a more quantitative profile of 15 young men on an IAC order who were referred to Clear Approach. Finally, we consulted project documents produced by the Care Leavers' Association in relation to the overall aims and planned structure of Clear Approach, as well as the intended outcomes.

In relation to the interviews, we hoped to interview a selection of care leavers who had taken part in Clear Approach as well as those who had been referred to the intervention but who had for some reason not taken part. In practice, there were a number of barriers to young men participating in both Clear Approach and in an interview. These related to: individuals being identified as care leavers in the first place; the timetabling of appointments by offender managers; young men actually attending scheduled sessions or interviews and in a number of cases young men breaching their IAC order and being sent to custody.

In the end, nine young men took part in the Clear Approach pilot, and we spoke to four of these individuals. We also spoke to two care leavers on an IAC order who had been referred to the pilot but not taken part. As for the eleven key stakeholder interviews, these included interviews with Probation Officers, Probation Service Officers, Mentors employed by Work Solutions, as well as Strategic Managers from Greater Manchester Probation Trust, Work Solutions and the Care Leavers' Association. Aside from an interview with one young man who did not wish to be recorded, all interviews were recorded and fully transcribed in order to aid analysis.

The research presented here was approved by the Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were addressed at the beginning of each interview, where it was also made clear that respondents would only be required to discuss issues that they felt

² Now known as Cheshire & Greater Manchester Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC).

comfortable with. As the British Society of Criminology's Code of Ethics outlines, researchers should strive to protect the rights of those they study, their interests, sensitivities and privacy.

The care leavers we spoke to have been given pseudonyms in this report in order to preserve anonymity. Meanwhile the key stakeholders have simply been numbered 1 to 11, with the Clear Approach facilitator also being assigned a pseudonym. Although this might seem rather impersonal, it reflects our desire to maintain confidentiality and protect the identity of respondents who might otherwise be easily recognised.

Profile of (identified) Care Leavers

A key element of this study was the profiling of young men on the IAC caseload who have experiences of care. From the outset, this proved challenging as there was no uniform process through which to record care leaver status. With assistance from the IAC manager, a small monitoring exercise was undertaken to investigate what proportion of the IAC caseload had experience of care. Preliminary investigations found that of 111 new starters between the period of January to September 2013, 13 (thirteen) young men were care leavers. However, the exercise also unearthed the complexity of identifying care leavers as a further 35 young men were recorded as 'not stated'. It was not possible to know whether 'not stated' was due to a refusal to respond to the question or whether (or not) new starters were asked the question. That aside, 62 young men were recorded as having 'no' experience of care. However, on closer inspection we found at least one person incorrectly recorded as having no care leaver experience. The above may cast some doubt on the robustness of the data.

Later analysis revealed that 17 young men under the supervision of the IAC had been recorded as care leavers. This group was referred to the Clear Approach intervention, although they did not all participate in it, and their personal and assessment details make up the following profile.

The mean (average) age of those referred was 22 years of age with the youngest referral being 17 years of age and the oldest aged 26 years of age. Of these, five referrals were under the age of 21 years at the point of referral. The average 'age at first contact with the police' was 13.5 years of age, and the average age at which the group was 'first convicted' was 14.2 years of age. The extent to which the ages of first contact and conviction correlate with the age at which the young person had their first experience of care is an area worthy of further exploration. Information provided by the CLA and the IAC team indicates that the average age at which the cohort encountered the care system was 8 years of age.

Those referred to Clear Approach had, on average, accumulated 6.6 convictions before the age of 18 years, with the highest being 18 convictions. In addition, the group was recorded on average as being convicted 7 times, since 18 years of age. The context within which offending behaviour occurs will be an important area for discussion later in this report.

Offender Group Reconviction Score (OGRS³)

OGRS calculates the likelihood of (re)conviction within a specified time-period (12-months or 24-months) and is utilised as a proxy to measure the 'risk' of future offending behaviour. It is important to note that such actuarial tools are certainly not without criticism, and represent an assessment made *on* the individual *by* the 'professional' and therefore may reflect various assumptions which underpin the occupational culture at the time. That said, OGRS is a calculation that practitioners are required to engage with. For our purposes, the OGRS score was abstracted from the most recent eOASys assessments to measure the 'risk' presented by the group. Such assessments were only available at the time of the research for 15 of the 17 young men referred to Clear Approach, and the following information is therefore based on these 15 young men. From our analysis, the mean OGRS score was 65, indicating that collectively the group represented a 65% risk of being reconvicted within the next 12 months, rising to 77% within a two-year period. The OGRS scores ranged between

³ The OGRS is an actuarial calculation of risk of reoffending based on static factors such as previous level of offending and compliance.

30% and 87% within a 12-month period and 47% and 97% for a two-year period. These figures represent a 'medium to high' risk of future offending.

Offence Type

The following chart illustrates the offence for which the cohort was made subject to the supervision of the IAC. By virtue of the imposition of an IAC order, the offences perpetrated were 'so serious' that a custodial sentence was considered.

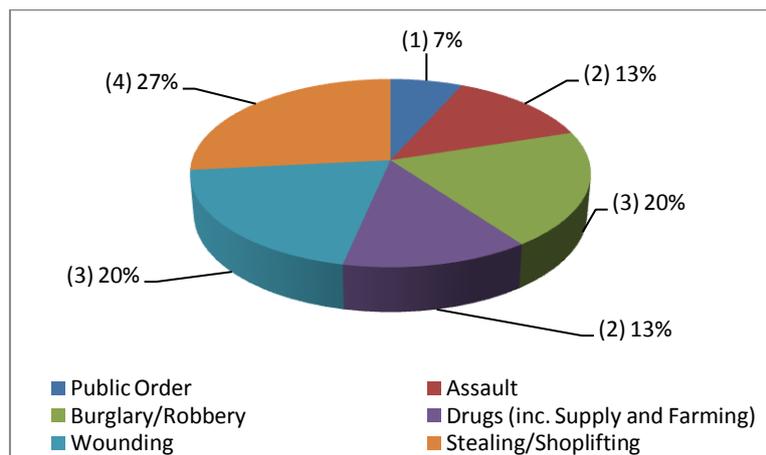


Chart 1: Offence Type of Clear Approach referrals

Seven of the cohort group were subject to supervision for perpetrating the acquisitive crimes of stealing/shoptlifting and burglary/robbery, with another five convicted of violent offences including wounding and assault. Two young men were under supervision for drug offences of farming and 'possession with intent to supply'. Finally, one young person had perpetrated a public order offence. It is important to recognise that the pictorial representation of these offences may mask the seriousness and the context within which the offences occurred.

Care Leaver (eOASys) Assessed Problem areas

In order to consider the needs and problems experienced by care leavers, this study drew upon the Offender Assessment System (OASys) information available for the care leaver cohort. In 2002, the OASys tool was introduced to probation areas to assess the criminogenic (crime causative) needs of individuals, to identify those factors that facilitate offending behaviour and secondly to highlight need areas at which to target resources and interventions to reduce future offending behaviour. OASys evaluates criminogenic need on ten distinct dimensions, and the following chart shows the prevalent offending-related problems for those young men referred to Clear Approach. For comparison, the chart also includes the profile for the generic IAC cohort.⁴

⁴ Source: Clarke, R., McArt, D, Taylor, E. and Wakeman, M. (2012) Process Evaluation of Manchester and Salford Intensive Alternatives to Custody Pilot. London: MOJ

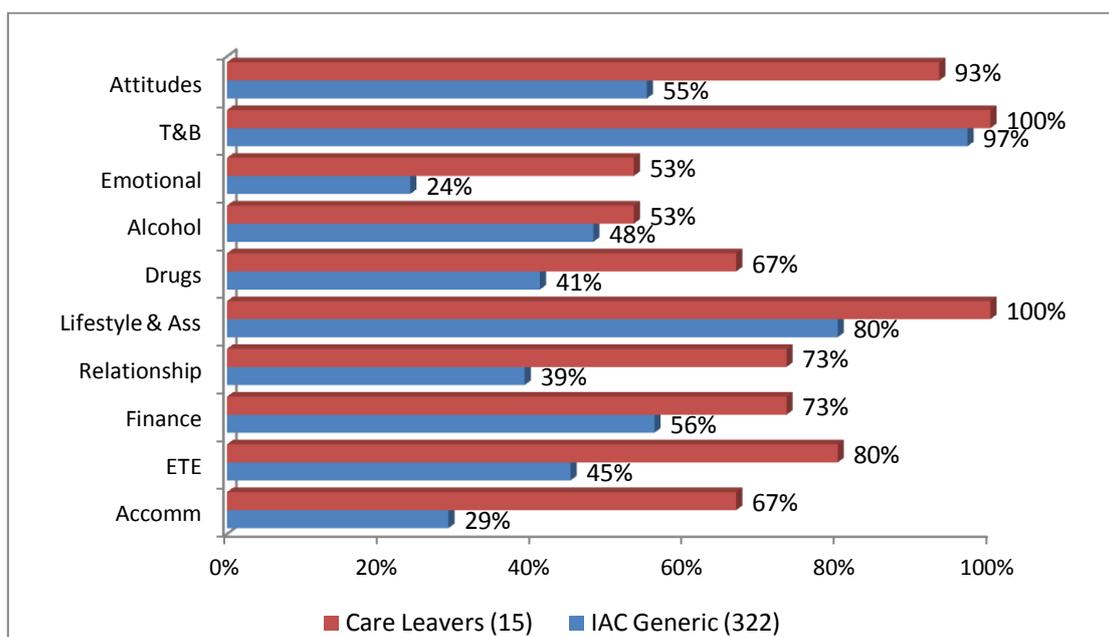


Chart 2: Comparison of eOASys need areas for Care Leavers against Generic IAC caseload

The data clearly shows that care leavers were assessed as having greater needs on all OASys dimensions⁵. The experiential nature of crime causative needs is that they coalesce and compound one another. As such, it is important not to simply read the above chart as a series of distinct problems, but as a summary of the multiplicity of challenges faced and endured by young offenders and care leavers in particular. The specific problems for care leavers are accommodation, relationships, emotional well-being and attitudes (to offending). As will be evident throughout this report, the experience of problems upon these key dimensions will have an overwhelming impact upon the well-being and attitudes of care leavers. The extent to which these problems/needs arise due to care leaver status is yet another area explored within the interview stage of this study. Related to this, a reading of the 'notes section' within the eOASys documents proved insightful of the harmful experiences endured by care leavers under the supervision of the IAC (see table 1).⁶

⁵ Note 'T&B' refers to 'Thinking and Behaviour', 'Lifestyle & Ass' refers to 'Lifestyle and Association' and 'ETE' refers to 'Education, Training and Employment'.

⁶ OASys is a structured assessment tool developed around the Burgess scale (0=no problem, 1=some problems and 2=big problem). The assessment requires the assessor to include qualitative notes where they have scored a problem area as '2' being a big problem related to offending behaviour. These notes were captured within the 'relationship' section of the eOASys assessment form.

Table 1: eOASys Assessment Notes (abridged) on Care Experiences

Case	Care recorded?	eOASys assessment notes (abridged)
1	Yes	Suffered physical abuse as a child and was placed in a care home due to his behavioural difficulties. It seems these difficulties may have evolved and remain as psychological issues.
2	Yes	Been in care since 9 months old. Has struggled to develop relationships with family members. Case blames parents for his predicament and is annoyed that they did not support him. Tells of a chaotic and isolated upbringing.
3	Yes	Case is angry at his mother and is upset with Local Authority for leaving him in the family home for some time.
4	Yes	Unsettled upbringing after leaving mother's home at 14 years of age to find his estranged father and brother. Case was abused (physically) when he met his father and then placed into care, where he began to commit offences.
5	No	No reference to care status. Extensive reference to mental health problems and experiences of abuse (sexual).
6	Yes	Unsettling upbringing. Taken into care of the local authority at 1 year of age (due to neglect) until 18 years. Experienced 32 different placements. Disruptive manner due to experiences - feels let down by adults.
7	Yes	Describes a poor childhood and was taken into the care system at 7 years of age. Separated from two sisters, reports mother was alcohol dependant.
8	No	No reference to care status.
9	Yes	Mother had difficulties with drugs, placed in care for a number of years (5) until the age of 18 years old. Witnessed DV perpetrated against mother resulting in his removal.
10	Yes	Death of mother resulted in case being taken into care. Has siblings who are also in care.
11	Yes	Case resentful of mother after being placed into care and began self-harming. Registered as Child Protection case due to mother's abuse (physical). "[I]t seems behaviour can be attributed to difficulties in childhood."
12	Yes	Case describes a difficult childhood. Father suffered mental health problems and an abusive family home. Put into care as family could not cope with his behaviour. Experience has impacted upon his emotional wellbeing and mental health.
13	Yes	Difficult and turbulent childhood. Taken into care at the age of 20 months and has moved across Manchester whilst in care. No contact with father, mother passed away when he was 14 years of age.
14	Yes	Yes (looked after child) reference to Care Leavers Association (CLA) - "good relationship with both sets of parents".
15	Yes	(Extensive notes) Parents separated when 2 years old and then taken into care when aged 10 years old. Mother died when he was 12 years old - "difficult to deal with". Resentful of (older) siblings who appear to have moved on with their lives.

The table offers a sobering reminder of the array of personal and emotional problems experienced and endured by the care leavers within this study. Yet this important contextual information is not always accounted for in actuarial tools where needs and risks are often conflated. Some of the accounts above point towards ‘unsettling’ childhoods, traumatic experiences of abuse (physical, emotional and sexual), neglect and rejection. Unsurprisingly, the eOASys comments highlight feelings of anger and resentment to family members and adults, which in turn may be related to (comparatively) increased emotional and substance (drug and alcohol) misuse experienced by care leavers. Finally, we note that a high level of problems with attitudes, thinking and behaviour and lifestyle may be associated with childhood experiences.

To reiterate, given the personal, social and criminogenic problems endured by the care leaver group, it is evident that interventions must be cognisant of the multiplicity of care leaver problems and needs. Second, interventions require a specific expertise in order to respond sensitively to the particular needs (including past experience) of care leavers. Finally, assisting care leavers to ‘make sense’ and take ownership of their history and backgrounds is important for delicately alleviating ‘barriers’ to support a process of change. It is these very issues that Clear Approach is designed to identify and address.

Clear Approach: Commencement and Completion

Nine care leavers *commenced* the intervention. Explanations for non-commencement attest to an array of organisational and practice factors that have a bearing on the rate of throughput and the level of attrition through Clear Approach. To elaborate, two care leavers were not ‘timetabled’ to attend Clear Approach and therefore did not have the opportunity to access the intervention. Some were recorded as not wanting to take part, whilst others had been returned to custody for either breaching their order or because they were awaiting sentence on further offences that they had been accused of.

Of the nine care leavers that commenced Clear Approach, five were recorded as completing. For the purposes of this report, ‘completion’ is defined as attendance at 5 or more timetabled sessions. In other words, this applied to participants who attended at least 50% of the scheduled sessions. In light of the voluntary status of the intervention including the additional demands placed upon programme engagement, this is regarded as a positive finding.

Comparatively, care leavers who completed the intervention (n=5) were on average slightly older when they entered the care system. Meanwhile, the non-completer group (n=4) had a higher number of convictions (at both under and over 18 years of age) and as such present with a higher ‘risk’ of future offending behaviour. Overall, the offending behaviour pattern for those care leavers who completed Clear Approach was less serious. Further, levels of ‘need’ as measured through eOASys are lower for those care leavers who completed Clear Approach, particularly on the dimensions of *accommodation*. Meanwhile, *relationships*, *alcohol* (use) and (pro-criminal) *attitudes* were assessed as greater for the non-completer group. Whilst the numbers involved are small, the data above suggests that increased specialist support may well be required for those care leavers who present with a more serious offence history and increased needs.

The Perspectives of Young Men

Background

We interviewed six young men for this project, and they were aged between 18 and 25 years old. Four of our interviewees had participated in Clear Approach, and two had been referred as care leavers but not taken part⁷. As indicated in the earlier methodology section, there were a number of challenges in accessing willing interviewees. Some basic details for those young men we did speak with are provided in Table 2 below, which shows that most had experienced a combination of both foster and residential care placements. All names presented below have been changed in order to ensure anonymity.

Table 2: Young Men Interviewed

Name	Age	Age on Entry to Care	Placement Type
Max	19	15	Foster & Residential
Craig	25	2	Foster & Residential
Joe	24	8	Foster & Residential
Aiden	21	1	Foster & Hostel
Greg	18	14	Residential
Jake	23	10	Foster & Residential

Note the ages on entry to care in the table above which are fairly diverse and range from 1 to 15. Two of our respondents had entered care in infancy, and a further two at age 10 or under. This seems to call into question the popular assumption that children in care who get into trouble generally enter the care system in adolescence when challenging behaviour has already been established. This was simply not the case for four of our six care leavers.

In terms of placement stability, an issue now recognised as crucial in promoting positive outcomes in care, one young person reported having had one placement, another had had two, whilst a third remembered having had 4 or 5 placements. The remaining three care leavers reported experiencing between 20 and 40 different placements each during their time in the care system which is clearly of serious concern.

Whilst some of the young men were able to describe key people in the care system that they had had a good relationship with, for example, a foster carer, overall there was a sense that being in care had not been a positive time.

“Well all my life in care, I’ve never been relaxed, like I’ve always been kicked out of placement to placement, and it’s just been like that all me life”. (Aiden, aged 21)

“I was a bad runaway. And did everything I could to get away from care...I was moved all over...and they just got sick of me keep running back home, so they kept on moving me further afield”. (Jake, aged 23)

⁷ One of these individuals worked full-time and so was unable to participate. Meanwhile, the other young man had never been timetabled to take part.

One young man raised the issue of picking up a criminal record because of the routine prosecution of minor offences in some children's homes

"..(I)n foster care I wasn't getting that much in trouble, but in care homes you get in more trouble, say if like you smashed a glass or whatever, they get you done for criminal damage and that's where it starts, your criminal record". (Joe, aged 24)

Joe was very clear that being in care had impacted upon him in this way, and indeed serious concerns over the unnecessarily criminalisation of children in care have recently been highlighted by policy makers as well as by criminal justice practitioners (see The Magistrates' Association, 2013).

After Care Support

Regardless of experiences whilst in the care system, research shows that the leaving care experience itself and the transition to independent living is often a key turning point for young people (Schofield et al, 2014). When managed well, young people feel supported throughout the process and know that they have someone to turn to for guidance and advice. When managed poorly, young people feel effectively abandoned by their local authority and the system that claimed to 'care' for them (see House of Commons Justice Committee, 2013).

Some of the young men that we spoke to were more fortunate than others in relation to their care experience. Joe resisted attempts to place him in a hostel at age 18, and his foster carer agreed to keep him on at her own cost until he was allocated a place on the housing list.

"Me social worker tried to put me in that hostel...when I left care, and I said, I said no right. I put me foot down...I said 'listen, if you put me in a hostel, it will be full of crack heads, you're going to make me worse off'." (Joe, aged 24)

Others were not so fortunate, and homelessness was a common theme shortly after they left care. For Max, being homeless was clearly linked to his offending.

"I know they think once you're a criminal you're always a criminal, but that's not the way. Just certain things go on in your life and you think fuck it, what have I got to live for? Fuck it I'm just going to do this, I'm just going to do that. And I was homeless at the time, like when I was doing this class A thing. I was homeless, I had nowhere to live. I thought you know what, what have I got to live for? So I was getting money, I had somewhere to live, it was a bonus. I know it wasn't right at the time, and I've realised that, but everything I done was for a reason". (Max, aged 19)

Jake was also homeless after leaving care and echoed the comments above about young people living rough on the streets selling drugs to survive.

"I've had bad things done to me on the streets, where I've nearly been raped myself...People don't see what's actually happening on the streets...The people who don't have no families or people who are getting abused at home, badly abused, they're all in town, and they get mixed up with each other and they're getting forced into doing stuff like selling drugs and selling themselves to live to survive...Or getting sent to prison because they're scared of people on the streets...It might sound stupid, but people feel safe in prison. You've got three meals a day, you've got telly, you've got people what are going to watch you and make sure you're alright". (Jake, aged 23)

Jake had been in care since he was 10 years old and his comments highlight something of the often interconnected experiences of victimisation and offending amongst care leavers, which are illustrated very clearly in our earlier e-OASys-based profile of care leavers. In addition, the common theme of care leavers finding prison a safe place is a damning indictment of the after-care support available to them. Overall, the lives of the young men we spoke to were chaotic in many ways, often characterised by experiences of sleeping rough, poverty, mental illness, poor education, unemployment and very little support upon leaving the care system.

Clear Approach: Confidence and Trust

Perhaps not surprisingly given the instability in their lives, a lack of confidence and self-esteem was evident in some of the young men's stories.

"It's tough going through school knowing that you're just a foster kid or what not. And being called a foster kid when you're walking out with your, like when you go in Asda or something with your foster carer and they say this is your foster son. It just makes you feel little you know what I mean". (Aiden, aged 21)

Yet one respondent was very clear that this was something that involvement in Clear Approach had helped him with.

"I like it yeah, forces out my confidence, because before I done care leavers' group and talked to Jason I had no confidence. But then he told me to stop dwelling in the past and just try. It's always going to be in the back of me head...the stuff what's happened, but you just have to move on and do something...So I took a lot on board and I spoke to my worker, asked them to put me onto a team and within a week built my CV up and the experience I've done in care and what I've done over the years and I got offered a job within a week". (Jake, aged 23)

The care leavers we spoke to seemed to particularly appreciate the 'user voice' that was emphasised in Clear Approach, with the intervention being delivered primarily by a facilitator who had also been in care and had user-experience of the criminal justice system. (The perceived importance of a user-led model was also highlighted in Clarke et al's (2014) recent report on 'family work' for Greater Manchester Probation Trust). There was a sense that this gave the facilitator a certain amount of credibility and authenticity, and in many ways this made the work what it was.

"Because he knows what we're talking about...Cos if say no one's been in care and you're talking to them, they don't know how you feel and they don't know how it is in care 'cos they've never been in that situation. So it's like if someone else has been in care themselves, then obviously they'll understand where you're coming from. So that was pretty helpful as well". (Joe, aged 24)

"To someone that's not been in care and not been in trouble, it's different for them. They don't know what it's like". (Greg, aged 18)

"(I)it was important because I felt like he knew where I was coming from and that's something we need, like someone who's been through what we've been through so you can talk to them on a level". (Max, aged 19)

The user-perspective emphasised through the work of The Care Leavers' Association combines with their very specialist knowledge of 'care' issues and legislation to offer something quite distinct from the more generic family support projects that may be available to young men on an IAC order. The

user perspective was also evident in the group sessions in Clear Approach which included some 'guest' talks from care leavers who had been through the prison system. For example, one of the sessions involved hearing from a care leaver who had been sentenced to 16 years in prison, and another involved a motivational talk from a care leaver who was currently in an open prison. Such talks were designed to enable participants to think about the possible long-term consequences of offending behaviour.

"Cos he brought some guy in, he'd just done a 16 year stretch and that was pretty interesting...so that's a pretty long time, and he's like 36 now and all his life is ruined, plus he's got a baby, he said he's got a baby and he's not even been to the first scan, he's not even seen it grow up...and the kid thinks he's a stranger...he said it only started off like little crimes, and it started to get into big crimes, fire arms, robberies, armed robberies and all that. And he's been in care, and he got worse and worse and last time he got a 16 year stretch for an armed robbery. So it's scary man". (Joe, aged 24)

The Chance to Talk: Group Work and One to One sessions

Overall, those who took part in Clear Approach clearly valued the chance to talk, and hear from others who had been in care. Interestingly, one participant, whilst very positive about the intervention overall, commented that he found the one-to-one sessions difficult because of the issues that they raised for him personally.

"That went really deep, like it brought too much back...cos I've got feelings that I've not told no-one. I don't want to tell no-one, but it started bringing me up and, it was helpful in a way, but I preferred the group work because it's not just speaking about myself...In the group work speaking about each other...we were...helping each other with our own problems". (Jake, aged 23)

Jake's comments highlight the need for those delivering interventions like Clear Approach to be very aware of the impact that just talking can have on vulnerable young men with traumatic past experiences, and that there may be a need to ensure that follow-up support is available. Interestingly, Jake later went on to note how talking on a one-to-one basis, with a facilitator to write things down, had also helped him to "make sense" of his own history to some extent. This highlights one of the really key benefits of the project.

Others valued the chance to give their general opinion about aspects of life in the care system.

"It was just about just a chat really, about what can improve in care homes and stuff like that. Then he asked me my point of view. I said they needed to work on the staff who are in these care homes. It's not the care home, it's the staff what are in these care homes what you need to sort out". (Joe, aged 24)

In terms of thinking about how to improve Clear Approach, another participant suggested that it would have been useful to have more individuals involved in the group work sessions, and noted the lack of attendance at some sessions.

"More people attend the group session, more people basically." (Max, aged 19)

However, perhaps a certain amount of erratic attendance is inevitable in light of the chaotic lives that some of the participants clearly had.

“I attended nearly all the sessions, apart from when I got homeless and then I couldn’t focus straight. When I’m in that state of mind I can’t be around people, cos me illness, starts triggering off it”. (Jake, aged 23)

As Jake’s comments highlight, there were sometimes very good reasons for individuals not attending all of the scheduled sessions, which were nothing to do with the quality of the programme itself.

The Impact of Clear Approach

It is of course difficult to ascertain the direct impact made by any criminal justice based intervention on offending behaviour, given the vast number of other variables that may also be at play, and this is certainly beyond the scope of the research presented here⁸. However, some of our respondents were very much of the view that involvement in Clear Approach had had a positive impact on their lives, and this impact was evident in a number of different ways.

According to Jake, his involvement in the intervention had made him begin to think differently.

“It made me feel a lot more better in meself, like everyone else might of wiped their hands of me, but I can still do something about it...cos he [the facilitator] put it across like, you’re responsible for your own actions, you can’t keep blaming your past and living in your past, and it made me see that you have the choice and that you own your own mind, basically. Like if a lad says to you ‘you want to come out and rob something?’, you have the right to say no. You don’t have to do it”. (Jake, aged 23)

Others had achieved more tangible outcomes as a result of taking part in Clear Approach. One of the aims of the intervention was to ensure that individuals were aware of any leaving care support that they might be entitled to, given the evidence that care leavers who come into contact with the criminal justice system often fail to receive this (Fitzpatrick, 2014). For 19-year old Max, having the support of the facilitator beyond the programme itself, led to a very significant outcome, whereby Max got a leaving care advisor as well as the leaving care grant that he was entitled to - which came to over £1600.

“...(H)e helped me, like when we had a meeting. He sat in a meeting...and he was like throwing questions at the leaving care worker, and the leaving care worker didn’t know where to put his face because these questions. I wouldn’t ask because all I’m used to getting is ‘nope’. But when he was telling them the questions, he [the leaving care worker] is like ‘yeah we could work around that, we could come to some sort of agreement’. And my heart was buzzing cos I’ve never seen a leaving care worker like that”. (Max, aged 19)

Max’s experience highlights how crucial it is for care leavers (and particularly those involved in the criminal justice system) to have an advocate and somebody who will fight their corner. Without such a person, it is very easy for individuals to miss out on much-needed financial and other support that they are entitled to under current leaving care legislation. Furthermore, because the legislation in this area is quite complex, it is clear that the kind of specialist support described above can only be provided by those with a detailed knowledge of relevant policy.

⁸ Clarke et al’s report (2014) begins to identify more intermediate outcome measures relating to family and identity that may be more appropriate to consider than ‘reoffending’ when considering the impact of interventions.

In contrast to the above examples, Joe's story is slightly different again, in that as a direct result of taking part in Clear Approach, he obtained voluntary work with the Care Leavers' Association (CLA) for two days a week once the intervention had ended. In addition, he reported that the CLA were helping him look into doing voluntary work with some young offenders. Joe notes his interest in Clear Approach encouraged him to stay on.

"If it was boring I would have said to Jason 'I don't want to know', but it was pretty interesting what he was saying to me, what he does, so that pretty interested me. So that's why I stayed on...So now he's trying to help me...to try and get voluntary work up there...Two days up there and two days there. It builds me CV up then, if I've been doing voluntary work at two places it will look good on me CV, cos I want to get a full time job". (Joe, aged 24)

Interestingly, Joe noted how his involvement with Clear Approach had helped him *in conjunction with* the help that he received as a result of his IAC order, whereby he was getting help with his dyslexia and learning to read. On the support he had received as a result of being on an IAC, he noted:

"Cos I've got dyslexia and they're helping me with reading and all that and it's getting me up to scratch now, so they're helping me with that twice a week, plus me council who I live with, they're helping me as well, so it's not that bad really". (Joe, aged 24)

The emphasis on receiving support for future training and employment was also emphasised by Greg. According to him, the most helpful part of being on an IAC order was:

"Like in the ICT suite like 'cos there'll be people to help you make a CV, help you search for jobs and stuff, and apply for jobs over the phone and help you with all that kind of stuff really. Help you with any of that really, that's probably the best bit about it, getting a lot of support from them and that". (Greg, aged 18)

When asked if he would recommend Clear Approach to other care leavers in his position, Max responded:

"Yeah, definitely, because it helps to talk about what you've not been able to talk about before. Like I don't know if that goes for other care leavers, but me I just keep things in my head and just let it build up and when it builds up I flip, and I just do things that piss other people off, like for example piss the police off...Like I have come in here (to the IAC office) and flipped once...But since then I've been happy and that, this place has made me, it's helped me a lot". (Max, aged 19)

Max was not the only young person who felt this positively about Clear Approach. This emphasis on young men being helped by Clear Approach in conjunction with their wider IAC order is a theme that also arose in our interviews with key stakeholders. Overall, the user-led focus and the configuration of the intervention which allows for one-to-one sessions to be consolidated in group discussions highlight the unique nature of Clear Approach. The voices of young men who took part in this programme provide powerful evidence of the positive impact that this could have on individuals.

The Perspectives of Key Stakeholders

In this section we highlight some of the key themes emerging from our interviews with 11 key stakeholders. Five of these stakeholders could broadly be termed as 'strategic managers' and were accessed from the IAC project and the Care Leavers' Association. The remaining six stakeholders we term as 'practitioners', and these included Probation Officers, Probation Service Officers, (external) agency mentors and support staff.

Lack of Knowledge and Understanding about Care Leavers

A key theme to emerge from the very outset was the general lack of knowledge and understanding about care leaver issues amongst stakeholders. Addressing this was crucial in terms of identifying which young men were even eligible for referral to Clear Approach.

"The key thing to supporting...the key thing is to give somebody who's come from the care system the permission to talk about who they are, where they're from and where they want to be, without offender managers misunderstanding it and misinterpreting it as an excuse for offending behaviour...There are lots of prerequisites in terms of that care leaver being able to do that and one of them has got to be the offender manager being aware of what a care leaver is". (Stakeholder 5)

"Cos if I'm honest, I knew nothing about this as an agenda item until I spoke to Jason about care leavers...We didn't even capture it as a piece of information with our clients". (Stakeholder 10)

This lack of knowledge and understanding was one of the things that the presence of the CLA at the IAC office aimed to address.

"I think one of the things that Care Leavers' Association brought was just like better understanding, some of the knowledge of the details of things like legislation which is important, or where to go to get to x, I can never remember, it's complicated. But some of it is just an understanding about how important it is to take into account personalised history when it comes to care experience". (Stakeholder 3)

Interestingly, one of the factors that contributed to the lack of knowledge about care leaver issues was an apparent fear of raising 'care' issues in the first place.

"(W)hen someone is telling you something that is sometimes quite scary, certainly emotive, emotional. If someone's saying 'I was abused, this happened and some of that abuse took place while I was in care, it wasn't just about before', then it's difficult to sometimes know how to reply to that...It raised an issue for us about training, about how we speak to people now and communicate...How do we engage? How do we show that we care without reinforcing a particular perspective if someone's on a downward spiral, if you put your arm around them and go "it's going to be alright" when it clearly isn't going to be alright, or you might actually make them worse, so it's all that. And I remember staff saying 'oh it's a real minefield isn't it" and it's all those phrases. And because it's just couched in all those phrases, I've got to say I use them myself, and then it just made us all a bit scared to try and get there". (Stakeholder 10)

Such concerns undoubtedly contribute to the fact that care leaver issues have frequently been neglected in the sphere of criminal justice.

“It’s not been high priority or any priority sometimes when it comes to policy and direction and instruction and even assessment systems. It’s kind of like one of the things that’s ignored. Who knows properly why? I think some of it is they thought it wasn’t that important when actually it’s incredibly important. I think some of it is possibly concern about how to do it. When do you ask? Are they going to want to say? Should you be asking? Is it personal? How do you record it?...I think there’s some genuine concern about labelling, but for me it’s not about saying tick a box that’s someone’s identity. It’s about just we call it someone’s life experience, which is very different, should be very different”. (Stakeholder 3)

However, there were a number of other related concerns too that clearly weighed on the minds of practitioners when they encountered individuals for the very first time in the induction process.

The Induction Process

Staff identified the induction meeting as the point at which to gather information to inform the needs and ‘package of support’ for the young person. It was noted that the induction was often quite a lengthy process, with an hour’s appointment usually required as a minimum. This included asking the young person the ‘care’ question. However, there was some discussion as to whether the induction was the appropriate space within which to explore care leaver status for offenders subjected to supervision.

“...we pull out a form and go ‘oh care leavers, have you ever been in care?’ And then it’s a yes or a no. [If a] young person just gets that sprung on them in a volley of other forms then how is that positive? Plus the fact I think, for young people in YOS [Youth Offending Service] at the moment [who] are in residential care, their understanding of the care system is probably greater than maybe some of the young adults that have temporarily been placed there... when they were 6 years old. So what they understand by care or what they deem as care might be different. So my view is that young people associate care with being in a care home for x amount of months. They don’t associate that with being temporarily placed overnight or foster care or other placements or private fostering”. (Stakeholder 6)

The above quote raises the very important issue of how to define a ‘care leaver’ and suggests that such definitions may vary between young people. It is arguable that such definitions may also vary between practitioners depending on their perceptions and understanding. In addition, there is an issue concerning the point at which the practitioner deems it appropriate to introduce the ‘care leaver question’. It is evident that the induction process is driven by an organisational need to gather data for monitoring and case recording purposes, including action planning and supervision objectives to resolve more immediate and pressing problems.

For one practitioner, the induction involves:

“...an assessment about their past, where they are now and where they might hope to be. Part of that assessment, one of the questions that’s asked, ‘have you been in care?’ Not necessarily first appointment but that’s when we come up with some mentor actions. So it might be that they come to me and they’re a job seeker. But say they haven’t got their initial appointment with the job centre, so that might be me first intervention. Then it’s helping them maintain looking for work, everything that goes with that....Or they haven’t got a CV, they can’t send an email. At that stage we also do a literacy and numeracy assessment so it would tell us and the

offender manager where they're at with their maths and English. ...we might refer them to the skills tutor to improve their maths and English and promote that if they are a low level... 'cos if they're looking at employment they're going to struggle. Could be that they've got a housing need or they might say to me that they want a job, they really want to look for work but they're not quite sure how to. But whilst they want that and they're trying to do that then they have a really big substance misuse issue. So they might come into me and be under the influence of cannabis and smoke heavily every night and day, so that becomes an immediate issue". (Stakeholder 11)

The above quotation illustrates the array of complex and competing objectives, which may restrict the identification of the care leaver's status within the induction process. Although the 'care question' is acknowledged it is subsumed under a deluge of other factors, priorities and needs which may appear as more pressing and therefore worthy of resolution. As a result, for practitioners the exploration of care status may be considered as of lower importance than the pressing 'practical' problems experienced and endured by the generic IAC cohort within the early stages of the supervision process.

Finally, for some interviewees, the exploration of care leaver status was considered to be too 'sensitive' an issue to raise within the constraints of the induction session. In addition and as inferred earlier, the induction session is the point at which the practitioner commences the process of offender motivation – seen as critical in facilitating offender compliance and engagement. As such, to introduce the sensitive matter of care leaver status was thought to be potentially negative and may reduce levels of offender motivation. Yet this of course raises issues about how we assess, identify and respond to individual needs. Again, the care question was conceptualised as a subject that some young people may not want to (re)visit.

"People that have been in care...some people that have been in care have had a traumatic experience, a breakup of families, abuse, mistreatment and all that kind of stuff. So I do not feel I should be touching on those grounds if I've only met the guy for the first 20 minutes, he doesn't know me from Adam, who the hell am I to push him into something which he knows about, which I have no idea about and try and encourage him to do it [the Clear Approach programme] when he doesn't know me? I've got to build that relationship up over a period of time with that person". (Stakeholder 8)

Note the comment about pushing someone into something "which I have no idea about". This appears to be yet another indication that some stakeholders felt that they lacked sufficient knowledge in this area.

Lack of Understanding about Clear Approach: Contradictions & Conflicts

A further key theme to emerge from our interviews was that running in parallel with the lack of understanding about care leaver issues in general, was a lack of understanding by some about the Clear Approach intervention itself.

According to one stakeholder:

"It just feels a little bit hushed away the care leavers thing. It felt like a secret group. And I think a lot of staff felt that if you haven't got someone on it, you didn't really understand what was going on, whereas Cannabis group and things like that, far more transparent". (Stakeholder 6)

The idea of Clear Approach being perceived as a 'secret group' is obviously of concern, particularly given that the CLA had gone to some lengths to brief IAC staff about the aims and purpose of Clear Approach. Of course, in order for Clear Approach to run successfully and in the way that it was intended to, it was crucial that practitioners did understand exactly what the intervention was intended to achieve. As one stakeholder noted:

"(T)he relationship between the offender manager and the young person is integral to getting them to come along to meetings, cos that relationship is where everything is based, where everything feeds in from and out from. If that offender manager is not on course with your programme and your work, then they're not going to be able to persuade that young person. With the best motivation in the world, they cannot persuade a young person to come to a programme they're not able to inform that young person about". (Stakeholder 5)

It was further noted that it was not easy to get all offender managers to 'buy in' to the Clear Approach training and awareness session that was delivered to them. Another stakeholder noted:

"(T)hey're maybe quite protective of their work, and because this was a new area for them, in a sense they didn't know a lot about it, slightly suspicious and protectionist". (Stakeholder 7)

Yet for offender managers, the challenges related to buying-in to the intervention and identifying care leavers were compounded further by the resource constraints of time.

"We're pushed for time. I've got to say it, we're pushed. There's loads of work that we've got to go through and this [Clear Approach] was an extra load for us to take on board. Initially it was like 'yeah ok, we'll do what we can, we'll gather the names', which they did do. But there wasn't no vigour in it, there wasn't no excitement about it and I understand that because the amount of work that an OM has to go through in a day, it's quite vast so an extra load to identify, to encourage, to support and so on, on top of what you're already doing. For some it was a bit of a 'do we have to do this?' And I understand that, 'cos I felt like that meself to be honest, do I have to do this? To be honest, it was one of those, we had to do it and it got done. We did it kicking and screaming but it got done". (Stakeholder 8)

The quote offers a valuable insight into the challenges of contemporary probation practice and may indicate the potential challenges that inhibit the systematic identification of care leavers within the Criminal Justice System. Clearly there can be challenges in promoting any new intervention, however it is important to acknowledge the wider social and policy context in which offender managers and related practitioners were working in. 'Probation' has recently undergone a huge restructuring, which has resulted in the effective dismantling of the service in its traditional form⁹. Informal discussions with managers revealed that this wider context had created a period of great uncertainty amongst practitioners, and in combination with a number of recent staff changes, it was a very difficult climate to be working in.

That said, and despite the comments above which indicate that getting the buy-in of all practitioners was not always straightforward, there was a clear recognition amongst management that the involvement of CLA at the IAC office had highlighted some hitherto unrecognised issues relating to the criminal records of care leavers.

⁹ Under recent Coalition government policy, 'low risk' offenders are now to be supervised by the private sector, whilst 'high risk' offenders will remain the responsibility of a new National Probation Service (NPS), who will work alongside Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs).

“The other kind of thing that’s been highlighted through the work we’ve been doing with CLA...is that a lot of convictions that happen in a young adults life happen within the care home, and would that behaviour be criminalised if they were at home? So throw a bottle on the floor in a care home – criminal damage! Throw a bottle in the home, mum’s probably not going to call the police. So it’s about that up-tariffing of those and how we deal with that”.
(Stakeholder 6)

This comment about the prosecution of minor offences in some care homes not only relates back to the experiences of some of the young men we interviewed, but also highlights how the presence of the CLA at IAC, and the very specialist knowledge and support that they brought with them, helped to improve understanding of the some of the key issues relating to care leavers.

The Needs of Care Leavers

Although practitioners were at pains to express that the needs of care leavers were similar to the wider generic IAC caseload, it was evident that additional problems are present. A central problem identified concerned the absence of wider networks of support to which young people can turn in times of trouble.

“(S)o he’s homeless, he’s got a 17 year old partner who’s expecting their first child. There’s no money, there’s no income, so pretty much he’s come with really complex needs...[A] lot of the time it’s housing, because they don’t have that support network to fall back on.....They also don’t really have a lot of guidance, a lot of them their relationship has broken down with their Barnardo’s worker, their care leaver worker. So they’re a bit lost really when they come here and they’re the ones that we’ve seen who are not claiming, have no housing, all the support around them has totally broken down and they’re wandering through the criminal justice system..”. (Stakeholder 1)

There was also recognition of the need to provide *sustained* support for young men who had been in care.

“Young people who have been in care obviously, there’s the oppressions which they experience. They’re not always startlingly obvious, [A] lad leaves care, suddenly he’s 18, 19 years old, the stigma...of going through that system isn’t obvious amongst a peer group, the peer group which have also been in care, also struggling to make ends meet [in a] working class type of environment. But it’s when you start stepping [outside] of those parts of society, when it becomes more obvious. And it could be the minor things, such as, if your educational development has been restricted, if you want or there’s been a barrier there because of all the troubles you face, you’re then going to look to improve your academic status if you want, or your work and your skills, that’s when what happened in the past starts hitting home”.
(Stakeholder 2)

Furthermore, there was a perception that young people who have been in care tended to keep themselves to themselves more, and that practitioners needed to build a closer relationship with care leavers in order “to actually get them to actually trust you enough to speak about it”. As we outlined earlier, criminogenic needs are often more pronounced and acute for those individuals identified as care leavers. Yet despite this finding, we also found that there was some ambivalence as to whether or not practitioners thought there should be ‘specific’ interventions for care leavers.

“Just that maybe the young person might feel that they’ve been singled out...So I guess, not that we would, put them in boxes but they may not necessarily want to be put in another box,

another 'we'll put you in the you're a care leaver box, but we'll put you in you've come from a stable background box', as well as an offending box and everything else that other labels they've picked up along the way". (Stakeholder 11)

For some practitioners then there was a need to minimise what was perceived as the potentially stigmatising effects that accompanies the identification of care leavers. There was therefore a reluctance to place the young offender in yet another 'box'. Paradoxically, this was set against an acknowledgement of greater problems and criminogenic 'needs' for those young men with care leaver experience. Clearly, this was a tension for practitioners, which many disclosed they had struggled to reconcile.

Barriers to Participation

As mentioned earlier in our report, there were a number of barriers to individuals participating in the pilot phase of Clear Approach that were emphasised by our interviewees. In particular, the failure to identify all relevant young men during their induction represented a major barrier to the participation of young men in Clear Approach from the very outset. It also highlighted a discrepancy between the apparent buy-in to the programme of managers and the actual practice on the ground.

"If you can't identify who is and who is not a care leaver, then we don't know who we're going to be working with. And if the managers are putting in processes that we've worked with them on to ensure identification is happening, but offender managers are not implementing it, then it just all gets undermined to begin with anyway". (Stakeholder 5)

The chaotic lives of the care leavers on an IAC order, which clearly emerged through the analysis of OASys data and our interviews with young men, were also highlighted as a barrier to young people's sustained participation in a structured intervention.

"(H)aving a 10 week structured programme built around young people that have got chaotic lives doesn't work...you could work with a young person, have a fantastic session with them one week and expect them to come back at the exact same time next week, but so many things have happened between that week and the next week, they've lost their house or they've been kicked out by their mum or someone's beat them up or they've committed another offence or so on and so forth, that you end up losing that young person. But also, even if they do have a good week from beginning to end, a good week to them is very different to a good week to me and you. So getting them back in each time, it's almost like you're going back to square one. You have to re-motivate them". (Stakeholder 5)

There were some obvious tensions here in designing an intervention that had a certain amount of structure whilst also retaining sufficient flexibility to take account of the context of the young men's daily lives.

"I guess for the content point of view, it is we don't know what that person's experience is, who's going to be sitting in front of us, so it has to be quite, it's not too complicated and it's not too simple, it's kind of in the middle really. It's flexible enough for the worker to be able to pitch it to wherever that young person is coming from, but it's got to be responsive to that young person, you know, so it has to be, on the one hand you've got to show the Probation Trust that actually this is a thought through process and there is some cause and effect principles in it, but actually some of it is also about what's the young person bringing to us?". (Stakeholder 7)

It appears that there were a number of different barriers to individuals participating in the pilot phase of Clear Approach that related to the nature of their own lives, the structured nature of the intervention, as well as the failure of some practitioners to identify care leaver status from the outset and timetable young men for appointments. In addition, some care-leavers breached their IAC order and were sent to custody during the programme.

The User Perspective

A further key theme identified by our strategic managers was the importance of the user perspective, whereby the personal experience of the project facilitator was regarded as a key issue in relation to being viewed as credible by the young men involved in Clear Approach. This links in directly with the comments made by the care leavers that we interviewed, and also raises some interesting questions – not only in thinking about ‘what works?’ in delivering criminal justice programmes and interventions, but also perhaps as importantly, ‘who works?’ (cf. Clarke et al, 2014).

“It’s the user perspective that matters, but it’s also about the individual that delivers it as well...It’s about being able to use that user perspective such that you present it in a way which empowers them. It doesn’t glorify who you are or where you’re from or your offending. It says to them look...I’ve been where you are and I am where I am today through hard work and sheer determination, and through effort. And people do sit back and they look and they think do you know what, you’ve just taken away every excuse that I’ve got for not getting anywhere in life. And if you can use it in that way it’s empowering... they just grow and grow and grow and grow in self-esteem, week in week out when they come and speak to you, they become more and more comfortable and as they become more comfortable the conversation grows. And I guess that happens for any practitioner, user led or not, but being user led, if you’re able to use that experience of who you are in a very specific way, people relate to that ...It gives you credibility straight away”. (Stakeholder 5)

The credibility of the facilitator, and the specialist skills and knowledge that they brought with them to the project, were clearly a key factor in how the intervention was viewed by others. Overwhelmingly, and regardless of individual understanding of the Clear Approach intervention, key stakeholders were very positive about the impact of the facilitator.

“...Jason is very passionate about what he does and he was advocating if you want to the other agencies to get more involved. And sometimes it’s the quiet lads who are the vulnerable ones who are not making that noise. So thankfully Jason’s like, ‘this needs doing, that needs doing’, and he’s [the young person] got an interview for a job, did the interview and it was quite a success if you want because by the end of the order, he still came in after the order to do the exit strategy if you will, but it was a good experience really for me in my [Probation Officer] role to see that”. (Stakeholder 2)

“I think there is a place for him here as part of the core team...his ability to speak to them, at a level we can’t, just can unlock something. Yesterday, he was engaging, he was in here for ages. Normally the clients have got itchy feet after about 15, 20 minutes, jumping up, gassing and cig breaks, give them food. And we don’t begrudge doing these things if it helps them settle and feel comfortable with us, but they sat in here for ages having that conversation. And I don’t know what level of detail was going on there but it unlocks something very important for them, ‘cos it allows us then to do the ETE [Education, Training & Employment] work and to do all that, so the offender manager gets the benefit....we’re as a project lucky to have some good

staff across the board, but to have someone say “I’ve been there”, it’s a different level isn’t it”?
(Stakeholder 10)

Indeed, there emerged a clear sense that the intervention was able to facilitate the engagement and compliance of the participants.

“...(T)hey were having someone that they could relate to, a lot of the lads they’d turn up for Jason and they’d miss everything else, one of mine in particular, like he wouldn’t turn up for anything but he’d respond to Jason, he’d turn up for Clear Approach, but we’d lost him engagement wise on the rest of the order. So he was finding something that he could relate to in that group”. (Stakeholder 1)

The disclosure that the programme was able to retain the engagement and compliance of some participants despite their lack of engagement with other requirements of the IAC order is a powerful endorsement of Clear Approach. Furthermore, there was certainly a general consensus amongst the young men and practitioners that the ‘user perspective’ that came with the delivery of the intervention was incredibly valuable. Yet arguably the facilitator had a particular skill set in being able to “unlock something very important” in the young men he spoke to that went beyond just having personal experience to draw upon. In thinking about how an intervention like Clear Approach might be replicated elsewhere, it is clear that the role of facilitator is key as is the question of ‘who works?’ in delivering an intervention of this kind.

The Impact of Clear Approach: The Perspectives of Key Stakeholders

In considering the potential impact of Clear Approach, strategic managers emphasised a number of issues, including the fact that they felt the intervention was delivered in a very respectful way.

“(L)istening to a few of the service users who accessed it was the most interesting bit. And it was good, and I got the impression that they felt it was very respectful and important bit of their time on this project. It was run in a very respectful way is what I’m saying. It felt like they were very mature in the way they were talking about it, very positive about it, and that’s exactly what I was wanting”. (Stakeholder 3)

The important issue of making visible those who are at particular risk of becoming lost in the criminal justice system was also highlighted, as was the theme of empowerment which very much underpinned the structure of Clear Approach.

“So that’s the positive thing I think with Clear Approach is that we’re getting hold of a group of young people who are lost in the criminal justice system as care-leavers, apparently invisible as care leavers. Finding them and empowering them to say ‘do you know what, yeah this is me, and my care experience is fundamental to who I am””. (Stakeholder 5)

‘I had three [young people] on the last Clear Approach and for them, they found a sense of unity from it, a bit of empowerment, one of mine said ‘oh I didn’t know I was entitled to that so I’m going to go to my Barnardo’s worker and I’m going to say so’’. (Stakeholder 1)

Significantly, this unity was accompanied by a sense of empowerment, which enabled and encouraged participants to take control of important aspects of their lives. It is clear that the empowerment process is initiated through the provision of knowledge and information that participants can utilise to confidently employ more pro-social self-seeking behaviours. Whilst Clear Approach was not designed specifically to reduce offending, its broader aims of empowerment can

clearly help motivate young people to change their behaviour. One stakeholder was particularly clear about how involvement in a programme like Clear Approach might help to facilitate the process of desistance.

“I think when people decide to stop committing crime, it’s a fairly big deal and it can come from all sorts of things and most of the time it’s a process. And I think part of the process is understanding yourself a little better and being able to put some of the negative stuff behind you, understand who you are and where you’ve come from and where you want to go, which is more important. That’s not an easy thing, that’s not an easy thing for anybody. But I think if someone’s had a care history then part of what I’ve just described needs to involve considering that as well I think”. (Stakeholder 3)

The need for improved self-understanding and moving beyond a negative past (cf. Maruna, 2001) was also emphasised by stakeholder 5.

“What it’s going to do is it’s going to allow people, with the right support in place from elsewhere, to make more positive choices, because what it does is it builds self-esteem, it empowers, it gets people to think positively about a negative. And the fact that you’ve come from here, the fact that you’ve lived this life is not something that you need to carry with you as baggage. It’s something that you can let go of, it’s something that you can use as a way to lift yourself up, and actually builds character within you. So don’t look at it negatively, look at it positively”. (Stakeholder 5)

Interestingly this relates directly to the comments of some of the young men interviewed. To conclude with the words of Jake (23):

“It made me feel a lot more better in meself...you can’t keep blaming your past and living in your past, and it made me see that you have the choice and that you own your own mind, basically”.

Conclusions

From the outset, this report has identified that care leavers in the criminal justice system are likely to have a number of criminogenic needs. Indeed our analysis of the OASys profile of the young men on IAC showed that those identified as care leavers were assessed as having greater needs on all OASys dimensions. The particular vulnerability of care leavers was also reinforced through our interviews with a sample of the young men. Within this context, the interplay of increased levels of personal, social and criminogenic needs linked with negative experiences of 'care' and the vulnerability of care leavers, thereby highlighting the complexity of problems for those care leavers under the supervision of the Criminal Justice System (CJS). A needs-focused analysis leaves us in little doubt that care leavers as a group are worthy of specific, specialist attention when they come into contact with the justice system. This of course links in with wider concerns over the potential of the care system to fail young people who come into conflict with the law (e.g. through unnecessary criminalisation) (see House of Commons Justice Committee, 2013).

Drawing primarily on a quantitative profile of care leavers in combination with 17 semi-structured interviews (6 with young men and 11 with practitioners), this report aimed to explore the pilot phase of Clear Approach. Clear approach is an intervention available to care leavers on an IAC order – and aims to explore the individual and group needs of care leavers. We are not aware of a programme specifically like this being delivered elsewhere in the country and in our view it is unique. But how useful is this unique intervention?

Our research has clearly demonstrated that there are a number of very positive features of the intervention. Firstly, the space to talk to someone about care experiences to someone else who had 'been there' was clearly valued by some of the young men we spoke with, particularly when they had very little conventional support available to them from elsewhere. Indeed, the 'user perspective' emphasised on Clear Approach was viewed as very important by both practitioners and young men. This aspect of the intervention reinforced the findings from previous studies (e.g. Williams, 2013) that illustrate the importance of credible and authentic facilitators through which to motivate participants to engage in 'processes of change' and significantly other IAC supervision requirements. In relation to this, IAC practitioners disclosed skills and knowledge gaps, which they felt inhibited their ability to engage care leavers effectively. Added to this, there was an acknowledgement of organisational drivers being focused upon aspects of offending behaviour rather than the particular needs of care leavers. Such findings support the need to incorporate specialist support, such as that offered by Clear Approach, into the broader IAC project. As indicated in a number of our stakeholder interviews, it was felt that care leavers may have a multiplicity of 'needs' that warrant approaches that are centred on a cognisance and 'real world' understanding of their experiences and histories.

Also of crucial importance for some was the knowledge gained about what support individuals might be entitled to under relevant leaving care legislation. As one strategic manager commented, understanding such legislation is "complicated" and requires detailed knowledge of relevant policies as well as of local support services that may be available to care leavers. It is the provision of this kind of specialist support and expertise that makes Clear Approach distinct, particularly in comparison to more generic 'family-focused' projects. The information provided to some young men through Clear Approach illustrated the facilitator's understanding of the issues of relevance and their ability to make the individual aware of their entitlements. This highlighted how the process of engagement with young men was responsive to individual needs.

A further key factor was the increase in confidence that care leavers reported as a result of being helped to make sense of, and articulate, often difficult past family experiences. This helped to empower them to articulate what they wanted in other areas of their life, and in some cases motivated them to engage with attempts to address their own criminogenic needs – for example, by building a CV in preparation for training or employment. The structure of Clear Approach allows for such empowerment to occur at an individual level but also at a collective level through group work and listening to the stories of outside speakers who have been through the care and criminal justice systems themselves.

Finally, the ongoing support provided by the Care Leavers' Association away from the programme was another very positive factor for two individuals in particular. Having someone to fight your corner, to go 'above and beyond' what might be expected of their role can be incredibly important for vulnerable young people who lack wider networks of support. To repeat our earlier assertion, there are undoubtedly a number of (often mutually reinforcing) positive features of the Clear Approach intervention if delivered as intended. The finding that some care leavers engaged with Clear Approach despite non-engagement with other conditions of the IAC order is a testament to the quality of the relationships developed with the intervention and in particular the facilitator.

Yet of course we cannot conclude without acknowledging that there were barriers to delivering Clear Approach as intended. Indeed, in some senses there were barriers at almost every stage of the process. From defining what a 'care leaver' actually is, to identifying relevant young men to refer to the programme by asking them the 'care' question, to then timetabling them for an appointment with the facilitator so that they could actually take part in the first place, there appeared to be a number of different obstacles before the project had even got off the ground.

Despite training and briefings and a lot of apparent support for the intervention from strategic managers, it is clear that there remained a lack of knowledge and understanding about care leaver issues as well as about the purpose of Clear Approach itself. This led to uncertainty amongst some front-line practitioners and a certain amount of fear about even asking the 'care' question. Not only were there concerns about stigma, labelling and putting young men in yet another box, on a more practical level, the young men's more immediately pressing concerns often inevitably took priority (e.g. homelessness). These factors combined with a perceived lack of time and resources to even consider opening the 'can of worms' that asking the 'care' question may lead to.

Perhaps inevitably the issues described above led to a certain amount of reluctance by some front-line practitioners to fully engage with the pilot phase of the intervention. And we have highlighted the above issues before even throwing the young men's own chaotic lives into the analytical mix. The context of some individuals' lives was such that they were not necessarily able to participate fully in a 10 week structured programme even when they evidently felt that they were getting something out of it. For example, mental illness, homelessness and substance abuse were all factors that could impact on the participation of young men. A number of individuals also breached their community order during the course of the research and were sent back to court, in some cases ending up in custody – meaning they were no longer available to complete the scheduled sessions. These findings clearly have implications for the future design and delivery of Clear Approach.

Despite the various obstacles identified above, these are not in our view insurmountable. For example, the concerns of practitioners about raising the 'care question' with young men during the induction process might easily be avoided if practitioners consulted the relevant 'notes' section in eOasys prior to their first meeting (which ought to provide the kind of important contextual information we presented earlier in Table 1). The obstacles we have described above certainly should not detract from the positive benefits that engaging with Clear Approach could bring.

Nationally, there is very little specific support available to care leavers in the criminal justice system, and an intervention like Clear Approach has great potential to help fill this gap.

To be clear, the Clear Approach programme is not aimed at specifically reducing reoffending, for this is the wider task of the criminal justice system and in particular the practitioners who work within it. That said, Clear Approach's focus on addressing personal histories and biographies in an attempt to empower young men to move on from the past undoubtedly has the potential to encourage care leavers to engage more fully with their community order. For example, by increasing young men's trust and confidence in the professionals that work with them, they may ultimately feel empowered to contemplate change in their own lives in order to move forward in a more positive direction – quite possibly 'travelling more hopefully' on the road to desistance (cf. Weaver & McNeill, 2010)

By engaging with the wider context of care leavers' lives, and by engaging with individuals on their own terms, an intervention like Clear Approach can consider how the criminogenic needs of care leavers might begin to be resolved. In view of the evidence presented in this report, it would in our view be practice negligence not to seek to address the needs of this particularly vulnerable group. We therefore conclude that Clear Approach is a programme that ought to be welcomed, and it deserves to be supported fully by all relevant stakeholders in order for it to be delivered as intended.

To support the conclusions above, there are a number of recommendations to be made. Firstly, more flexibility should be built into the design and delivery of Clear Approach, in order to allow for the often chaotic lives of participants. In addition, a regular timetable of briefings and mandatory training for practitioners at all levels should be provided in order to increase knowledge and understanding of the intervention, but also of the generic issues affecting care leavers in general. This ought to increase the confidence of key stakeholders in identifying relevant individuals to refer to Clear Approach.

However, most important in our view is that funding and resources should be made available to roll-out Clear Approach on a long-term, sustainable basis so that it has the opportunity to bed-in to mainstream provision. Given the evidence that offending rates for children in care in some parts of Greater Manchester are noticeably higher than the national average (DfE, 2013b), this would seem like a particularly useful location in which to roll out the programme, and carry out more in-depth research on its impact. Consideration should also be given to how far an intervention like Clear Approach could be delivered in other settings, for example in the secure estate, but also outside of the criminal justice system. Finally, we believe that Clear Approach should be viewed as an integral part of a much wider strategy to address the often-neglected needs of care leavers in the criminal justice system.

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