

# Legislative challenges for care leavers

## Transcript

Harvey Gallagher, chief executive of the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers

In England, the need to care leavers has been something of a priority for quite a few years in particular. About three years ago, the children's minister in Westminster introduced what is known as 'staying put'. And this means that a young person who's been placed in foster care can stay past 18, when they're no longer in care with their former foster carer. And that's really important because a young person who's happy, who's stable, who's got a good relationship with a foster carer gets the stability of that relationship for a longer period of time. Government in Westminster did not offer the same ability to stay put, if you like, or whatever the equivalent is, for young people in children's homes. And that's a significant deficit. And there is a campaign in England at the moment called 'every child leaving care matters', who are trying to get some kind of equivalent support established for young people in children's homes. And that was still not resolved. At the time, government said they thought that was something that was too difficult to develop, because the issues perhaps of what would be the equivalent of a new adult now living in this children's home. Compared to Scotland, a young person leaving a children's home doesn't have a commitment from government to stay in their children's home or something equivalent. Some local authorities, along with government pilots have tried to develop something called 'staying close' for children in children's homes. So, if you leave your children's home, you might go and live in semi-independent accommodation or something like that, close to where your children's home was. So maybe you can keep some of your relationships the same. What's fantastic about the Care Leaver's Covenant in Scotland, is the emphasis on maintaining relationships.

In practice in England, staying put has been implemented in a pretty patchy way. It's definitely better than it was before, there are young people benefiting from staying put in a really positive way. And that's a good thing. But it hasn't yet had the far reaching impact, I would hope it would have had. And that's for a number of reasons. Money is clearly a problem. The Department of Education in Westminster did give some ring fenced funding initially to local authorities to support staying put, but it wasn't enough. And so local authorities have had to find money from other places. For instance, one of the things they do is they ask a young person to start claiming housing benefit, so that former foster care becomes their social landlord or landlady. Now, I don't blame local authorities for implementing that because you have to get the money from somewhere. But would you

put your 18 year old on to benefit and ask them to pay it back to you in order to pay their rent, I don't think you would do that if that was your child.

The other anxiety local authorities and fostering organisations for that matter had in England was that the more young people, young adults stay with our foster carers past 18 years of age, that then therefore ties up a place with that foster carer that you might want to offer to a younger child. So there's a 90 and a 20 year old in that bedroom who was previously in care. Clearly, nobody else can live in that bedroom. And we haven't yet seen that happen. And I think that's probably partly because of staying put not having been implemented as successfully as we would like it to be. But I still think in the back of our minds, that may be a concern, one of the consequences now of local authorities knowing that they will have a responsibility for young people post 18. And a potential financial responsibility is that those young people who have been placed at some distance from their home local authority are sometimes brought back to that authority, because that makes it easier for the local authority to administer the support arrangements around them. And I heard about a young woman from a London borough not too long ago, who had been placed at a children's home in the Northeast of England, who'd been there for three or four years. Very settled, liked it, doing well. He was then brought back to London to live with a foster carer in London in anticipation of what the local authority might be able to offer when she was 18. And that doesn't strike me as anything that was in her interest.

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