



## **Key practices for social workers**

*Life after care*

### **Lesley Ann Cull**

Ruth Hayman is a young person who has had experience of being looked after by the local authority. Ruth left care some years ago and is living independently. She begins by talking about the bursary scheme she became involved in after she left care.

### **Ruth Hayman**

Hampshire was the first area to set them up in the country, there's £3500 for a year. The young people do 800 hours work within that year, which could involving talking out in conferences, presentations, workshops, setting up user groups within each local area within the county so that young people can use the groups to reflect back and feed back any problems within the care system which we might be able to change. I came to get the bursary by going to what's called care action team, which we call it CAT for short, and the care action team came about after it was called Education Action Team where the young people would go about trying to change education for looked- after children to improve it. I started going in November after getting difficulties in benefits and my college, I nearly had to leave college. I was invited to the care action team and was then asked if I wanted to apply for a bursary which I did, which now helps towards living costs. Since I've been attending the care action team each month, in November we've been to a children first conference in Wales, doing two workshops about education and what Hampshire County Council are doing to improve education for looked- after children, whether we have support teachers or just encouraging young people, being proud of them, helping them with what they want to do and focusing specifically on their needs and not the needs of what they can give to them. We have the meeting each month and we write reports after the conference, which we keep as young people, and which go into the file at the Hampshire County Council. I chaired a conference on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February this year in Winchester on Social Inclusion, which was a conference for all young people in education, how we can include them instead of excluding them, if they have problems what can we do, how can we get them to make friends, how can we get them to learn social skills, and one of the most important points raised was having a buddy system where young people and children in primary schools through to secondary schools get trained up, to then work alongside other young people and children and be a friend and talk to them, have a chat with them, share crisps with them, play games with them, whatever it, they may need, so that they have someone who is in the school who is a peer to them. And is also a kind of mentor for them who is their same age.

### **Lesley Ann Cull**

I asked Ruth to explain what the mentoring system involved.

### **Ruth Hayman**

The mentoring system is for care leavers. Young people are being approached who are 15, 16, 17, whenever they are nearly ready to leave care, they are asked if they want a mentor. An appropriate mentor would be set up for them, they'll have contact whenever they want, and the mentor can take them out, help them with different things, give advice to them, be a friend, be a parental role, go out and do lots of fun things, go have a coffee or swimming or something. And even down to practical things like helping with shopping and budgeting or filling out benefit forms or applying for colleges and universities, and helping with interview skills as well.

### **Lesley Ann Cull**

Ruth then spoke about some of the important issues for young people in care.

**Ruth Hayman**

A lot of the issues are moving around a lot, which hopefully is going to reduce down to no more than three while they are in the care system because of Quality Protects. However there's still a lot going on at the moment. Bullying occurs a lot within children's homes, or at school, or in the area that you may live in. If you are known as a kid in care you get classified as someone who shouldn't be around, shouldn't be mixed with and stereotyped negatively, specially within schools. There's a lot of teachers don't know how to handle young people who are being bullied or have aggressive behaviour and will exclude them from their classes and could end up excluding them from school as well.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

What kind of help is there for children and young people who are victims of bullying?

**Ruth Hayman**

There isn't much support around, people don't know how to identify the bullying, they don't know how to identify the cause of it, they try and look at what's going on at the surface level. So teachers within schools find it very difficult to sort the bullying out, they don't know how to deal with the young person, the young person could get very shy, or get very withdrawn, or turn the outward way and.. just go wild. And then foster carers and children's homes may not know how to deal with it. In children's homes the bully may be within the children's home and they don't know how to deal with it. They often just victimise the young person who's being bullied even more by withdrawing them from the situation instead of withdrawing the bully.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

I asked Ruth how children and young people are supported generally when they are in care.

**Ruth Hayman**

It depends. My last foster placement I was in, I had a lot of support. I was there for 7 months which was my longest placement in 2 years and I would get a lot of support from my foster carers. If I wanted to talk with my foster mum, who I got on closer with, she would shut the door, my bedroom door or kitchen door and we would chat for an hour or so, talk about different things, and I mean sometimes I would end up shouting and screaming at her, but ten minutes later would have a hug and make up and that was the end of it. If we would have arguments we wouldn't carry on and it was a really good environment within the house. We all supported each other, we always gave each other hugs or said hello or just share things and it was a learning curve. It wasn't grab everything you wanted but it was learning to give as well. In the children's home we had to just fend for yourself, you had to do what you wanted to do, but without upsetting the other young people, so you would have to integrate with them so that you weren't bullied or victimised. And then the staff wouldn't really support you either, you were just left to your own devices. Everything was done for you, you weren't allowed to cook because it was deemed a health and safety hazard and you would clean sometimes, they would ask you to Hoover, but if you wanted to go out anywhere they would have to take you and it would be in a minibus with a logo on it and everyone would know you were from the children's home and so the support varies from placement to placement.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

How easy is it to form friendships in the children's home?

**Ruth Hayman**

It's not very easy. If you are one of these people who like to be yourself, like to be an individual, then it's very difficult to get on with other people in the children's home. If you are someone who doesn't mind mixing with people or for survival you've learnt to mix with them and do what they do, and do what they ask you to do, you can get on quite fine. Some people make very good relationships within a children's home, some people don't.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

Ruth talked about what it was like to have to keep moving to different placements during her time in care and how this affected her.

**Ruth Hayman**

It's really hard. I still think of my first placement when I was 14 which was in a little village called Swanmore which is near Southampton. And I still think of the relationships I made with the foster carer, with my foster brother, the young little girl who was living there, my foster carer's friends as well. I think about the dog, I think about the area, how I really miss it, cos it was out in the country, its very hard. After then I withdrew from trying to form relationships with people. I became very difficult because no one could get through to me, because I would just put a brick wall in front of me and that was it. I was in my space and everyone else was in theirs around it.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

What kind of help do children and young people receive to support them through school?

**Ruth Hayman**

There is some support, if you are loud enough or scream loud enough you can probably get it. There is education support teachers who will come into the school and sit with you in your lessons if you want them to, but for people who are quite quiet and just try and get on with their work, there is nothing there. And often problems can be pushed under the carpet because people don't notice them so much. If you've got learning difficulties it's harder still because in the children's home the staff may not spend time with you, and you can then get classed as being thick or stupid and so you end up giving up hope and not bothering to do the work within school, and can leave care with not learning to read or write, which a lot of the members of the care action team can't actually do. They can't read, they can't write, but they can talk which really helps them now, but before it didn't. They would just become disruptive and just shout about and not bother go to school, truant all the time because no one was helping them

**Lesley Ann Cull**

What about after young people leave care - are they encouraged to continue with their studies?

**Ruth Hayman**

There isn't much support at all; financially it's an uphill struggle. If you start further education at the age of 17 or 18, your benefits will stop by the time you're 19 and you have to struggle on. I am fortunate because I have shouted loud enough and managed to get some help from the County Council who pay my rent now. But for other young people who don't shout loud enough and who give up more easily, they wouldn't bother carrying on with further education and just leave.

But within colleges you can get a lot of support as well. The college I go to, my personal tutor knows my circumstances, is really supportive and I get support from the teachers as well. If I don't get my work in on time or I am struggling, they will sit with me for 10-20 minutes, go through what I have to do and explain it to me and don't put too much pressure on me because they know that I will do the work, but I may need a bit more time or a bit more understanding to help me do it.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

I asked Ruth about the reviews she attended when she was in care.

**Ruth Hayman**

My reviews weren't a very nice experience because at the time I didn't have confidence to talk to anyone, so I would curl up as tightly as I could in a ball, keeping my head just above the table and if anyone asked me any questions I would just go quiet and nod or shake my head. So I didn't communicate in reviews and no one talked to me prior to them and I didn't like answering the silly questions you get in review booklets as well, because they are always the same. And I didn't like talking out, I was too afraid to talk out and say exactly what I felt, because I didn't want anyone to shout at me or have a go at me. And a lot of people who I talk to say reviews are boring, the questions are all the same and sometimes the questions were childish, or if you were younger they are too difficult to understand, and everyone keeps saying they need to be changed relevant to the young person's age. If they are children then

someone needs to be filling a form out for them, and doing one that's user friendly with lots of pictures and lots of things to do, maybe colouring in as well.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

What could be done to make the experience as better one?

**Ruth Hayman**

I think they should be focusing a lot on what you do in your spare time, so they can get an overall picture on what your placement is actually like. Instead of you and your foster carer, and you and your foster brother, and you and the foster dog, it should be more 'what are you doing in your spare time' so they know how you are spending your time and any difficulties that could be arising in your placement, as well as asking questions about difficulties within the placement.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

How did Ruth feel that her reviews should have been handled?

**Ruth Hayman**

I think the better way to do it was actually not having the young person there, if they really insist on not being there. But either doing it by audio cassette from another room, or recording what the young person wants to say, with an interview with an advocate, who would talk with them through it, not their social worker. Because that's, they may be afraid of their social worker, and they may be afraid to truthfully answer questions. So it should be done by someone who is independent of social services, who will come in, get to know the young person and say 'what do you think of this, what do you think of that,' and then people can take the tape back and just listen to it.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

I asked Ruth about some of the issues faced by young people leaving care - was it difficult to make the transition to independent living?

**Ruth Hayman**

There's a lot of things that people don't realise. There's the emotional side of leaving care, for example loneliness. If you've left care, you've left supportive lodging and you move into a flat or a hostel, it can be very lonely. You can be stuck in your room day and night, not going out often and there could no one about. And if you're ill as well it's even worse. Sometimes you can wonder if anyone's going to notice if you just kind of ended up dying in your sleep, so it's scary.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

Finally, what advice would Ruth give to social workers working with young people?

**Ruth Hayman**

If I was in a room with 10 social workers now I would be telling them that they should listen to what the young people have to say, what their clients have to say, instead of nodding their heads and pretending to listen. But actually take on board what they are saying and build up a relationship with them instead of just turning up once for an hour every six weeks, but going fortnightly, weekly if necessary, and building up a really strong relationship with a bit of emotional side to it as well. So there's some respects there from both parties and the young people can then see the social worker as a friend and not an enemy which quite often they can be seen as. I think it's also really important for social workers to act on anything the young person might be saying. Or if there's any problems with their schools to go and find out what's going on. If there's any bullying going on, finding out what's going on, and really working with the young person and involving them with the decisions that have to be made prior to decisions being made, discussing with them what they want, their views, and how things can be made easier for them. I don't think young people are involved much at all. It's very new for social workers to be listening to young people about decisions they want and it depends upon the young person. If they are strong willed enough to say 'oh this is what I want' and to keep saying it until they get it.