

# Supporting Young People from Care to Adulthood: International experiences

**Mike Stein**  
**Emeritus Professor**

# What I am going to talk about

- A journey – young people’s journey from care to adulthood in different countries
- To illustrate how young people experience this journey in different countries - give examples of policy and practice
- A method for evaluating the impact of international experiences – how do they promote the resilience of young people on their journey from care to adulthood?
- The international experiences I will be talking about will be drawn from research carried out in 33 countries – and this includes research carried out by ‘peer researchers’- young people from care. Let us hear from them first

## The voices of peer researchers

*“I was interviewing care leavers as a care leaver myself – and knowing that through this, young people were given a voice, a chance to share their opinions on the transition from care to independent living”*

*“I enjoyed it – it gave me confidence to talk to new people”*

*“Emotionally and physically draining, but valuable life experience”*

# Involving young people from care in research: the example of peer research

**SOS Children's Villages International and care leavers' projects in England have pioneered 'peer research', in the context of children's rights, including the participation of young people in policy making. In partnership with professional researchers they are able to:**

- Draw on their personal experience to increase awareness of the topic being researched
- Help to identify, comment and revise the research questions and interview schedules
- Carry out interviews
- Reflect upon the research findings
- Contribute to the policy and practice implications and;
- Participate in the presentation and dissemination of the findings

# Involving young people from care in research: the example of peer research

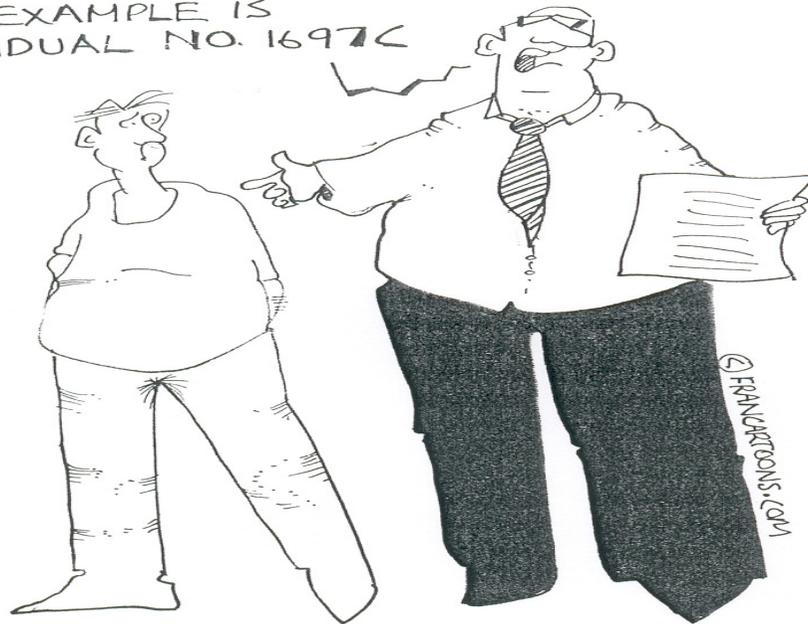
- Professional researchers see peer researchers as an important source of insight, bringing something different – an ‘in care’ and ‘leaving care’ lived perspective
- By participating in peer research young people are given the opportunity through training, support and the research experience to acquire new knowledge and skills and develop confidence
- Peer research is not for all young people from care – for example, very vulnerable young people still needing help with their own problems
- Successful peer researchers are often those young people who have made sense of their own journey from care to adulthood: by having some emotional distance they can balance empathy and objectivity

## Pathways to adulthood: the placements from which young people leave care

- Family foster care – trend to use of specialist foster care, providing additional support and treatment
- Kinship care – with family relatives and friends
- Small children's homes – mainly for teenagers
- Larger children's homes and centres for young people – 'social pedagogy' and treatment approaches
- Institutional care – linked to deinstitutionalisation programmes, UNCRC, *Alternative Care of Children – meeting individual needs*
- Semi-independent and supported accommodation

# 'Meeting individual needs'

WE LIKE TO TREAT ALL OUR  
YOUNG PEOPLE AS INDIVIDUALS..THIS  
FOR EXAMPLE IS  
INDIVIDUAL NO. 1697C



# Pathways to adulthood: international examples

- In Spain most young people in care are placed with their kinship carers, mainly members of the young people's extended families – their grandparents, uncles and aunts – or close family friends
- They provide a family identity ('not seeing themselves as in care'), stability and young people often remain with them during their journey to adulthood. But kinship carers need support!
- In Australia, New Zealand and Spain there are more young people in kinship care than foster family or residential care. In most 'western' countries the position is reversed. In the UK just under 20% of children and young people are in kinship care
- Young people may have little choice of placements – as choice relates to national and local policies and availability of placements

# Pathways to adulthood: the age of leaving care

- In Europe and 'western' societies most young people leave care between 16-18 years of age, although there is a large variation – between a lower age of 14 and a higher age of 26
- In comparison with young people in the general population, most young people leave care at a younger age and have to cope with major changes in their lives in a far shorter time
- Their journey to adulthood is more accelerated and compressed
- The pattern from care to adulthood is also less supported and more linear – where as in the general population most young people 'yo-yo' between birth families and independence

# Supporting young people from care to adulthood: international examples

- Informal ‘non-legal’ arrangements – in Ireland and Norway where young people are settled in their foster care placements, some become ‘part of the family’ and remain until adulthood
- There is evidence from some countries, including the UK, that young people also receive on-going informal personal and practical support from their former carers after leaving
- In Sweden some children’s homes continue to provide practical and personal support for young people after they leave
- Formal ‘legal’ arrangements – in England and Spain young people may ‘stay put’ in foster placements until 21 – foster parents are supported financially and young people may continue to receive leaving care services

# Supporting young people in residential placements: international examples

## Young people 'staying put' in residential placements

- In Germany there are small residential homes – for up to eight young people that provide flexible support by residential staff – visiting or stopping over depending on need. They also arrange follow on accommodation with young people and if it works out young people can become the tenants
- In Switzerland young people can start 'living in' between two and four evenings a week in accommodation before moving in and becoming tenants

## Young people returning from secure accommodation and keeping in touch

- In the Netherlands a scheme called 'New Perspectives after Return' provides individual mentoring for young people aged 16-24 returning home from secure accommodation. The mentor becomes involved three months before young people leave and keeps in contact up to three times a week for nine months
- In Switzerland a system of telephone contact and counselling, personal coaching and financial support has been introduced to support young people leaving residential care

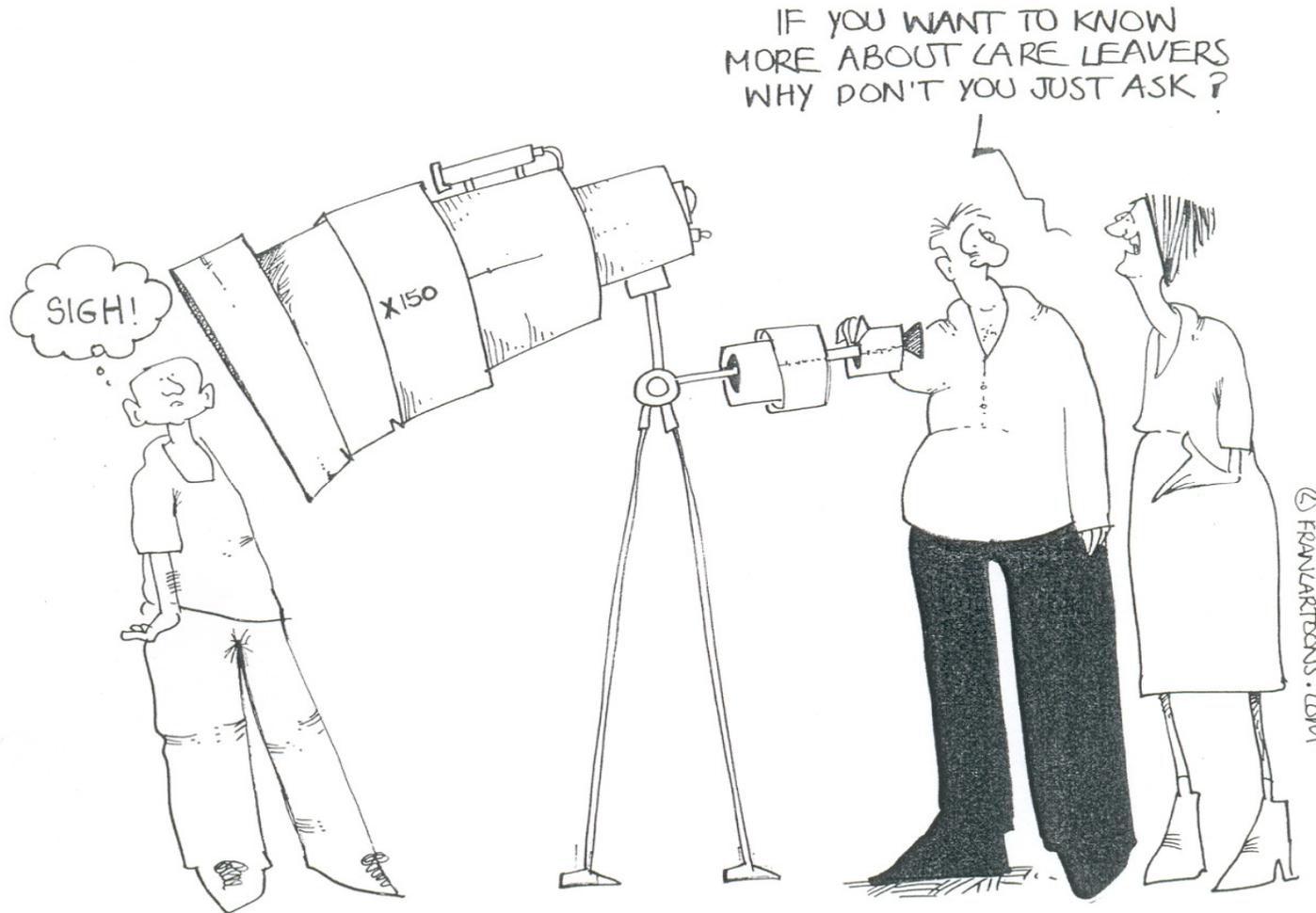
# Leaving care law and policy: international experiences

- In the UK (four countries) specialist leaving care legislation combining ‘duties’ and ‘powers’ has contributed to the development of specialist leaving care workers - ‘personal advisers’, teams and projects supporting young people on their main pathways to adulthood up to 25
- In the Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway) the main ‘social democratic’ approach has been ‘universalism’, that is developing law and policies that aim to include all young people in mainstream services – education, employment, housing, youth services, health and well-being
- Recognition of the failure to meet the needs of care leavers and other very vulnerable groups of young people has led to the development of more specialist legislation within a universalist framework
- In England there is a legal and policy framework for ‘children’s rights’ - involving young people individually in the decisions, and collectively in the policies, that affect their lives
- However research shows that there is variation in the implementation of the law in different countries and in local areas. What can make a difference is that practitioners are aware of young people’s rights and are prepared to ‘fight’ for them to be implemented – and where the law may be weak to campaign for innovative and best practice

# Leaving care law and policy: involving young people

- The legal and policy framework in England provides powers for the involvement of young people at every stage from care to adulthood: the making of care plans, the needs assessment and pathway planning process, preparation for leaving care and choice of accommodation, and the process of supporting young people on their pathways to adulthood.
- There is a legal responsibility to ensure young people are ‘prepared and ready’ before they leave care – an Independent Reviewing Officer has this responsibility and the young person may have an ‘advocate’
- There is also research and practice evidence that young people whose transitions from care are successful have more interactive relationships: they are able to negotiate good quality accommodation, engage in education and employment and participate in community and leisure – they are empowered through being involved

# Leaving care law and policy – involving young people in decisions



# Leaving care law and policy – involving young people collectively in policies

- In England the ‘New Belongings’ project has a team of care experienced young people and professionals who work with local authorities to: Implement the Charter for Care Leavers – 7 promises put together by young people from care; improve how different services can work together, and; involve young people in community activities. The project starts with a survey of all care leavers to find out their views about their experiences of care, the services they receive and what should change
- In England young people living in and leaving care participate in Children in Care Councils. Their work includes giving young people a voice on local policies and their impact on care and leaving care. This may contribute to a Pledge – or a commitment from the local authority to providing services

# Leaving care law and policy: international examples

- In Germany all young people have a legal right to assistance for 'upbringing and education' until the age of 21 in residential care, foster care and in 'assisted living units'. If young people are refused after care services they have the legal right to go to court with a 'provincial advocate'
- In Scotland 'staying put' when settled, until 21 years of age applies to young people in foster care, children's homes and supported accommodation
- In Norway local authorities have a duty to provide aftercare services to young people aged 18-23 – if it is denied young people can complain to the County Governor
- In Romania – and in some other post-Communist countries - young people can remain in care as long as they are in education, up to 26 years of age – there are also 'employer subsidy' schemes to provide work for care leavers

# Leaving care information and research: international experiences

**Having good information and research is important for planning services both nationally and locally in order to meet the needs of young people – in education, employment, housing, health and well-being:**

- Variation in the range and quality of official data collection – some collected at a ‘national’ level and some at a ‘local’ level
- National data on care and leaving care may include comparisons with young people in the general population on education, health and well-being and ‘outcome’ data
- No countries have national data which includes comprehensive measures of progress from entry to care
- Very little evidence of official data based on the views of care leavers

# Leaving care information and research: international examples and findings

- In terms of 'official data' Sweden is only one of three countries in the world that has a 'national registers' of entire birth cohorts. This allows comparisons to be made between different groups of children and young people, over time, and in relation to different areas of their lives – education, health, living circumstances, welfare dependency, mental health, offending, substance misuse
- Recently, national register data covering the entire Swedish population in ten birth cohorts was analysed to assess school performance among care leavers from long term foster care and future psychosocial problems
- It showed that doing well at school means doing well in later life – but poor school performance among young people from care is the major risk factor of adult psychosocial problems including suicide, drug abuse, criminal behaviour and welfare dependency
- Research also shows that young people can be helped at school to overcome difficulties – by programmes of assistance from foster cares and teachers

## Leaving care information and research: international examples and findings

- In most Western and European countries some research has been carried out – variation in the range and type of studies carried out in different countries
- Research generally shows overall poor outcomes for care leavers in comparison with young people in the general population – in relation to their education, careers, and their health and well-being
- However, there are important differences: some young people from care do very well and successfully ‘move on’, others ‘survive’ and get by and may do well later, and others ‘struggle’ a lot. These differences may change over time – young people may move between these groups

# 'some young people from care do very well – with support'



HELPING TO LIGHTEN THE LOAD!

# Evaluating the impact of international experiences: the resilience test

**The examples from different countries can be evaluated against the research evidence on how they promote the resilience of young people by:**

- Stability and continuity to young people through secure attachments where they are living – this helps young people's education, health and well-being in the present and the future
- Any additional help young people may need - at school and with personal problems which may affect their mental health and well-being
- Supporting young people in developing friendship networks, new opportunities and leisure activities – 'turning points'

# Evaluating the impact of international experiences: the resilience test

- Involving young people in all decisions which shape their lives and promotes their rights – creating a culture of participation
- Providing opportunities for young people to remain in placements where they are settled, ‘staying put’ from care to adulthood, leaving care gradually, as young people leave their family home
- Preparation and supporting young people into adulthood with their accommodation, careers, health and well-being - by leaving care services, and building on positive family, partner, kinship and social networks

# Some references

- Dixon J and Lee J with Stein M, Guhirwa H, Bowley S, and Catch22 NCAS Peer Researchers (2015) *Corporate Parenting for young people in care – Making the difference?*
- Stein M (2014) Young people's transitions from Care to Adulthood in European and Post-communist Eastern European and Central Asian Societies, *Australian Social Work*, Vol. 67. 1
- New Belongings: A better deal for Care Leavers, The Care Leavers' Foundation
- Stein M (2012) *Young People Leaving Care, supporting pathways to adulthood*, Jessica Kingsley
- Stein M and Verweijen-Slamnescu R (2012) (eds.) *When Care Ends, Lessons from Peer Research, insights from young people on leaving care in Albania, the Czech Republic, Finland and Poland*, SOS Children's Villages International
- Lerch V with Stein M (2010) (eds.) *Ageing Out of Care, from care to adulthood in European and Central Asian Societies*, SOS Children's Villages International
- Stein, M and Munro, E. (eds.) (2008) *Young People's Transitions from Care to Adulthood: International Research and Practice*, Jessica Kingsley