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Summary

Many children in care seek one person who genuinely cares about them. Some already have this personal bond with a foster carer, a relative or a social worker; but many are missing out. Mentoring and befriending schemes present a golden opportunity to fill the void. They are shown to have a strong positive impact on the lives of young people. Bolstering access to mentoring and befriending would be a valuable investment for our care system and the young people it supports.

Mentoring and befriending schemes can help spark a positive change in the lives of society's looked-after children. This report reviews the place of these schemes and makes a case for making this type of relationship more accessible.

The research shows that this relationship can play an important, positive role in young people's lives.

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) and a host of other organisations have conducted research into the areas of children in care, vulnerable young people, support for the elderly, and criminal justice. A consistent finding from the research is that strong, supportive relationships, based on mutual caring and trust can make all the difference to someone's life and life outcomes.¹ This understanding is reflected in the many mentoring and befriending schemes aimed at supporting different people across society.²

For this research we spoke to many young care-leavers, to service providers, social workers, foster carers, policy-makers and academics. Their message was strong and consistent: mentoring and befriending schemes work. Their supportive, informal approach can help children feel better about themselves and their lives; the mentoring relationship can improve their experience of care and the outcomes they take with them when they leave the system.

A more responsive care system would be more effective in supporting positive outcomes for those in care.

Government has already backed the mentoring and befriending approach. Local authorities have a statutory duty to offer independent visiting – a model of befriending – to children in care if it is considered to be in their interest. However, our experience, and a review of available evidence, suggests that

this provision is severely undersupplied. Funding is fragile and opportunities to expand provision are limited.

More robust evidence would highlight the value of mentoring and make the case for better investment.

With limited evaluative evidence and patchy data on outcomes, there are challenges in demonstrating the positive payoffs for looked-after children. There is, however, a strongly held understanding that mentoring and befriending can make a material difference to children and young people's lives. This recognition now needs to be backed up by investment in longitudinal studies to gather qualitative and quantitative data.

It is well established that the care population is subject to significant challenges, with academic and life outcomes, on average, dramatically poorer than the general population. These poor outcomes carry a burden of cost to the state and to individuals.

The value of mentoring and befriending in improving lives is worthy of more purposeful commitment. With the multiple challenges faced by children in care, mentoring and befriending is not one, simple solution. However, it is a valuable option for children's social workers to use to respond to individuals' needs to forge a more effective, child-centred care system.³

1. Introduction

Children need positive relationships with at least one trusted adult who can be relied upon to provide practical and emotional support wherever they are placed.⁴

A consistent finding from research by NEF and a host of others in the areas of children in care, vulnerable young people, and criminal justice, is that strong, supportive relationships based on mutual caring and trust can make all the difference to someone's life and life outcomes.^{5,6}

For most people, bonds with family and friends underpin well-being and resilience to life's challenges. Yet these are precisely the bonds that are often lacking for some of the most vulnerable children, including those in the care of the state.

Attachment theory provides the foundation for understanding objectively that a relationship with a significant adult is essential for healthy emotional and cognitive development for children and young people.⁷ And for disadvantaged children the presence of a trusted adult tends to be associated with better outcomes.⁸ But formal systems of support often struggle to respond well to this need. One reason is that it demands flexibility that is difficult to plan and control for.

In seeking to explore this issue NEF undertook research to examine the extent to which mentoring and befriending approaches could potentially help fill a gap in meaningful personal relationships for children in care. This is relevant to a wider context discussed in research and policy papers which calls for a child-centred approach to the care system which makes space for and takes account of children's voices.^{9,10}

2. Identifying a gap in relationships

“When there’s no-one to talk to, even about little things like tearing your coat, you feel angry. Tiny things can become big things because there’s no-one to talk them over with.”

Care-leaver interviewed for this research

In our conversations with young people, social workers, foster carers and others, the first question we asked was whether, taking the care population as a whole, respondents felt that there was a gap in personal, emotional and practical support from a trusted adult for children in care. Almost without exception the response was ‘yes’. It is important to stress that not all children in care experience this kind of gap. Some have positive, lasting relationships with long-term foster carers, with family members that they remain in contact with, or with social workers or teachers for example. But for many children and young people there is an absence of a dedicated adult with a personal bond to the child or young person. This understanding was widely held by those we interviewed for this research, including young care-leavers.

It is hard to establish how many of the 91,000 looked-after children in the UK experience this gap of a personal relationship with a trusted adult. In interviews for this research, however, it was suggested that it is likely to be more rather than less. One possible indication that has been suggested is frequent placement moves as a proxy for instability and gaps in relationships for children, although even where placements are stable children may still feel isolated and unsupported.¹¹ For the year ending March 2011 data showed that one in ten children in care had experienced three or more placement moves in that year.¹² Meanwhile, it has been found that, among looked-after teenagers, placements have a 50% chance of breaking down.¹³ In England alone in 2012 there were 24,150 looked-after children aged between 10 and 15 and 13,580 aged 16 and over.¹⁴ Even though placement moves can be for good reason and many children recognise that a move may be in their best interest, what these data suggest is that there are likely to be thousands of looked-after children who are living with insufficient support based on a caring, personal relationship.

For a number of children this absence may be complicated and compounded by also having been ‘let down’ or abandoned by parents and other adults as well, including as a result of placement moves. Pre-care experiences exert an influence on a child’s ability to trust adults and form healthy, appropriate attachments, potentially undermining the child’s sense and experience of stability around people, and their sense of identity. The care system can compound these patterns. One of the biggest challenges for the care system is achieving continuity and permanence. Placement moves, even for good

reasons, can exacerbate feelings of abandonment and cumulative rejection until some children struggle to trust anyone. An adult who attempts to support children in these circumstances may face a period of testing out, requiring considerable tenacity over time to not give up.¹⁵ Nevertheless, there is evidence that even for children who have experienced damaging relationships with parents or carers, positive relationships can be established and flourish.¹⁶

In conducting this research we were mindful of how a gap in personal and emotional support for looked-after children might differ from the experience of such a gap for other vulnerable children who are not in the care of the state. One important difference to consider is around autonomy. It seems likely that looked-after children might have less freedom to associate with others than other vulnerable groups because of the presence of restrictions placed on them via the structure of care.¹⁷

Through our interviews with three groups of young people, and discussions with professionals, we sought to understand the nature of the gaps in support that looked-after children experience. A number of key themes emerged.

Experience of isolation

Our conversations with young care-leavers were informative in trying to understand the nature of the gaps they experienced in relationships. We heard that, with professionals, they had often felt simply like a case number.

People talked to me to fill in forms. I felt like a number not a person.

Some of the young people we talked to were striking in their agreement about their experience of isolation, despite relatively positive journeys through care. They described how moving around was physically and emotionally exhausting, engendering feelings of loss as well as alienation if they ended up with people they didn't understand or feel comfortable with. It could feel that they had no role models at all. The young people also described how they kept the fact of being in care quiet from their peers at school. Several of them reported not being able to talk to their foster carers about even minor problems. One young person summed up her feelings as follows:

I would have loved to have had someone who would let me stamp my feet and cry and then give me a hug after.

This young person described how little things (such as losing a button on her new coat) would grow in proportion inside her because she felt she had no one who cared enough about her to let her express her frustration.

Even while recognising the need for foster carers to be remunerated, some of the young people reported that they would have liked a relationship with an adult who came to see them simply because they cared enough to do so, not because they were going to be paid for it. One independent visitor described how the child she visited could not believe it was not her job to visit her. The visitor felt the quality of their relationship changed and improved after the child understood this.

Box A: Suggestions from care-leavers

We asked young care-leavers we spoke to what one thing would have made their time in care better. They identified the following:

- Reclaiming social work for the child – ie: starting with a focus on the child and their needs, not what the rule book says
- Constancy
- Stable relationships
- Uniformity – wherever you are in the country the quality of care is good
- More resources for activities like joining a football club or music lessons

A gap in the crowd

Young people in care tend to have a number of people involved in their lives – social workers, carers, teachers and possibly also other professionals. Some of our interviewees suggested that the last thing young people want is another new face. Although young people we spoke to felt that, despite having a lot of people in their lives, there were few they related to on what they described as a normal level. One interviewee felt that young people didn't necessarily mind another person in their lives but they certainly didn't want another reminder that they were 'in care'. This speaks of a desire for a different quality of relationship – being entirely personal not professional.

Overall the sense we got from the range of our interviewees was that even if children and young people are surrounded by professionals these are not necessarily people that they feel they have a personal connection with and the care system itself is careful to steer professional relationships away from becoming too close. Furthermore, some children may see that it is the professionals who have broken up the personal networks they did have and this may have implications for their sense of autonomy and their ability to trust professionals. Therefore, we also heard that many children, despite having people around them, are still isolated and are still looking for a person to connect with on a personal level.

Network not crowd

A consistent theme that arose in our discussions with young people and professionals was the importance of looked-after children having a positive network around them, as generally exists for most children who have family and friends around them. The idea of a network obviously implies the involvement of different people but the danger is that, with the state as corporate parent, then this may seem more like a crowd of professionals than a network. The difference appears to rest on whether or not those in the network see the child first – who they really are, their particular circumstances, preferences and personality. Those in the network might bring different things to the child's life but would start from the viewpoint of the child as an individual and whole person and never as simply a case on a list. A network also tends to imply some level of communication and interaction between participants or at least the possibility of that communication when necessary.

“Interdependence” models in leaving care schemes emphasise interpersonal skills, esteem and confidence in order to support this transition.¹⁸ The concept of ‘circles of support’ has been used in a number of circumstances to depict how an effective network can be built around an individual.¹⁹

The distinctions here are subtle and therefore easily lost in a system where people may be subject to restrictions, targets and heavy case-loads. It also means understanding nuances in a professional relationship where boundaries may be important. These are significant challenges for the system of care. Ultimately though the essential idea of a network mirrors the natural state of things for most people, children and young adults included, with the idea that by building up a network someone has a greater chance of finding a significant person or selection of people to connect with, trust, and draw personal support from. Thinking about a network also addresses the reality that, inevitably in the course of things, professionals and others move on and so individuals may therefore be lost to the child. Even when a significant presence in a child’s life is removed, solid connections need to be maintained. Resilience to the loss of a trusted adult is likely to be improved when there are others whom a child or young person recognises as part of their existing network.

Dependency

Relevant to the issues of isolation and self-reliance imposed on looked-after children is the tricky question of creating or rather avoiding the creation of dependency. It is beyond the scope of this report to look at this theme in detail but it arose in our discussions as an important matter for the lives of looked-after children and requires mention.

We heard in some of our interviews with professionals about the need to avoid creating a sense of dependency in the child on any given individual. This makes sense at one level because as noted above, many of the adult relationships for looked-after children are relatively formalised and professional or semi-professional in nature. This means they are liable to disappear through the natural course of events as people move jobs or careers. The desire to create an effective network is intended to mitigate this. However, some interviewees felt that it was important to acknowledge that, for most children, dependency – on parents and other family members – is a natural expectation of life that gradually transforms towards adulthood, and that this fundamental of life is missing for looked-after children. These interviewees also felt that as social work had become more professionalised and less child-centred the focus on avoiding dependency had sharpened. The role of social workers specifically had shifted from one of offering a source of dependence to attempting to find it through a permanent placement with a foster carer.

Muted voice

Alongside and closely associated with the gap in relationships that stakeholders described for looked-after children, there is a yawning gap for many young people in care around their sense of autonomy and voice. Typically a child in care has relatively little choice over their circumstances, and little ability to influence major aspects of their lives. Recognising the importance of listening to and respecting children’s views, aspects of the

statutory framework and on-the-ground practice aim to address the need to listen to children and give them a voice.

“Looking after them (children in care) would be easier and much more effective if we really heard and understood what they have to tell us.”

Utting, W. (1997) *People like us: the report of the review of safeguards for children living away from home*, London HMSO

One response to the need to take greater account of the voice of the child is the expansion of independent advocacy services for vulnerable children, including children in care, since the 1980s. A recent examination of advocacy services was undertaken at the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies.²⁰ An exact definition of the scope and role of advocacy is elusive, but the following description captures core aspects.

“The role of independent advocates is to help children express themselves and make changes. It empowers children to ensure their rights are respected and their views and wishes are heard at all times and is a means of achieving social justice because everyone matters and everyone is heard.”

Willow, 2013 cited in Selwyn and Wood²¹

As discussed in the Hadley Centre report, children may seek an advocate in response to a particular issue of concern such as a possible placement move, and advocacy services are often commissioned on the basis of single issues. There is however an important debate about the appropriate length of the relationship between advocate and child. As the relationship develops, multiple issues that matter to the child may come to light which would require longer-term support. Arguments for shorter-term involvement, however, typically focus on resource issues and a belief in developing the child's self-reliance.

Statutory guidance on advocacy provision is not entirely clear-cut but it does place a legal duty on local authorities to provide advocacy services where children in the care of the state have a health or social-care related complaint. Guidance also encourages local authorities to extend this provision to looked-after children who wish to draw on advocacy support, but there are a number of barriers to access, and provision varies. The landscape of advocacy is highly variable. A scoping report from the Office of the Children's Commissioner found widely varied availability, access and operating models.²²

For the purposes of our research into mentoring and befriending for looked-after children, there are interesting questions around the potential overlaps and complements advocacy services. These questions are worthy of further dedicated exploration which go beyond the scope of this research and would include looking at the effective boundaries between the roles of advocate and befriender/mentor within a well-functioning network around the child. For now though we can draw a qualitative distinction between the less formal role of befriender/mentor as a 'friend' who is likely to be mainly outside negotiations with professionals on issues of care-planning and enactment. Advocates by contrast are skilled participants in representing and supporting the child's views in particular circumstances where resolution of issues is required. The need for advocates to be trained appropriately in specific skills is an issue highlighted by the Hadley Centre in its report.

Transitions from care

The transition to adulthood for all young people between the ages of 16 and 25 is a major life-stage involving big changes and a shift to greater responsibility and decision-taking. This stage of life brings with it particular stresses and vulnerabilities. This is a time when young people are variously:

- continuing with education but transitioning between educational establishments
- moving into work
- becoming financially independent
- working out their identity
- forming relationships with partners
- moving away from the family home.

As noted previously, for most young people the transition to adulthood is cushioned by back-up from family and friends. If things go wrong, then practically speaking there is a family home to go to, temporary financial support and a source of advice from parents or other significant adults. Crucially there is also a source of emotional and psychological support available from trusted relationships built over a lifetime. Some young people do not have these normal advantages, in particular young care-leavers.²³ This absence of support is compounded by the fact that care-leavers have an accelerated pathway to adulthood as they are expected to become independent and self-sufficient at an earlier age than their non-care peers.²⁴

“When I turn 18 they’re just going to leave me. I’ll be on my own.”

Young person²⁵

While care-leavers may encounter similar physical and mental health risks as their peers in the wider population, the prevalence of such risks and possible outcomes is higher in the care-leaving population.²⁶ The stresses of becoming rapidly independent with the associated likelihood of greater isolation in the absence of close networks of support can exacerbate these difficulties.

Recognition of the huge challenge for young people in the transition from care and towards independent adult life is reflected in substantial statutory provision. The *Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care-Leavers* guidance sets out the support that care-leavers should expect from local authorities under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 which amended the Children Act 1989.²⁷ More recently the Government published its *Care-leaver Strategy* setting out its commitment across government departments to streamlining support for care-leavers.²⁸ This guidance and strategy is vital since, for vulnerable young people making the transition to adulthood, a major source of support has to come from services provided by government and voluntary sector organisations. There have been recognised gaps in the availability of such support as people transition from children’s services to adult services.²⁹ Using data from 2011, the Prince’s Trust found that, among young people preparing to leave care, 13% were getting no support to prepare for life as

an independent adult, and among those who had left care, 12% had no pathway plan in place and 28% were unsure if they did.³⁰

Research indicates those care-leavers who make a more successful transition to independent adult life tend to have supportive personal relationships, for example with former foster carers, family members and close friends.³¹ The role of the personal adviser enshrined in the statutory guidance for care-leavers might be expected to ensure that all young care-leavers have a reliable personal relationship during the transition phase.³² As has been noted in previous research, it is paradoxical given this statutory provision for personal support that there might still be a gap for young people.³³ The answer appears to be in the nature of the relationship sought by young people which has a very different quality to any professional association. The following quote from a volunteer mentor captures what this previous research attempted to describe.

“I sang at the top of my voice because I didn’t know what else to do. And she turned and looked at me as if I was mad. And then we both just started laughing and that was it. It broke the ice.”

Clayden and Stein, 2005, pp. 80

Similarly in previous research conducted by NEF into the issue of transition to adulthood, young people spoke of their wish for emotional support and a bond of trust characterised by hand-holding but also enjoyment.

“Just someone who acts like they care really, that makes a big difference.”

Young person³⁴

3. Addressing gaps in personal support

“Children in care have more people around them now than in the past but they are always looking for the one person they can connect with. For some it might be a relative, others a foster carer, or leaving care worker. But still a lot have no one.”

Senior policy-maker interviewed for this research

It is clear from the many conversations we had, and from other research, that there is no simple way to address the challenges faced by looked-after children. Even if the basic ingredients for children’s lives – stability, permanence and love – are well recognised, securing improvements in these dimensions for every child is complex and demanding. There is certainly no silver bullet for ensuring that every child in care has a trusted adult in their lives who makes time for them and cares about them for who they are. The needs and characteristics of children in care, their existing and ongoing relationships with family and friends, and the nature of human relationships themselves are often complex and hugely diverse.

In the UK, the strong focus on foster care, as opposed to residential care, and efforts to increase the rate of adoption, reflects an aspiration for children to grow up in a family environment. A positive, long-lasting relationship with a foster carer or adoptive parent may be a good aspiration but for a range of reasons is not achievable in all cases. Even where it is achieved there may still be value in enabling the child as much as possible to form other caring relationships as children living with their own families often do.

In our interviews we heard the view that ideally what is needed is a case-by-case response delivered through sufficient flexibility in the options available to social workers, foster carers and children themselves. We heard from several interviewees that an enabling framework needs to be embedded in the care system: one that can maximise the opportunity for natural supportive relationships to occur and flourish, including: maintaining relationships with previous carers; building the capacity of the team that already exists around a child to operate as an enabling network; and creating the possibility of a new connection by structuring the means for introducing a child to a willing, supportive, and supported adult who is prepared to dedicate time and thought to them. Outside care, relationships between children and young people and older peers and adults tend to develop and flourish naturally, often through school or activities such as sport. The care system needs to balance its roles in minimising risk for a child with maximising opportunities for normalising his or her life.³⁵

We can think about what difference this would make to the outcomes for children in care and we turn to this question later in the report. But as to need, there can be no doubt. This research has clarified previous findings – children and young people talk about looking for the one person they can connect with. For different children, this could be a family member, family friend, a professional (such as social worker or teacher), a carer, or someone new who is not part of an existing aspect of the child's life but is willing to try to develop a relationship and devote time and attention to that child.

The diversity of young people's experiences, assets and needs makes it difficult to generalise or be prescriptive about the best way to fill gaps in personal support. The point is that our system needs to make it as likely as possible for a child to identify or find an adult (possibly a different adult to suit them at different points in their childhood and young adulthood) with whom they do or can forge a personal bond, and then ensure that that relationship is enabled and supported.

This is as much about practice as frameworks and guidance. To an extent the aspiration to support personal relationships for children in care is there, from the framing of statutory guidance to the delivery of care at a local level. But there are real constraints on the ability of the system to achieve as much as it could. We heard from some interviewees that, despite best intentions by policy-makers and practitioners, the system still often militates against continuity of relationships for the child. As noted earlier, there is a complexity of reasons for this, many of which have been examined in research and evidence, around systems of accountability, the risk-averse nature of the care system, social worker caseloads and turnover, and financial constraints, to mention some of the main ones.

In this project we wanted to explore whether mentoring and befriending schemes offer a way within the current system to expand the options available for enabling children in care to develop a personal supportive relationship (as opposed to a professional or statutory one).

In our focus group with young people, participants reflected that having a mentor would be having someone to relate to on a normal level.

Someone who doesn't use big professional words you don't understand. Someone you can ask stupid questions or talk to about things you can't talk to the foster carer about.

In the next section of the report we consider how approaches to mentoring and befriending can work in practice help expand the options for personalising support for children in care, especially for those who experience the lack of a significant personal relationship within their existing network.

4. Mentoring and befriending for children in care

“Volunteers are trained to understand that they may be the most significant adult in a young person’s life.”³⁶

Mentoring and befriending schemes have been used for developing mutually beneficial relationships for all sorts of people in a range of settings. It is common to hear about workplace/professional mentoring schemes, mentoring in school and college, sport-based mentoring, support for offenders and ex-offenders, and befriending for isolated people including the elderly, disabled and refugee populations.

Mentoring and befriending approaches recognise that contact and sharing of human assets make all the difference to people’s lives. The mutual element of mentoring/befriending is highly relevant here. Benefits are reported for both mentors and mentees in a way that gets away from an idea of “being done to”. The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation records evidence obtained through evaluations and case studies that mentoring and befriending schemes can be demonstrated to contribute to a number of key policy areas including reducing reoffending, building community cohesion, increasing access to employment and reducing social isolation.³⁷

Government has given its backing to mentoring and befriending approaches for a range of people.³⁸ The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation has mapped over 3,000 schemes in England in community, statutory and business settings.³⁹ These schemes span all age ranges, but it is estimated that over two-thirds focus on children and young people under the age of 24. This recognises the need to support young people beyond family and friends networks, and the energy for doing so. However, a survey of projects across the UK found that only 11% named looked-after children as a primary client group.⁴⁰

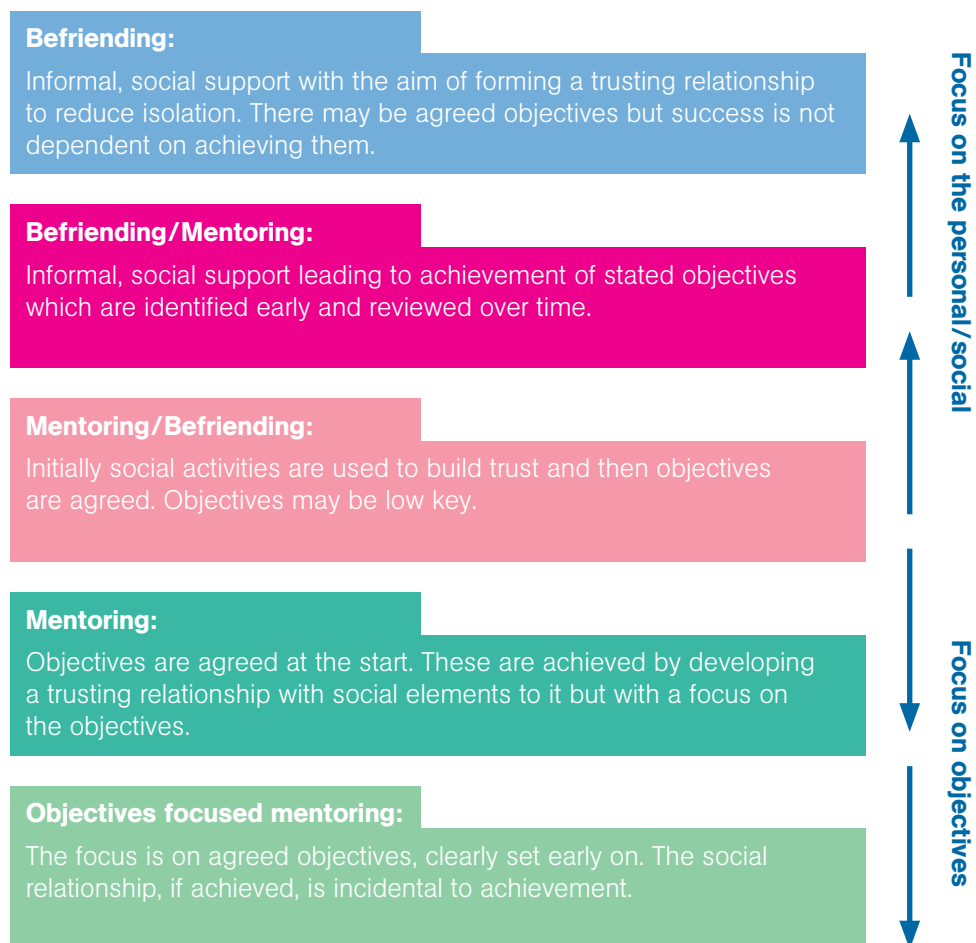
Defining mentoring and befriending

The terms mentoring and befriending often appear side by side and seem interchangeable. Both involve developing a relationship with one person, or developing relationships in a group setting.

The difference between mentoring and befriending is around the relevance or not of particular activities and goal-setting. A mentoring relationship generally implies setting of particular goals, eg: around learning and education, and is likely to be time-limited. A befriending relationship is less formal in its aims, more fluid in its activities and approach and focused on supportive social relationships often over a longer time period. It is more about developing a person-to-person understanding and supportive bond.

In reality, unless a scheme is very tightly defined, it is quite likely that a relationship will incorporate elements of both mentoring and befriending, much as many natural friendships do. This is likely to be especially the case in working with young people, for whom a connection with the other person is likely to be especially important for motivation and engagement. From this perspective, making a distinction between mentoring and befriending may be too binary. A skilful approach could allow for flexibility between the roles, adjusting the nature of the relationship and activities depending on a child's changing needs and preferences.

Figure 1: A spectrum from befriending to mentoring⁴¹



Models of mentoring and befriending

Across the spectrum of mentoring and befriending schemes there is a multitude of different models containing features of choices, key among which are:

- Mode of interaction: most schemes are based on one-to-one interactions, but there are schemes implementing group sessions, with new schemes emerging around online e-mentoring.
- Profile of mentor/befriender: for example, in some cases peer mentoring is intended to match mentors and mentees with common experience; there may also be a particular choice made around the target age for mentors, for example, Community Service Volunteers' (CSV) Grandmentors scheme specifically matches young people with older mentors.⁴²

- Focus of meetings: related to the extent to which the scheme is goals-oriented the type of activities mentors and mentees engage in can differ substantially. In some cases the activity may focus around sport or music for example, in others the engagement is more flexible and focused on day-to-day social activities such as going to a café or visiting a museum or park.
- Frequency and flexibility: Clarity around expectations is important but schemes may differ both in terms of how often mentors and mentees meet and also how much flexibility there is to rearrange meetings.
- Length of relationship: In part this relates to the model that is being applied in a scheme, with mentoring relationships tending to be time-limited and befriending relationships more open-ended.
- Remuneration: most schemes engage volunteer mentors, with a small budget provided to fund activities such as going to the cinema. Some schemes do however remunerate mentors, particularly where they are goal-driven.

Considerations for mentoring/befriending looked-after children

Being clear about the nature and conduct of any mentoring/befriending relationship from the outset is paramount. While a mentoring or befriending arrangement can combine both emotional and practical support, great care is required in structuring and managing schemes, particularly so for vulnerable young people who may have experienced various forms of harm and loss.

Through our interviews and review of the literature, key themes and issues for consideration and clarification arose. These themes align with the features for success that were flagged in the government-funded national mentoring pilot for looked-after children.⁴³

1. Defining boundaries

Young people we spoke to highlighted the importance of establishing and understanding boundaries in any type of mentoring or befriending arrangement. Boundary-setting involves both practical issues, such as where meetings take place and methods of contact between mentor and mentee including sharing of contact information. It also involves broader issues of protection.

Issues of child protection were discussed with the group of young people and they also flagged the need to consider protection for the mentor as well. Some of the young people spoke particularly in favour of a peer-mentoring model but they recognised that this could pose personal challenges for the peer-mentor, where through their relationship with the mentee they would be reminded of issues they had faced in their past. This implies the need to ensure on-going support for the mentor, not just in managing their mentee relationship, but in having access to personal support themselves.

While mentoring and befriending schemes aim for the development of mutual trust, respect and perhaps friendship, there needs to be great sensitivity towards avoiding signs and signals that could be misinterpreted or be the cause of further harm.

“In some circumstances for example a child can misinterpret a hug or it can cause anxiety.”

In-house local authority provider of independent visiting services

What these and similar findings suggest is that schemes need to be skilfully and sensitively set up and managed. Avoidance of harm has to be paramount. Among other things, this means openly discussing issues of confidentiality and disclosure of information with mentors and mentees. Everyone needs to understand the boundaries of confidentiality with mentors well-equipped to handle information that arises appropriately.

“The trust is that you can tell the independent visitor things and they won’t tell everyone.”

Voluntary sector provider of independent visiting service

“You don’t want the mentor to report on you.”

Care-leaver

These quotes convey an important point that while mentor and mentee will understand that certain types of information cannot remain confidential, there is space for natural sharing of concerns or issues that won’t end up on the case file or be discussed among professionals.

2. Defining the relationship

In our discussion with young people, we talked about terminology which they felt was important. Neither the word ‘mentor’ nor ‘befriender’ seemed quite right to them. In general there was a preference for ‘mentor’ in that it got to the point, while ‘befriender’ had the connotation of the young person being unable to make friends on their own. Elsewhere terms such as ‘visitor’ and ‘ally’ have been used.

Beyond defining the appropriate term, in general interviewees felt that the role of the mentor was more akin to that of an aunt or uncle, rather than a friend. This was because there was an essential element of status that was important to the relationship. It implied a close relationship but with some mutual understanding of appropriate distance or personal space and respect for a degree of authority which could be partly age-related.

“It’s like an aunt/uncle relationship.”

Various interviewees described it this way

“It would be a huge relief to pass problems over to someone and not have to worry. Someone like a counsellor but without having to sit in a chair and cry and stuff.”

Care leaver

This aspect of mentoring ties in with achieving boundaries discussed above. A certain distance in the nature of the relationship can help provide necessary protection without losing the deep fundamental of caring.

3. Payment

As mentioned previously, a consistent finding in our conversations and in the literature is that children value someone who isn't paid to see them and spend time with them. Even so, it should be noted that some care-leavers felt that payment was not so relevant.

"It's massive for the young people that their visitor isn't paid."

Voluntary sector provider of independent visiting service

We heard from one volunteer about the impact that finding out that she was not paid to visit had on her mentee. It seemed to represent a positive shift in the relationship with the child once that was understood.

4. Consistency and frequency

A key finding from a government pilot was that young people and mentors both highlighted the importance of consistency in the frequency and regularity of meetings.⁴⁴ It was important for the young person to feel they could rely on the mentor being there as arranged and preferably at the same time each week. A structure to the sessions also helped with both parties knowing from the outset what the boundaries and the duration of the relationship would be.

5. Building in choice and involvement

In our group discussion with young people it was agreed unanimously that children and young people should have a say in the type of person they wanted as a mentor and also some control over the set up and running of the scheme. One social worker described how there are lots of people around the child, professionals predominantly, who all have their own role to fulfil. But a mentoring/befriending relationship is a chance for a greater child-led approach. This finding echoes an earlier review of independent visiting (a model of befriending described in more detail below) in Northern Ireland which found that:

Choice was also an important factor. Being able to develop a relationship with a non-professional adult in whom they had a choice about their age and gender, the level of information they shared with them and the degree they were involved in their lives was also clearly empowering and beneficial.⁴⁵

This chimes closely with co-production, an approach that involves service users in decision-making around service design. A co-produced scheme might engage young people themselves to determine significant aspects of the operating model, starting with whether or not they would like a mentor, the desired character of the relationship, how long it lasts, and so on.

Closely related to choice and involvement on the part of children and young people, the young person's group as a whole felt there would be real merit in groups of young people and mentors getting together. Even if a child had a dedicated mentor bringing everyone together would mean expanding the network and, since you can't get everything from one person, getting different things from different adults. Another idea was that children should be able to take other friends not in care to group get-togethers.

The idea of matching through group open days was also discussed (“like speed-dating”) although it was recognised that there could be a problem if there were a few popular adults that more than one child wanted as their mentor. On the other hand, a group fun day approach might make the process of matching more natural.

Example models of mentoring/befriending for children in and leaving care

As part of our research we explored two schemes representing different approaches along the befriending/mentoring spectrum depicted in Figure 1 above. Our intention was to examine differences and similarities in order to help clarify common elements and to highlight the choices which are available in considering potential responses to differences in need and circumstance.

The two approaches researched for this study were:

- Independent visiting – this is the predominant model of befriending currently available for some looked-after children which receives statutory support through the Children’s Act;
- Chance UK’s mentoring scheme.

As well as looking at these two schemes in some detail, we also reviewed approaches that support care-leavers as they make the transition to independent living.

1. Befriending through independent visiting

The Children Act 1989 placed a duty on local authorities to provide an independent visitor for a child in care who was not in regular contact with their family. This duty was extended in the revised Children and Young Persons Act 2008 (section 16)⁴⁶:

A local authority looking after a child must appoint an independent person to be the child’s visitor if –

a. The child falls within a description prescribed in regulations made by the appropriate national authority; or

b. In any other case, it appears to them that it would be in the child’s interests to do so. (our emphasis)

Independent visiting schemes aim to enable a befriending relationship between a child in foster or residential care and an independent, unpaid volunteer. Schemes can be run either in-house by the local authority or by voluntary sector organisations commissioned by the local authority.

Children are referred to an available independent visiting scheme by their social worker or independent reviewing officer. They tend to be referred when there is little contact with adults outside the foster home, or when a child is found to be shy, withdrawn, or to have low self-esteem. The child is able to choose whether or not they wish to participate and for how long, but we heard from interviewees that it was rare for a child not to want an independent visitor.

The fact that the independent visiting model adopts a befriending rather than mentoring approach means that it is not objectives-focused but is rather focused on building a relationship of trust between the volunteer and the child. In interviews, providers described the role of the visitor as being modelled on a friend, ally or aunt/uncle. Young people themselves have described having an independent visitor as being like having an older sister/brother, mother or close friend.⁴⁷

“It’s someone who is there for you, but you aren’t recreating the parent relationship.”

Independent visiting scheme manager

Independent visiting schemes are set up with clear parameters around the frequency and duration of visits, types of activity, boundaries, and reporting requirements. This gives the child, the volunteer and the child’s carers stability and a level of certainty about what to expect, which is important as a basis of trust. This is not to say that the schemes operate rigidly. There is and needs to be flexibility around precise times for meetings given that children may have activities going on, and volunteers are often in full-time work which can involve travel for example, but it is critical that arrangements are well managed and not chaotic, otherwise children may feel let down if plans change at short notice.

Typically meetings for younger children may initially be weekly and then fortnightly, while for older children a monthly arrangement is often normal taking account of the changing nature of the young person’s time, meeting friends etc.

In interviews conducted for this research we heard that matches often last for a long time, in one case 11 years. Programme managers described an average length of relationships between visitors and children of three years.

Despite the requirement on local authorities to provide an independent visitor for a looked-after child if it is considered in their interests to have one, our findings suggest that relatively few looked-after children benefit from having an independent visitor. There also appears to be some confusion about local authorities’ responsibilities in practice.⁴⁸ It was beyond the scope of this research to determine how much the potential demand for children to have an independent visitor matches against supply of places across local authorities. However, indications suggested a substantial gap. For example, one local authority had 43 matches in place and availability for a further five, but two to three referrals each week. This suggests that in this case at least twice as many children as have the opportunity for an independent visitor were already identified as potentially benefiting from it.

Data from a further two local authorities revealed that the number of children with an independent visitor was less than 10% of the care population. One interviewee believed, however, that the majority of the care population in his area, especially those aged over ten, could benefit from having an independent visitor. Separately, a review conducted by the Children’s Rights Director for England found a higher figure, though still a minority at 29%, of surveyed children in care reporting having independent visitors. Of those

without an independent visitor, 80% reported never having been offered one; only one in five said they would not accept one if offered.⁴⁹

2. Mentoring: Chance UK example

Chance UK provides mentoring programmes for children aged between 5 and 11.⁵⁰ Although Chance UK typically works with children who are living at home with parents or relatives it also works with some children in foster care. Evaluation evidence suggests that this work improves the emotional and behavioural health of young people, an area of concern for looked-after children.⁵¹ Although the Chance UK model has very different characteristics from independent visiting, as discussed below where the two schemes are compared, this type of mentoring approach offers an alternative with real potential benefits for some looked-after children.

Chance UK's scheme is targeted to supporting children with specific behavioural or personal difficulties, who are considered to be at risk of developing anti-social or criminal behaviour in the future. Chance UK offers a contrasting model to the more generally applicable befriending approach offered through independent visiting because it provides mentoring as a time-limited, goals-oriented intervention. It is this aspect of the scheme, therefore, not its target population that is of interest here.

Chance UK's objectives are to:

- introduce more stability into the children's lives
- reduce the isolation they and their families may be experiencing
- directly address the difficulties experienced by each child
- support the children as they find the motivation and life skills they need to move forward
- channel their disruptive energy into projects that encourage a sense of personal achievement
- engender in them a sense of self-worth.

Children may be referred to Chance UK in various ways, including contact by schools, parents or social services. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is used to identify which children are likely to benefit most, with high scores demonstrating significant distress and behavioural consequences. Chance UK began as an early intervention, crime prevention scheme, recognising that by the time a child reaches teenage years the potential for diverting them away from involvement in criminal activity may reduce significantly.

“There's things you can do with 5 to 11 year olds that you can't do with other kids. You can say to a 5 or 11 year old that there's someone who would like to come and take you out and do nice activities with you and they'll say “yes please”. That might not happen with older ones.”

Chance UK interviewee

Typically, the programme aims to work with children and their families because meeting the needs of the child very often means meeting needs of the family. This means that in addition to providing a mentor for the child, Chance UK also provides a parent programme.

“With the mentor going into the home every week there is someone who isn’t a social worker who can see the needs of the family.”

Chance UK interviewee

The Chance UK mentoring programme runs in stages:

- First three months: during this time the mentor will be getting to know the child, building up the child’s confidence, and developing trust and understanding.
- Second six months: at the beginning of this stage, the mentor works with the child to determine goals that the child would like to achieve. There are likely to be three goals: (1) **behavioural** – eg: “to be able to walk away from a fight in the playground”; (2) **educational** – eg: “to complete a project about my heritage”; (3) **fun** – this is about building on a strength the child has, with the aim of working on something which can be a protective factor in the child’s life in future, eg: “to join and be a regular member of the local junior football team”.
- Final three months: this is a time to work towards the end of the programme for the child, to talk about fears and expectations and put in place follow-on strategies and support.

The nature of the relationship between the child and mentor is based on the mentor as role model. Staff at Chance UK described how the scheme aims to help children work with their mentor to understand how relationships work, especially with peers. This can help the child learn what makes people like (eg: being kind) or not like (eg: being violent) others. The relationship also aims to be practical in order to help children stay away from trouble, eg: helping to work out a route home from school to avoid certain streets where gang activity is concentrated.

3. Comparing and contrasting independent visiting and the Chance UK model

Core processes

There is a high degree of similarity in process management between independent visiting and the Chance UK scheme. In both cases great care and resources are devoted to recruiting, training, managing and supporting volunteer mentor/befrienders, and to achieving best matches between volunteers and children. Good practice features are set out in further detail in Annex 1.

Meeting plans

Beyond these process and management similarities there are important differences between the two schemes with a much less directed, more flexible approach inherent to independent visiting versus the time-limited and goals-oriented nature of the Chance UK model.

For Chance UK, meetings between the child and their mentor take place weekly for between two and four hours. This is more intense, and less flexible

than in independent visiting, where frequency is more likely to be fortnightly or monthly, and meetings may be rearranged to suit changing schedules for either child or volunteer.

Endings

The time-limited nature of the Chance UK programme provides a particularly interesting alternative to a more open-ended befriending approach, especially if we are thinking about schemes that could help children in care. The concern is of course that for children in care they will have experienced separation from their birth family and possibly further separations from carers which may feel like further abandonment or rejection. It may seem that yet another relationship with an adult mentor who then leaves them after a relatively short period would be adding further insult to their experiences. There would be a vital role here for the skilled judgement of social workers and mentoring scheme providers, but critically of course space for the child to reflect on what they would like and whether a shorter, goals-oriented programme might be what they are looking for.

With the concerns about separation and abandonment heightened in the case of looked-after children, we spent considerable time talking to Chance UK staff about the ending process. They described the philosophy behind the one-year programme being to equip a child with life skills to build up their independence and self-sufficiency. Staff were clear that endings were managed and discussed right from the start with the children and volunteers to ensure clarity and no false promises. A huge amount of attention was paid to putting in place exit strategies and follow-on support after the programme ends. This might include, for example, enrolment in after-school clubs with Chance UK helping to ensure that grants are in place to cover the cost of this. Chance UK aims to develop a good relationship with the schools so that teachers and support staff are aware of the child's ongoing needs and can be ready to offer help and support.

An interesting perspective was that for many children, in care or not, previous endings to relationships with adults in their lives may well have been chaotic and confusing (eg: a parent being sent to prison). A time-limited mentoring programme which is well managed and thoughtful can provide an alternative and positive experience of an ending. Since all sorts of relationships end for a variety of reasons, offering this more positive, predictable – albeit still sad – experience could perhaps be a counter-weight to previous negative experiences. We heard from more than one interviewee that the danger with open-ended relationships could be a sense of drift which itself does not offer a positive experience to children.

The one-year nature of the programme may also make it more possible for children to have experienced a positive role model. We heard from one Chance UK volunteer that he would not have felt able to commit for more than a year because of his own circumstances. He felt that the time-limited nature of the commitment made it more likely that volunteers would come forward.

The graduation ceremony at the end of the year is important because it is about closure on a high note, with the emphasis on achievement and future potential.

4. Transitions from care

Research indicates that the most important times for a young person to access 'human' support is entering care around the age of 13 and when a young person is transitioning out of care.⁵² This was also mentioned in our interviews with social workers. Young people we spoke to described how children from care have independence thrust on them, quickly having to sink or swim. They described how simple things such as knowing how to read an electricity meter, could be daunting without an obvious person you know you can turn to for advice and help.

A number of organisations provide mentoring schemes for young people leaving care, including TACT, the Prince's Trust, Catch22 and Circles of Support to mention a few.

The transition out of care inevitably means young people have to engage independently with life issues, such as sorting out utilities and looking for training opportunities or employment. Some of this is knowledge of practicalities but social skills become all the more important, as do networks of support and an understanding of a range of social activities.

The Prince's Trust Leaving Care Mentoring project is one example of a scheme offering a year-long mentoring programme to support young people through their transition from care to independence.⁵³ Young people are matched with volunteer mentors who they initially meet with fortnightly, then monthly. Mentors aim to inspire and motivate young people, but also offer a range of practical supports, including helping with access to benefits, housing, and health services, and providing guidance on job searching, education and training.

In contrast to independent visiting schemes, leaving care programmes tend to be time-limited as in the case of the Prince's Trust project but nevertheless as might be expected the relationship between mentor and mentee has been found to extend beyond the formal length of the scheme provision where a real bond is forged.⁵⁴

CSV's Grandmentors programme is built around "inter-generational" mentoring.⁵⁵ Though not initially intended specifically for care-leavers, many referrals come from Leaving Care teams in inner London boroughs, and the programme is intended to assist mentees in adapting to independent living. Volunteer mentors, usually aged 50 or over, are matched with young people aged between 17 and 24.

The programme is predicated on a belief that older mentors can offer younger mentees the benefits of their life experience. Grandmentors assist mentees in developing a personalised action plan together with short- and long-term goals. The duration and ending of the relationship is handled on a case-by-case basis, but at least a six-month commitment is expected. Findings from a programme evaluation are briefly outlined in Chapter 5 below.

What can mentoring and befriending offer?

Some interviewees for this research expressed the view that if the care system worked properly then mentoring/befriending schemes would be

unnecessary. Foster/residential homes would mimic family life sufficiently for carers to perform the supporting adult (parenting) role more fully, and social workers would have more availability for developing a nurturing, personal relationship with children.

The counter-argument put forward by others suggested that even in the best circumstances where a looked-after child has a significant trusted adult in their life, be it foster carer, family relation or friend, it is nevertheless important to achieve a network of support around them. For some children, one important option for building a network is to include a mentor/befriender. Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of this role is that the mentor/befriender can occupy a space somewhat separate from the professional relationships central to the care system and focused solely on the personal needs of the child. However, it was also clear from our interviews that it was important to guard against any risk that mentors and befrienders could be seen as substitutes for rather than complements to professionals and services that make up the team around the child.⁵⁶

The case of care-leavers provides an interesting insight into the additional support that a mentor can offer. The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 strengthened the support for care-leavers via the role of personal adviser to assist with needs assessment and pathway planning. In their study, Clayden and Stein (2005) noted that it was somewhat paradoxical that with enhanced professional support there was still a place for mentors to help achieve positive outcomes for care-leavers.⁵⁷ Their analysis pointed to young people's reflections on the different nature of the mentor relationship from that with professionals and family members which were often troubled.⁵⁸

In summary, the role of mentor/befriender is, and should be, substantially different in nature from that of the primary care-giver or key decision-makers. Mentoring cannot substitute or compensate for lack of a stable relationship with a caregiver but it can be an important source of continuity and support through the care career. From our interviews and a review of other evidence in the literature it becomes apparent that we should not underestimate the importance to many children of adults who make time for them without remuneration, and who are almost completely separate from decisions affecting where they live and with whom.

Any child may benefit from advice from or time spent with a supportive, understanding adult who they get on well with outside the home. This is likely to be as true, or more so, for children who are not living with their birth families. It is not necessary to cast mentors and befrienders as being in competition with social workers or foster carers. It has been noted in research that there is a tendency among professionals to discount the value of ordinary or mainstream activity in solving problems for looked-after children and to default to seeking professional involvement.⁵⁹ This is to miss a fundamental of life that ordinary activities and interactions can be the medium for meeting needs and turning corners. It has been suggested that behind every young person who is doing well there is someone consciously or subconsciously playing such a mentoring role.

In considering the value of mentoring/befriending, although the principal issue relates to the value to the child, the value to the team around the child is also imperative. Therefore, the quality of the mentor/befriender has to be clear. Essential qualities in that person will certainly include reliability, thoughtfulness and transparency. This is crucial in driving perceptions of professionals and carers.

Challenges in delivering mentoring and befriending schemes

Our conversations with scheme organisers, participants and professionals highlighted several key challenges to successful delivery of mentoring and befriending schemes as follows:

- **Recruitment:** On the one hand we heard in our interviews that attracting sufficient numbers of volunteers, especially men and people from different ethnic backgrounds, represents an ongoing challenge to scheme organisers. The knock-on effect of this is to reduce the options for matching as successfully as possible across a cohort of children.

On the other hand, we heard from one social worker who had herself been a foster parent for a number of years, that fostering attracts a lot of people but the intensity of the commitment can be too much for them. There may therefore be a potential pool of people who have not been fully accessed as mentoring and befriending may offer them a way to be involved that is less demanding.

In our interview with one of the Chance UK volunteers we heard that he would have felt unable to commit to an involvement beyond one year. This suggests that mentoring programmes where there are clearer demarcations in the relationship could be easier to recruit to.

- **Social worker access and awareness:** It is suggested that social workers either may not have access to independent visiting for children in their caseload where provision is limited in the local authority, or that they are unaware of its availability or its value. Lack of awareness will certainly reduce referrals, and lack of availability causes an absolute block to access.
- **Resources:** Resources for what may be considered non-core activities are likely to be particularly under pressure and vulnerable to change. In the current climate of austerity where cost-cutting is a paramount concern to local authorities, independent agencies are under pressure to reduce costs which may cause strain and this can translate in to reduced levels of provision.

A further aspect of concerns about resources was mentioned by several volunteers who found it a struggle to take their mentee out on the very small budgets provided for meetings and activities.

- **Perceptions:** Most interviewees with experience of running or volunteering for mentoring and befriending schemes had found that foster carers and other professionals were mainly positive about the benefits of an additional personal relationship for the child. However, some mentioned that initially, and understandably, there may be some caution. We also heard that

occasionally, carers would use withdrawal of visits by the mentor/befriender as a disciplinary tool which schemes are clear should be avoided.

- **Children's responses:** One of the independent volunteers spoke about the challenge of visiting her mentee where she was evoking little response during her visits. She had found this affected her motivation.

5. Evidencing outcomes

“ We can't just say that relationships lead to better outcomes. What's the evidence?”⁶⁰

Qualitative evidence gathered through our interviews and focus groups described a series of interconnecting outcomes from mentoring and befriending for looked-after children and care-leavers. The diagram below summarises these findings in impact map form to show how a positive experience of mentoring and befriending is expected to contribute to long-term beneficial impacts for children and young people.

The long-term outcomes shown in green boxes in the diagram echo the common aims that the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation has noted across the multitude of mentoring and befriending schemes:⁶¹

- Building social skills, confidence and self-esteem
- Reducing unwanted behaviour such as criminal activity, truanting or drug abuse
- Developing knowledge and skills
- Expanding opportunities
- Reducing isolation.

We asked respondents how mentoring and befriending delivers benefits to children and young people, and the most frequent responses were: providing help with practical problems, having fun, having a role model, providing emotional support, offering the chance to try new things, and modelling positive relationships.

The relationship has never been closed off even when he says he doesn't want to see his independent visitor anymore. The familiarity has been very important for him; she is his only consistent figure. He has nothing else to anchor him, everything changes in his life. His troubles inform his relationships mirroring his experience, and his behaviour stems from it and is perpetuated by it. For him the independent visitor is an unthreatening relationship, a bit of fun. Someone not trying to deal with his behaviour, someone to chat to, who can feed back views if that's what he wants. That is his longest relationship.⁶²

The non-professional, unpaid nature of the relationship was consistently mentioned. This was considered to be critical to the tenor of the relationship and to the value of mentoring/befriending experienced by children and young people.

The issue of participation in a mentoring/befriending arrangement as a way of giving children a voice and choices they rarely experience was raised by a significant number of our respondents. It is also an issue highlighted in the literature, as is the experience of constancy via a mentoring and befriending relationship.⁶³

The figure below was developed through our conversations with young people in and leaving care, social workers, foster carers, voluntary agencies and volunteers, and policy-makers. Although it has not been tested in practice, we hope it may offer a starting point to schemes interested in developing their thinking around the outcomes they seek to create.

Figure 2: Depicting outcomes

Outcomes for children and young people

Inputs

- Role model for relationships and social interaction
- Emotional support
- Practical advice & support
- Making time for the child or young person
- Feeling cared for as the main or sole purpose (relating to unpaid/non-professional relationship)

Initial outcomes

- Enjoyment & having fun
- Trying new things
- Having choices, eg: whether to have a mentor/befriender; type of person & activities
- Being listened to
- Help in resolving immediate issues/concerns

Medium-term outcomes

- Reduced stress
- Experience of a positive/'normal' relationship
- Sense of being liked and cared for as a person
- Having someone to be 'normal' with – not feeling judged
- Positive behaviour change
- Experience of consistency & constancy

Long-term outcomes

- Personal well-being: improved confidence; self-esteem; trust; resilience; able to ask for help
- Personal relationships: better able to form and maintain relationships with peers and new contacts
- Social interaction: expanded network of support; improved social interaction, skills and behaviours
- Practical skills & problem-solving: eg: staying safe; making decisions; budgeting
- Achievement: personal; educational; developing skills and range of experience

Potential outcomes for individual and society

- Reduced truancy and exclusion from school
- Reduced risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training)
- Reduction in risk of youth and adult offending
- Reduced risk of addiction
- Reduced risk of mental ill-health

Broader relevance of outcomes from mentoring/befriending

The green boxes at the bottom of the figure above show the domains that long-term outcomes from mentoring and befriending for looked-after children (shown in the blue box) could be expected to impact in the long term. Across these outcomes domains, data suggests that young people who are or have been looked after far more poorly than the general population (see Box B). In summary, relative to their peers, young people leaving care tend to:⁶⁴

- have lower levels of educational attainment
- be unemployed
- live in unstable and poor quality housing or be homeless
- be young parents
- have mental health problems
- have relatively high levels of drug use
- be over-represented in prison.⁶⁵
- These poorer outcomes have been found to relate to individuals' pre-care experiences, intensified by instability, placement movement and disruption while in care.⁶⁶ Further, care-leavers are expected to become independent and self-sufficient much earlier than their non-care peers, thus accelerating their transition to adulthood.

Box B: Key statistics – outcomes for looked-after children versus general

Education

- Special Educational Needs (SEN) are identified in 67.8% of the looked-after population (most commonly behavioural, emotional and social difficulties), versus 18.8% of the general child population.
- 15.3% of looked-after children achieve five or more A*–C GCSEs including English and Maths, versus 58% of non-looked-after children.
- The rate of permanent exclusions from school of looked-after children at 0.15% is over twice that of the general school-age population at 0.07%.
- The rate of fixed-term exclusions from school of looked-after children at 11.36% is nearly three times that of the general school-age population at 4.05%.

NEET

- Half of care-leavers have been found to be NEET at least once; 20% for six months or more.
- Of young people aged 19 in March 2013 who were looked after at age 16, 34% are NEET. The national rate of NEET is 13.9% for 16–18 year olds and 22% for 19–24 year olds.

Criminal justice

- Looked-after children make up 33% of boys and 61% of girls in custody, despite representing fewer than 1% of all children in England.
- 6.2% of looked-after children between 10 and 17 years old had been convicted or subject to a final warning or reprimand compared with 1.5% in the general 10 to 17 year old population.

Emotional and behavioural health

- Only half of all looked-after children have emotional and behavioural health which is considered normal.
- 40.9% of looked after boys and 33.2% of looked after girls had Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire (SDQ) scores considered “cause for concern.” In a representative sample of the general population of British 5 to 15 year olds, this level was found in between 8.1% and 12.7% of respondents.

Sources:

Department for Education (2013). *Statistical First Release: Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England, as at March 2013*.

Audit Commission (2010). *Against the Odds: Re-engaging young people in education, employment or training*.

SDQ: Normative SDQ Data from Britain (Accessed: <http://www.sdqinfo.com/UKNorm.html>).

Prison Reform Trust (2014). *Prison: the facts - Bromley Briefings Summer 2014*.

Indicators of change achieved through mentoring and befriending

The challenge for mentoring and befriending programmes including those for looked-after children is in establishing robust indicator data in order to assess impact. We heard from a volunteer and a scheme provider that it was difficult to pin down concretely and measurably the difference independent visiting made. They noted that the children talked about enjoying seeing their mentor/befriender and had become less shy with them, but that it was difficult to be more specific.

Children will say it's "awesome" and that they love having an independent visitor; independent visitors will say they love spending time with the children.

In the case of one independent visiting service, CSV Allies programme, progress is framed against Every Child Matters outcomes domains (being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and economic well-being). Data is collected in conversation with volunteers and young people themselves. Overall, the programme gathered consistent data and evidence for the scheme helping achieve outcomes around enjoying and achieving, gaining new experience, achieving more independence and being more confident.

In our interview with one local authority we explored the reasons why the council had recently expanded its provision of independent visiting. We heard that there was a general recognition that the programme was effective in providing a positive influence for vulnerable children. There was also a reflection that investing in an approach that helped children achieve better outcomes was valuable both in itself and for preventative reasons – costs down the line from poor outcomes could be high, as discussed above and shown later in the data in this section. These descriptions, which resonate strongly with practitioners and care-leavers alike but which are difficult to measure and value, are reflected in the following quote from the Council on Social Action:

It is not only possible for one human being to make a real and lasting difference to another, it is often the only thing that ever does.⁶⁷

It has been noted in a number of studies that robust research evidence for the effects of mentoring and befriending is relatively weak.⁶⁸ Positive outcomes very similar to those found in our primary research are consistently described in various studies but, as noted above, measurement frameworks and data have been lacking. This is partly because some of the psycho-social outcomes are more difficult to gauge, because attribution of outcomes between different services maybe difficult to establish and can be reductive, and because longitudinal data is not available.⁶⁹

There is a suggestion from reviewing the literature that while evidence is mixed, there are indications of modest though significant improvements in educational and employment, and behavioural and relationship outcomes but that there is less evidence of achievement on emotional and psychological outcomes.⁷⁰ This has led to the suggestion that mentoring may be more effective than befriending. Some caution is needed here, however, until further evidence becomes available. This is because there is the possibility that

mentoring outcomes, in being related to defined objectives, are more visible and lend themselves better to measurement and evaluation than the more loosely defined personal aims of befriending which are around delivering longer-term emotional benefits.

Just as important as highlighting the beneficial impacts of mentoring and befriending, the potential negative impacts of such schemes need to be acknowledged.⁷¹ There are particular concerns about the effects of ending a mentoring/befriending relationship, especially if it is unplanned or unexpected. The format of the Chance UK scheme specifically builds endings in as described earlier. One reason given for this was that, for children who have often experienced chaotic endings to relationships, a planned ending, marked through special events such as the graduation ceremony, can give an alternative, positive experience.

In this section, we provide a summary of evidence on mentoring and befriending for looked-after children from a selection of studies.

Mentoring pilot for looked-after children

As part of a government-funded scheme, 28 pilots were commissioned by the charity Rainer to provide one-to-one mentoring relationships for looked-after children aged between 10 and 15. Over 446 matches were achieved of which 98 had been running for over six months at the time of evaluation. The key aims of the pilots were to help with schoolwork, improve school attendance, improve social and life skills, and help young people participate in social networks and group activities.

The young people gave feedback via baseline and follow-up questionnaires after six months. Outcomes around school, relationships, feelings about themselves, hobbies and activities were monitored, and most also completed a standardised objective measure of progress: the SDQ.

Key findings across the pilots were as follows:

| Outcome domain | Overall comment | Reported results |
|--|--|--|
| School attainment | Significant improvement | 73% – improved attendance 68% – improved schoolwork 60% – better behaviour |
| Feelings about self | Highly positive | 74% – improved feelings about the future 62% – improved feelings about self 63% – more likely to stay out of trouble (though one-third reported only slight improvement in controlling anger and staying out of trouble) |
| Relationships | Most reported improvement | 80% – better relationships with friends 71% – better relationships with those they lived with including foster carers 68% – better relationships with family 63% better relationships with social workers |
| Hobbies and activities | Most felt their opportunities had improved | 73% – more opportunity to meet new people 66% – more opportunities to learn new activities or play sport |
| Stakeholder feedback on outcomes for the children and young people | The greatest improvements were in areas of greatest need | >66% – improved confidence and feeling better about themselves >50% – improved relationships with professionals 50% – improved schoolwork and participation in activities |
| Strengths and difficulties | Positive objective results | Scores after six months: Statistically significant fall in average scores for total difficulties and emotional problems Statistically significant rise in average scores for pro-social behaviour |

Chance UK

As noted above, the Chance UK model of mentoring offers a different approach to working with children, including looked-after children. We stress the need for caution in reading across groups of children in terms of potential for experience and benefits from a given approach. The Chance UK model is not explicitly designed for looked-after children, although some are mentored through it.

Published evaluation evidence of Chance UK's work has taken place across a five-year period using the SDQ. The study, produced by Goldsmiths University also undertook a sample of longitudinal case studies.

Overall the key finding was a significant improvement in SDQ scores from the one-year programme.

- 98% of 100 children sampled had reduced levels of behavioural difficulty after a year of mentoring
- 51% of these children ended the year with no behavioural difficulty at all.⁷²

As well as analysing the SDQ records, the Goldsmiths evaluation included a retrospective study on a sample of the children. This revealed positive reports from parents, carers, teachers and mentors in terms of improvements in personal and interpersonal behavioural control and learning new skills and having new experiences. The report concluded with the suggestion that the results demonstrate an overall improvement in mentee's general behaviour across everyday life in various contexts and environments (including home and school).

For local authorities considering new approaches to their work with looked-after children, these findings may be of interest. Research indicates that the SDQ provides accurate estimates of disorder prevalence among looked-after children.⁷³ SDQ scores are known to be significantly worse for looked-after children as against a general population of young people, with nearly 40% considered "a cause for concern."^{74, 75} Therefore, any documented improvement produced by a scheme such as Chance UK is worth further consideration.

Evidence for care-leavers

In a report published in 2005, researchers reviewed the evidence from 20 projects offering mentoring for young care-leavers.⁷⁶ Quantitatively this study found:

- 76% of young people achieved the goals they had set out to achieve, while 24% had not. Goals were mainly around moving successfully to independent living from care, with some specific and some more generalised tasks and aims.
- 52% achieved other goals that emerged during the mentoring relationship, while 48% did not achieve goals that had emerged.
- 93% had some positive outcome by the end of the mentoring relationship: either an instrumental, task-focused goal or more expressive feature related to having someone to talk to, such as improved self-confidence or ability to manage relationships.
- 39% had made some plans for their future in at least one area of their lives by the end of the mentoring relationship. Plans were predominantly made around employment, accommodation, education and personal development.
- The longer the mentoring relationship lasted the more likelihood there was of a positive outcome. Young people who were mentored for over a year were more likely to have achieved their original goals and to have made future plans.
- In 50% of the relationships there were some kinds of negative outcome, although there were also positive outcomes in these relationships. Negative outcomes were typically not related to the effect of mentoring relationships themselves, but involved unplanned endings to the relationships, an inability to form an effective match at the start, and young people's lives becoming chaotic despite additional support.

Qualitatively the study found that:

“Where they found their mentor’s help most valuable was generally in terms of building their self-confidence, improving their emotional well-being and developing their social and practical skills. Although this was perhaps difficult to measure, the young people interviewed were sure that it was their mentoring relationship that had helped them in these areas.”

Young people described the support they valued as follows:

- Advice on independent living and practical support such as buying cheap furniture, and general budgeting.
- Help finding work or training opportunities.
- Help with building confidence and self-esteem including through facilitating networks, eg: introducing the young person to other groups of young people.
- Discussing relationships and providing listening support as well as advice which was important for emotional well-being.
- Young people valued the accessibility and informality of the mentoring relationship, contrasting it with professional help.

The study reported that mentoring had generally been successful but young people recognised that it had its limitations. Mentors could not help in all aspects of their lives although it was not necessarily easy for young people to specify where their mentor had not been able to help.

In terms of longer-term impact, young people found it quite difficult to identify outcomes. So many things had changed for them during that transitional period that it was difficult to attribute what change was due to mentoring. Some young people said that while they were being mentored they weren’t sure of its value but since then they had come to realise how much they had benefited.

Young people valued the accessibility, attention and informality of the mentoring relationship, contrasting it with professional help. And mentoring was experienced differently to relationships with partners or friends.

Grandmentors

As noted above, CSV’s Grandmentors programme matches mentors, typically aged 50 and over, with younger mentees. Though not initially intended expressly for looked-after populations, the programme receives the balance of its referrals from Leaving Care teams. A 2013 evaluation included the results of a theory of change exercise, a review of the project’s initial implementation, and a prospective economic evaluation.⁷⁷ It also reported on recorded needs and impacts across a subset of mentoring relationships for which quantitative assessment data was available. These results are reproduced below:

| Need | Mentees with a need when mentoring commenced | | Mentees for whom need was addressed during mentoring | | Mentees for whom there was an improvement | |
|--|--|-----|--|-----|---|-----|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Not in education, employment or training | 11 | 33% | 3 | 9% | 3 | 9% |
| Health condition (mental or physical) | 13 | 39% | 4 | 12% | 4 | 12% |
| Difficulty related to asylum or immigration status | 3 | 9% | 3 | 9% | 3 | 9% |
| Difficulty in transition to independent living | 19 | 58% | 5 | 15% | 5 | 15% |
| Deficit in life skills eg timekeeping, communication, managing relationships | 25 | 76% | 12 | 36% | 12 | 36% |
| Deficit in basic skills eg numeracy and literacy | 23 | 70% | 9 | 27% | 8 | 24% |
| Deficit in confidence or self-esteem | 28 | 85% | 13 | 39% | 11 | 33% |

Future evaluation

The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation has been working to encourage more effective evaluation of mentoring and befriending schemes across sectors in order to provide greater understanding and demonstration of impact. In the immediate term, robust evaluation is required to meet the requirements of funders and commissioners, but future access to resources will depend on evidencing the positive benefits of mentoring and befriending. In the current climate it is more urgent to bolster and formalise anecdotal evidence for the beneficial effects on vulnerable young people and children in care. Only then will it be possible to attract the investment required to expand the numbers of children and young people able to take up an opportunity to access a mentor or befriender.

Our findings in this research from interviews, group discussions and literature review are that there are consistent features of mentoring and befriending that are valued by children and young people. These features include the voluntary and less formal nature of the relationship. However, there are outstanding questions which require clarity, for example the extent to which success is related to or enhanced by some level of objective-setting. In our conversations we heard that sometimes it is the nature of a befriending relationship which carries no expectations that is valuable, and sometimes it is a degree of objective-setting in a mentoring relationship that is valuable. Individual young people place different values on different types of engagement. For this reason, it is important to focus more on the child and less on setting boundaries around the service offer.

6. Issues of cost and value

“ We believe that the greatest gains in reforming our care system are to be made in identifying and removing whatever barriers are obstructing the development of good personal relationships, and putting in place all possible means of supporting such relationships where they occur.”⁷⁸

The current fiscal and commissioning environment is highly challenging for independent visiting and other mentoring and befriending schemes. In our interviews with providers, we heard that there can be a struggle to meet the costs of services under existing commissioning arrangements, which are often subsidised through additional means such as grants from charitable foundations. It is increasingly important for programmes to evidence their impact in order to be sustained.

For a variety of reasons, some of which are outlined below, developing and marshalling this evidence is particularly challenging for mentoring and befriending schemes for young people:

The range of benefits identified by young people, volunteers, and practitioners include improved confidence and self-esteem, better relationships with friends, and increased personal resilience. Change in these areas is difficult to establish concretely, and valuation relies on approximation.

Many changes of primary interest to commissioners relate to future benefits in terms of positive life outcomes around employment, health, and conduct, connected to avoided costs from reduced use of the health, social service, and criminal justice systems. In the case of care-leavers, fiscal impacts may occur quite closely in time, but for younger children in care quantifiable benefits may not be realised for many years. This makes establishing the attribution – the extent of mentoring/befriending’s contribution to these changes – difficult to assess. Further, invest-to-save arguments are challenged by siloism and coordination problems. While schemes’ costs are borne at present, long-term outcomes can mean that eventual savings are realised elsewhere.

Mentoring/befriending relationships for looked-after children are distinguished by an informal, non-professional, and supportive approach, often very different to the relationships that they are surrounded by. As one care-leaver put it “people talked to me to fill in forms”. The very nature of a mentoring/befriending relationship is designed to avoid the idea of yet more assessment and monitoring. This makes them poorly suited to standardised collection of outcomes data. This makes them precisely ‘form-filling averse’

because attempts at measurement risk actively interfering with the outcomes being created.

Taken together, this represents a fundamental challenge to conventional approaches to the measurement and understanding of value. With little longitudinal data, typically large time lags, and complex links between interventions and outcomes, there are real questions about the validity of standard approaches to cost-benefit analysis in this area. These schemes exemplify the difficulties of valuing preventive action.

But there is abundant evidence of value. In our interviews and focus groups with young people and practitioners, there was a clearly identified gap in personal, emotional, and practical support faced by the care population, and a consensus that mentoring/befriending helps to fill this. Although various studies have reported that schemes are relatively “expensive,”⁷⁹ whether or not they are depends on the value of the long-term outcomes they generate. While robustly evidencing this value remains a core challenge for programmes themselves, researchers, and policy-makers, there have been limited attempts to arrive at monetary value. One developed method is break-even analysis.⁸⁰ This involves estimating the extent of change that would have to be achieved directly through an intervention in order for it to be cost effective. Rather than specifically producing a benefit-cost ratio, this invites a judgement on likely value for money. The problem is that it will remain a matter of policy-makers’ judgement without investment in longitudinal studies capable of producing more substantiated evidence.

Below, we present a brief analysis of a selection of headline costs that could be expected to reduce with a better journey through care to which mentoring and befriending can contribute. The outcomes selected relate to those described both in our interviews and in evaluations including the national mentoring pilot.⁸¹ The costs described relate to the lifetime costs of truancy, of conduct disorder (the most common presentation of mental health problems among looked-after children), and of young people becoming NEET.

Truancy

The lifetime cost of truancy for an individual has been calculated at £56,576.⁸² Taking a relatively high estimate of the per head financial cost of delivering mentoring/befriending our calculation shows that a one-year mentoring relationship would need to reduce the lifetime cost of truancy by around 7%, or three years of mentoring would need to reduce it by 21% (equivalent to resolving truancy problems for seven and 21 children in 100 respectively).

| | 1 year of M/B | 3 years of M/B |
|---|---------------|----------------|
| Cost of mentoring/befriending (M/B) | £4,000 | £12,000 |
| Lifetime cost (borne by the individual and society) | £56,576 | £56,576 |
| Break even | 7% | 21% |

It is helpful to assess these estimates against findings from the national mentoring pilot, which reported that, after six months, school attendance had improved by 73% across the cohort and school-work had improved

by 68%.⁸³ These figures do not immediately translate into equivalent savings on lifetime costs of truanting as they may not be sustained over time, but they are indicative of the scale of observed changes.

Mental ill-health

Looked-after children have significantly higher rates of mental health disorders than the general population.⁸⁴ A review found clinically significant conduct disorders in 37% of looked-after children.⁸⁵ The lifetime cost of adverse outcomes among those with childhood conduct disorder has been estimated at £225,000 per case. For those with “sub-threshold” conduct problems, this cost has been estimated at £75,000.⁸⁶

Although evaluation evidence of the direct effect of mentoring and befriending on mental health improvements is limited,⁸⁷ many findings indicate improved self-confidence, social skills and emotional well-being. The national mentoring pilot recorded, through SDQ scores, that mentored young people demonstrated positive changes in well-being and social skills. Additionally, stakeholders reported that more than three-quarters of young people were considered to lack confidence and needed to feel better about themselves. Following mentoring, more than two-thirds were judged to have improved in these areas.⁸⁸

Our calculation shows that a one-year mentoring relationship would need to reduce the lifetime cost of sub-threshold conduct disorders by around 5%, or three years of mentoring would need to reduce it by 16%.

| | 1 year of M/B | 3 years of M/B |
|---|---------------|----------------|
| Cost of mentoring/befriending | £4,000 | £12,000 |
| Lifetime cost of “sub-threshold” conduct disorder | £75,000 | £75,000 |
| Break even | 5% | 16% |

NEET

An Audit Commission review found that almost half of care-leavers were NEET at least once, with a fifth NEET for six or more months.⁸⁹ The public finance cost (predominantly through expected benefits payments and lost tax and national insurance contributions) for a young person NEET between ages 16 and 18 has been estimated at over £56,000 (although costs for care-leavers are “likely to be higher”).⁹⁰ A further £104,000 “resource cost” is estimated to accrue to the economy, to individuals and to their families through associated future underemployment and unemployment.⁹¹ A number of evaluations have found that mentoring improves young people’s engagement with education and employment.⁹²

Our calculation shows that a one-year mentoring relationship would need to reduce the lifetime cost of being NEET by around 7%, or 4% at the higher estimate of potential gains, or three years of mentoring would need to reduce lifetime cost by 21% or 12% at the higher estimate.

| | 1 year of M/B | | 3 years of M/B | |
|---|---------------|----------|----------------|----------|
| Cost of mentoring/befriending | £4,000 | | £12,000 | |
| Lifetime “public finance”/ “resource” costs associated with NEETs | £56,000 | £104,000 | £56,000 | £104,000 |
| Break even | 7% | 4% | 21% | 12% |

Cost and value revisited

These break-even estimates are indicative which means, inevitably, that they carry an inherent degree of uncertainty as would any fuller cost-benefit study. Further development of robust data sets, including longitudinal tracking of outcomes, would allow for a more thorough review of effectiveness within and across schemes, and would help establish best practice features.

However, fundamentally, conventional economic appraisal may not necessarily be the right way to value these schemes. It is already well established that the care population is subject to significant challenges, with academic and life outcomes dramatically poorer than the general population. It is additionally recognised that these poor outcomes carry a burden of cost to the state and the individual across the life course. Our research found that young people, practitioners, and other stakeholders unanimously felt that personal support can help to improve the lives and life-chances for looked-after children. While economic returns may be long-term, investing in this support is also something of a moral imperative.

Delivering economic savings is not mentoring/befriending’s primary motivation; offering this support to young people who have faced harm and loss and confront enormous challenges is an investment in the most vulnerable children in society and therefore in society itself. Through placing a requirement on local authorities to provide independent visitors the government already recognises a special responsibility to this population. Any financial demonstration of mentoring and befriending’s value is ancillary to the basic principles underlying this work.

Ultimately, taking a value perspective to any intervention helps clarify issues that must be considered in making difficult decisions about the allocation of scarce resources. But it also reveals the truth that value judgements sit at the heart of decision-making. Cost-benefit or social return on investment analysis can help ensure consistent and objective evidence is included wherever possible, but these tools still require judgement about the inevitable assumptions that have to be made in modelling exercises. This is not to undermine their usefulness in highlighting important factors but to reinforce the point that decisions cannot be made on the basis of cost-benefit considerations alone. Mentoring and befriending for looked-after children throws up a crucial challenge to the question of what evidence counts in policy-making and public investment decisions. It highlights a potential limit to the usefulness of cost-benefit tools where, as noted above, in the short-term at least the very act of collecting suitable data could destroy the value we are trying to capture.

Conclusions and recommendations

“If I won the lottery I’d put the money into independent visiting. When you look at all the programmes for children in care it’s the most positive.”

Social worker interviewed for this research

The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation notes that mentoring and befriending can be applied successfully in a range of contexts with maximum success to be gained where schemes run alongside other measures and forms of support for vulnerable people.⁹⁴ The evidence gathered for this study suggests that this fits well with the idea of comprehensive support for looked-after children. Mentoring and befriending does not offer a neat solution or a silver bullet for solving the multiple challenges faced by looked-after children, but it offers a valuable addition to options available to children and social workers.

The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation also notes that good practice requires that projects need to be integrated into their organisational context and that the role and service provided needs to be understood and valued by relevant stakeholders including professionals.⁹⁵ In the case of looked-after children buy-in from social workers and foster carers is fundamental. For mentoring and befriending approaches to be successful they must be integral to social work systems and care plans.

It was suggested by one of our interviewees that it is difficult to engage ‘the system’ with ideas for new or expanded schemes for looked-after children. This was more than a matter of funding, but also a problem of constrained imagination. Opening up possibilities while paying attention to risk is an ongoing challenge that must be addressed for the good of children and young people.

Our findings lead us to four key conclusions that sum up the potential for mentoring and befriending for looked-after children, while also being realistic:

- 1.** Building and sustaining mentoring/befriending relationships is a fragile and uncertain process: It is only to be expected that attempts to create supportive relationships will be subject to mixed success particularly with vulnerable groups where natural relationships may have broken down and trust may be lacking. Expectations for what can be achieved across a particular population group will need to be realistic.

2. While there is some evidence that harder outcomes, such as a higher likelihood of a return to education or employment, have been achieved through mentoring and befriending schemes, this is an area where further outcomes data can help build robust conclusions.
3. A co-production approach: Evaluations have found that when the young person is involved from the start in the decision-making process there is a higher likelihood of success. This includes allowing the young person to decide whether or not they want a mentor, what they want from a mentoring relationship (i.e. if they just want someone to talk to, or a more structured framework in which to meet and monitor progress on hard outcomes), as well as involvement in the mentor selection process. Looked-after children are among those with the least control over their lives. A co-produced mentoring or befriending relationship offers a way to introduce a sense of self-direction and voice.
4. Flexibility: The looked-after population is hugely diverse in terms of each child's experiences, assets and challenges. A child-centred approach will only be achieved if the system can build in flexibility to the services and solutions it provides.

Recommendations

Our work has led us to propose six key recommendations:

1. For Department for Education and individual local authorities to work to raise awareness of independent visiting among social workers, independent reviewing officers and foster carers, for example through training and publicity.
2. For scheme providers to develop strategies and share practice around accessing social workers and encouraging them to make referrals.
3. For Department for Education and individual local authorities to consider and trial other models of mentoring and befriending, such as the approach offered by Chance UK, which could help meet individual needs and preferences among children and young people.
4. For Department for Education and local authorities to plan ways to set a default in care-planning and reviews that mentoring and befriending approaches should be considered and offered to each child at different points in their care pathway.
5. For Department for Education to sponsor longitudinal studies in order to build up the evidence base of the preventative value of mentoring and befriending for looked-after children.
6. For schemes to further develop the research evidence base, including by tracking outcomes systematically and longitudinally.

Box C: Filling the gap?

In Chapter 2, we outlined gaps in personal relationships as experienced by the young care-leavers with whom we spoke. In the rest of the report, we explored some ways in which mentoring and befriending can help to address these gaps. Below, we summarise these findings.

- **Addressing isolation:** As a primary aim of mentoring/befriending schemes, we heard that personal relationships formed through schemes can provide vital emotional support, alongside practical advice and assistance.

“I would have loved to have had someone who would let me stamp my feet and cry and then give me a hug after.”

“People talked to me to fill in forms. I felt like a number not a person.”

- **Turning the crowd into a network:** We heard that young people in care can have a number of professional people (social workers, carers, teachers, etc.) in their lives, but that they might not connect with any of them on a personal level. Mentoring and befriending, by starting from the viewpoint of the child as an individual rather than a case, can help to address this. Young people also identified the value of non-professional relationships, where they are visited by someone who comes to see them because they care enough to do it, not because they are being paid.

“Someone who doesn’t use big professional words you don’t understand. Someone you can ask stupid questions or talk to about things you can’t talk to the foster carer about.”

- **Dependency and love:** Some practitioners spoke of the danger of creating a sense of dependency in the young person on any given individual. Other interviewees pointed out that, for most children, dependency – on parents, caregivers, or other family members – is a natural, fundamental expectation that looked-after children miss. While mentoring/befriending is an imperfect substitute, it can provide young people with the sense of being liked and cared for as a person.

“Just someone who acts like they care really, that makes a big difference.”

- **Unmuted voice:** Care-leavers reflected a sense that they felt little control over their own circumstances, and little ability to influence major aspects of their lives. The affirmative choice to have a mentor or befriender, and the ability to direct the nature and length of this relationship, can provide a valuable experience of autonomy.

“When there’s no one to talk to, even about little things like tearing your coat, you feel angry. Tiny things can become big things because there’s no-one to talk them over with.”

- **Smoothing transition from care:** Care-leavers face an accelerated pathway to adulthood, undertaken without the supports that most young people take for granted. This transition generates a number of heightened stresses and vulnerabilities. The challenges faced are both practical (learning to live independently) and personal (forming an adult identity). Self-directed and flexible mentoring/befriending relationships can help with both sets of challenges during this important time.

“When I turn 18 they’re just going to leave me. I’ll be on my own.”

Annex 1: Good practice features

It is widely accepted that mentoring and befriending schemes must be well-structured and resourced with rigorous attention paid to key processes and features. Working with vulnerable groups calls for a focus on safeguarding but also carefully thinking through, training for, and managing the implications of certain aspects of a mentoring relationship such as endings. The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation has prepared a national quality benchmark – the Approved Provider Standard – which sets out 12 clear quality elements. Among these we can highlight certain elements that were consistently raised in our interviews:

- There must be strong organisational and management structures for the scheme with clarity of purpose.
- Recruitment, training and matching processes are rigorous and child-focused.
- Thorough ongoing training is provided for staff and mentors/befrienders.
- Strong management and support mechanisms must be in place for the mentors.
- Expectations are carefully managed and clear boundaries set and communicated to everyone, including the child.

The following table briefly describes the key processes by stages for any mentoring/befriending scheme.

| | Process | Description |
|--------------------|------------------------|--|
| PREPARATION STAGE | Recruitment | Volunteers may be recruited through advertisements, but word of mouth is an important source of potential recruits. We heard that sufficient numbers of volunteers come forward but there is often a challenge in getting sufficient diversity in terms of gender and ethnicity. Independent visiting programmes will turn down volunteers at any stage in the recruitment process if programme managers have any concerns about issues in their past, or their conduct during recruitment. |
| | Training | Training and recruitment processes often go hand in hand. Training sessions may follow initial interview, with further interviews and assessments following training. Volunteers are encouraged to think through their own needs to ensure they are well prepared. |
| | Matching | Independent visiting providers interview the children/young people to build trust and understand what it is they would like from their engagement with a visitor, and the type of person they would like to have. Providers also work closely with social workers to attempt the best possible match. This may include attention to particular needs the child has and achieving an ethnic match. |
| RELATIONSHIP STAGE | Meetings | Establishing regular meetings is critical. Time intervals between meetings may vary from scheme to scheme or according to the child's needs and characteristics, eg: age. Meetings may be as often as weekly especially in the case of younger children. Commissioners may stipulate minimum contact times. |
| | Support and Management | Providers pay close attention to supporting and managing volunteers, recognising the importance of this for responding quickly and effectively as questions and challenges arise. |
| | Reporting | Local authority commissioners may stipulate reporting requirements, eg: quarterly. |
| TRANSITION STAGE | Endings | Particular attention is paid to endings to mitigate as much as possible the harm that can be caused for children who are likely to have experienced separation, abandonment or rejection by adults. Wherever possible endings are actively managed over a period of time, beginning with letting the child know that the meetings will be ending, allowing time for winding down, and ending on a high, such as an exciting outing. At the very least coordinators try to get the mentor to write to the young people if they are unable to arrange a final visit. |

Annex 2: Record of primary research – interviews and discussions

| Stakeholders | |
|----------------|--|
| Young people | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Three group discussions• Two individual interviews |
| Volunteers | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Two interviews |
| Providers | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interviews with independent providers: CSV Allies & Chance UK• Focus group discussion with the Alliance for Child-Centred Care focus group• Interviews with three in-house local authority providers |
| Social workers | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interviews with ten social workers |
| Foster carers | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interviews with ten foster carers |
| Policy-makers | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interviews with Department for Education, Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and Office of the Children's Commissioner |
| Others | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conversations and interviews with academics and other interested parties |

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