

# TRANSITION FROM CARE TO INDEPENDENT LIVING AND HOW FOSTER CARERS CAN INFLUENCE OUTCOMES

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## Excerpt from 'A White Merc with Fins' (Hawes 1996)

It was OK for Red f\*\*\*ing Indians.

The Red Indian could go out into the forest for their forty nights and they knew, they knew for certain, like you know Tuesday comes after Monday, that when they came back the Tribe would still be there, camped on the plain beside the river by the ancestral burial grounds where everyone knew they were going someday, they would be there to welcome you back and take you in and listen to your stories about what you did and what secrets you learned out there, like prisoners know when they've done their time, the Tribe will be waiting and the campfires will still be there for them.

We haven't got that, we have to make up our own tribe as we go, we are free to do that, that is good, that freedom is wonderful, it is what everyone wants as soon as they are given the choice, as soon as the Great Leaders die we go for freedom, but being free means you have no safety net either.

Now, if we go out into the forest, we could come back and find everyone has moved on and the tracks are dry, we could just end up sitting by the river all alone and telling our wonderful news to ourselves alone and stirring the cold ashes where the campfires were, and listening to the lost ghosts crying.

It happens.

It happens every day, it leads to the park bench, it leads to people so lost they will do anything to join a tribe, they will shoot up with needles they know are full of poisoned blood just to be allowed to sit around a campfire with people they know and hate, they will believe that a few thousand old Jews who the SS somehow missed are actually running countries of 30,000,000 people, they will shout God Loves You as You are, or Eng-a-land Eng-a-land, or Allah Akhbar, or SOcialistrevolutionarygroup, they will grab any c\*\*p cheap story they are thrown, just so long as it half-hangs together, just so long as they are allowed to sit by some fireside somewhere in the cold, wandering world and not to the tribal passwords and say; We, We, We.



## PERSONAL PROFILE

In 2007 I worked within the political group offices at Birmingham local authority but, with the departure of my youngest daughter to university, I experienced 'empty nest syndrome' so decided to resign my post and become a foster carer.

Over the following 7 years I looked after many young people between 2 and 17 years of age. Each of these young people had their own story and had a range of challenges but all of them were very special people with fabulous personalities. They made me laugh, cry and 'tear my hair out', but they also taught me a great deal.

### Project Motivation

I quickly realised how fortunate we were as a family to have had wonderful childhoods with excellent role models all around us and to have been cared for in loving and safe environments; things that we didn't even think about and just took for granted. Yet these were some of the most basic things which were denied the young people living with us.

As part of my fostering role I attended a wide range of training, some mandatory, some voluntary, and of varying degrees of quality. However, most of the care I provided on a day-to-day basis was based on learned behaviour from my own experiences.

This was all fine until I experienced, on 3 different occasions, the transition planning for young people about to leave care to live independently. In line with The Children Act 1989, they were duly allocated Personal Advisors whose role was to help them prepare their Pathway Plans, record their wishes/dreams for the future and provide information on the support they could expect to receive. However, there was immense disparity between the information imparted and the young person's interpretation of it. For example: rather than the reality of a rather dingy, council flat in a socially deprived area with the minimum amount of benefits; the young people were convinced they would have a lovely flat, near their friends, decorated in the most up to date style with flat-screen TVs, music centres, computers and gaming consoles and would dress in the best designer gear. As a result, they couldn't wait to get there and no voice of reason was going to penetrate their excitement. I felt strongly that it was in their best interests for me to be included in the sessions so that I could reinforce the realities on a day-to-day basis and keep them grounded in their expectations. But I was advised that these were **their** pathway plans so my attendance was not required.

### Project Motivation (cont)

We cared for two 16 year old boys at different times who, shortly after having been allocated Personal Advisors and embarking on their Pathway Plans, decided that they wanted to live independently immediately and not wait until they were at least 18. They each had different reasons for their decisions. The saddest example was where one of them wanted to be free of the constraints of Social Services. He thought he could gain his independence and then return to live with us but without the 'interference' of the Local Authority Social Workers. He didn't believe, until too late, that this wasn't an option and we subsequently heard via his friends' grapevine that he was working as a 'rent boy' in another county.

A great deal of work has been undertaken by government departments, nationally and internationally, to improve services to young people within the care system, including transitioning from care to independent living. However, in my view, insufficient emphasis has been placed on the role of the foster carers who are in the best possible position to support the young people in our care. We usually know these children better than anyone else, yet such a valuable resource is overlooked/under-utilised.

Following a national Fostering Kids NZ conference to consider this issue, I travelled to New Zealand and Australia in order to ascertain what improvements have been made in this regard and what has been achieved over the past 12 months.

- Fewer than 1% of children in England are in care, but looked after children make up 33% of boys and 61% of girls in custody<sup>1</sup>.
- 23% of the adult prison population has been in care and almost 40% of prisoners under 21 were in care as children (only 2% of the general population spend time in prison)<sup>2</sup>.
- Only 6% of care leavers go to university - compared with 38% of all young people<sup>2</sup>.
- One third of care leavers are not in education, employment or training - compared with 13% of all young people<sup>2</sup>.
- A quarter of young women leaving care are pregnant or already mothers, and nearly half become mothers by the age of 24<sup>2</sup>.
- 30% of homeless people have been in care<sup>1</sup>.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2015, there were almost 68,000 looked after children within the UK. Of these children, 72% are in foster care, 22% of whom (over 15,000) were 16 years+<sup>3</sup>. By the time they are 16 these young people should have been allocated a Personal Advisor (PA) to help them prepare a Pathway Plan which should continue until they reach 21 years of age. These plans play a significant role in ensuring that the young person receives the support they need to achieve their goals for a successful transition to independent living. However, in many cases in the UK, Foster Carers have little/no input in this process.

In 2014 a national conference was held in New Zealand to consider the issue of transition from care to independent living and a number of pilots were introduced with a view to improving outcomes. The intention of travelling there was to investigate these initiatives, identify the level of involvement of foster carers in the transition preparation process and harness the learnings with a view to introducing them to our fostering community in the UK.

In New South Wales (NSW), Australia there is a strong view that fostering does not 'fit the bill' for long term 'safe home for life' and efforts are being made to move towards adoption as a more appropriate solution.

It soon became clear that there were significant differences between the fostering/care provision within the 3 countries. Despite these differences, it also became apparent that most of the carers who expressed a view, considered that they had limited, if any, input into the transition process. It also became clear that, whilst there is a great deal of criticism of the support afforded to our young people within the care system in the UK, elements of provision are actually envied in both New Zealand and Australia. The UK's 'Staying Put' initiative is considered a key element to the transitional success of young people and one which is currently being considered in New Zealand.

Despite the efforts of the professional partners involved in the care of these young people, it would appear there is a definite need within all 3 countries for a more robust inclusion tool for ensuring foster carers are fully involved in the process. As a result, and in consultation with a senior social work practitioner, a highly skilled teacher and a group of dedicated foster carers, a comprehensive training package is being developed with the aim of introducing and implementing this within Local Authorities and Fostering Agencies across the country.

## Aim of Project

While most young people are remaining within their families for much longer, vulnerable young people are leaving care between 16-18 years and are expected to live independently. Compared to the general population, these young people are likely to:

- Have inadequate support networks
- Have had less educational success, leading to unemployment/lower earning potential
- Experience greater mental health problems
- Be more likely to experience homelessness
- Become young parents
- Become involved in substance abuse
- Have low self-esteem/confidence

The aim of my project is to help improve the outlook for young people leaving care by harnessing the valuable resource of the foster carers and their knowledge/skills/commitment towards the young people they care for on a daily basis.



*“Living on my own sounds great as I won’t have to follow as many rules and can do what I like, but what if I need help? What then? It’s really scary!”*

## Objective/Goals

I am keen to encourage foster carers to:

- Take a more pro-active role when preparing the young people in their care for independent living.
- Learn/share therapeutic intervention strategies to support young people approaching independence.
- Reduce the risk of young people leaving care into homelessness, gang membership, substance abuse, etc by helping them to develop skills and strategies to cope with the realities of living independently.
- Help improve the emotional and social development of young people to give them a greater chance of emotional, social and economic success.
- Listen and learn from the young people that we care for and recognize their difficulties and challenges in order to support them into adulthood and independence.
- Develop a robust training tool aimed specifically at foster carers to guide them through the process of enabling the young people in their care to successfully manage independent living.

## Children in Care Statistics

### England

Current figures<sup>2</sup> for England are as follows:

Placement Type	March 2015
Foster Care	52,050
Secure units, children's homes/hostels	6,570
With parents	3,510
Placed for adoption	3,320
Another placement in the community	2,280
Residential schools/other residential settings	1,750
<b>Total</b>	<b>69,480</b>

Age Group	March 2015
Under 1	3,710
1-4	10,120
5-9	14,310
10-15	26,140
16 and over	15,270
<b>Total</b>	<b>69,550</b>

## New Zealand

The tables<sup>4</sup> below give a snapshot of the number of young people in the custody of the New Zealand Chief Executive as at 30 June 2015 by placement type and age group.

Placement Type*	June 2015
Non family/Whanau **	1,182
Family/Whanau	2,193
Child and Family Support Services (Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), ie IOSIS, Key Assets, Dingwall Trust.	502
CYF Family Home Placement (ie Foster Care)	133
CYF Residential Placement	29
Other supported accommodation	124
<b>Total children and young people</b>	<b>4,163</b>

\* Excludes placement types: Independent Living, Remain Home and Return Home.

\*\* Whanau = Maori word often translated as 'family'.

Age Group	June 2015
0-1	552
2-4	887
5-9	1,363
10-13	1,151
14 and over	1,073
<b>Total children and young people</b>	<b>5,026</b>

## Australia

Australian statistics were collated very differently according to States but the most recent numbers show that as at 30 June 2014 there were over 43,000 Australian children living in out of home care<sup>5</sup>. However, in March 2013 the breakdown of placements was as follows:

Placement Type	March 2013
Foster care	17,272
Relative/kin	19,426
Other home- based care	1,158
Family group homes	236
Residential care	2,211
Independent living	162
Unknown	84
<b>Total</b>	<b>40,549</b>

The Number of children admitted to out of home care by age group during 2013-14<sup>6</sup> were as follows:

Age Group*	
Under 1	2,096
1-4	2,828
5-9	2,654
10-14	2,385
15-17	1,121
Unknown	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,085</b>



## Fostering Kids New Zealand

Fostering Kids New Zealand plays a significant role in supporting both caregivers and looked after children.

They do this by providing training, encouragement, advocacy, information, publications and support services to caregiver families in order to give placements the best possible chance of success.

Their vision is *“Every fostering family is empowered, supported and trained to provide a safe and nurturing home.”* They help foster carers, whanau/kin, whangai\* , home for life and family group home caregivers.

Membership is free and provides strong support to caregivers to ensure stable and secure homes for children and young people in care. They also provide networking opportunities and peer support between people with similar experiences.

They also organise a well-attended and influential annual conference looking at wide-ranging issues which affect foster carers and the children and young people in their care.

Network/support organisations that provide advice and information, legal support in the event of allegations as well as networking opportunities also exist in England ie The Fostering Network and Foster Talk. They tend to be ‘not for profit’ organisations and there is a charge for membership. They are also very different to Fostering Kids New Zealand in that they don’t have such significant influence/input.

\* The Maori customary practice of whangai is where a child is raised by someone other than their birth parents.

## Aspirational Advocate

An amazing Kiwi foster carer role model is Ursula Elisara who, with her husband Elisha George, has been a foster carer in New Zealand for over 12 years. They were awarded the ‘Excellence in Foster Care’ award in late 2014.

Ursula’s view of what qualifies excellent foster care is to:

- Have a high level of self-awareness
- Start with the end in mind (ie what do we want the children to learn about themselves, relationships and the world around them)
- Provide solid, predictable routines - regardless of age
- Collaboration and recognising that success is all about Teamwork.
- Access training

Demonstrating a keenness to attend training was one of the main criteria when considering the award nominations. However, most of the foster carer training is not compulsory and not all foster carers take advantage of the opportunities available.

As is the case in the UK, there is often a lack of collaboration and foster carers are often not considered as full team members in the care of the young people.

## Fostering Kids New Zealand Annual Conference 2015

Hon Anne Tolley, Minister for Social Development in New Zealand, gave the opening address of the Fostering Kids Annual Conference in Auckland.

She highlighted the need for a system that works for children and supports Children Youth and Families (CYF) - UK equivalent of Social Services - staff to do their job to the best of their abilities. She acknowledged that since 1988 various reviews have led to 14 separate restructures of CYF but yet the outcomes for young people have not improved.

Therefore, in order to radically overhaul the system, an independent expert panel was set up to consider the development and implementation of a new model to improve and modernise CYF and consider all aspects of its operations.

This panel met with staff, young people and experienced practitioners, leaders and researchers from across the health, education, justice, social services, and care and protection areas both within and outside of New Zealand. It also conducted site visits to youth justice and care and protection residences, and family homes. It met and talked with foster parents. It was supported by a Youth Advisory Panel made up of eight young people with past and current experience of state care, a Māori reference group, a practice reference group and a cross-agency secretariat.

One of the key areas that the panel was closely considering was raising the age of state care. Currently, in New Zealand, when young people are 17 the state's obligations end and they are left on their own. They are also not eligible to sign tenancy agreements etc until they are 18. This practice leaves these young people vulnerable and at risk of being recruited to gangs.

Mrs Tolley expressed a view that New Zealand should be considering supporting these young people into their 20s, as she saw when she visited the UK earlier in the year. She was particularly interested in the UK's 'Staying Put' policy that enables young people to extend their stay in foster care beyond 18.

The outcomes of this expert panel were due to be published on 3 December 2015 but, unfortunately, there has been a delay and no firm date for releasing the results has yet been announced.



### Conference Dinner 2015

The fun theme for this year's conference dinner was 'What I wanted to be when I grew up'.

Most attendees threw themselves into the spirit of the event and dressed up in many guises. There was everything from doctors, firemen, nurses and coalmen to clowns in their multi-coloured wigs, surgeons covered in fake blood and ballet dancers in pink, tightly stretched tutus.

My table was much more subdued than some of the others and the conversation soon turned to the young people in our care. It occurred to me then, that the responses I'd received from my fostered teenagers to the same question was very different from those being acted out in the room, namely:

- Nothing – I'll get wages from the Government!
- A mum – but I'm going to do it better than my mum.
- I'm not clever enough to be a teacher.
- I'd like to be a carpenter but I'm rubbish at maths.
- I'm just going to stay at home and get benefits like my mum and nan.
- I don't know what I'd be good at.

It is clear that, as foster carers supporting young people at this critical time in their lives, it is crucial we help them build their confidence and self-esteem and give them the tools they need to make a success of living independently.

## Foster Care Provision

In New Zealand, foster carers are recruited by the Government's Children, Youth and Family (CYF) - who can be compared with the UK's Local Authorities' Children's Services - and 'not for profit' Not for Profit Organisations (NGOs). These NGOs are apparently in competition with each other for available funds.

It would appear that foster carers don't receive the same type of allowance as in the UK but are paid basic 'board and lodgings' which is as low as NZ\$200 per fortnight with an additional NZ\$20 for incidentals. As a result it is apparently very difficult to recruit foster carers. There is also a view in some quarters that there is a link between individuals who are receiving state benefits and those who become foster carers in order to boost their income, even slightly. This is in contrast to the UK where foster carers receive quite generous allowances out of which they must cover everything the young person needs, including entertainment/leisure activities, hobbies, board/lodgings, clothing, pocket money, holidays and savings, etc (the amounts for which are often agreed and closely monitored by supervising social workers).

Many of the NGOs are charities which were formerly orphanages set up after WWII and they continue to have strong links to churches/faiths ie Dingwall Trust, Barnardo's, IOSIS, Open Home, etc. Their foster carers are volunteers and there is a view that most of the children placed within these families are relatively 'low' need and much of their funding depends on charitable donations.

Other NGOs/agencies such as Youth Horizons/Kia Puāwai and Key Assets, generally support children/young people with 'high'/complex needs which requires greater funding. Therefore, some are lobbying Government for an increase in allowances paid to foster carers in order to encourage wider recruitment and retention.

There are concerns that the state's out of home care obligation to young people ends at 17 years of age and yet they are not able to sign a tenancy agreement until they are 18. They also struggle financially and, even if in employment, have difficulty meeting basic costs.

One senior staff member of an NGO stated that "we are throwing these kids out on the streets with nothing more than a duvet and a pillow and then we wonder why they join gangs!" (vis a vis the Red Indians).

As is the case in the UK, the quality of foster care is variable and, while there are specific guidelines in the UK, New Zealand and Australia in relation to Pathway Plans, these can end up having little value to the young person and can merely serve to record information.

Many of the NGOs also have their own Pathway Plans but some of the foster carers maintain that the social/support workers take the lead and input from the carers is often very limited. However, this can also be attributed to a lack of confidence or apathy on the part of some carers and their willingness to take a 'back seat' and allow the professionals to lead.

## Child, Youth & Family (CYF)

CYF advises that the preparation of young people for independence should take place as early as possible and research indicates that 2 years of planning and preparation is ideal in order for the young person to learn the necessary skills.

The young person is allowed to choose who facilitates their transition and could include:

- Foster carers
- Family/whanau
- Friends
- Mentors
- Support Services
- Lawyer (if they have one).

Although the young person has the right, and may prefer to limit CYF's involvement, the allocated social worker's role would be to help bring together the key people involved in supporting the young person but, unless specifically requested by the young person, the foster carers' views are not included.

Their guidance states that the main areas that need to be considered during the preparation are:

- Practical issues such as having enough money or help, being able to clean up after themselves, etc.
- Emotional needs: worries about being lonely or unable to cope.
- Accommodation is obviously a crucial element for consideration when leaving care, particularly as young people under 18 are unable to sign a tenancy agreement, yet they often leave care at 17.

- Health issues from the young person's perspective needs to be considered including areas such as smoking, drug and alcohol use, sexual health, contraception, any existing medical conditions, mental health (including self-harm and attempted suicide).
- Financial assistance available to young people moving to independence may not actually be enough for their needs. Young people have stated that even if working full-time, the youth rate is insufficient to meet the basic financial requirements of rent, food, utilities, travel clothing etc.
- Young people have identified the month or so before leaving care as particularly worrying for them. They often need/want more direct support and guidance which often comes from CYF at this time.
- Consideration should be given to providing the young person with a 'Leaving Care Pack' which would include information and documents pertinent to the individual and which the young person may need such as:
  - Birth certificate
  - Family history, family tree, family contact details
  - School and medical reports
  - Contact details for the GP, dentist, Inland Revenue, Power Companies, support networks, etc.
  - A letter to Work and Income (if financial support has not been set up prior to their move) stating that the young person has left the care of CYF etc.

## Youth Horizons/Kia Puāwai

Youth Horizons/Kia Puāwai supports children, young people with challenging conduct/anti-social behaviour, as well as helping them prepare for the transition to independent living. They first launched in 2009 with the intention that they would be well-equipped to work with Māori clients, their families and whānau, supporting them to achieve the best possible life outcomes.

The name Kia Puāwai, roughly translated as 'to blossom, was gifted to Youth Horizons/Kia Puāwai. It was taken from a saying by Princess Te Puea Herangi who was a highly respected Maori leader from New Zealand's Waikato region:

*“I te ohonga ake i aku moemoeā, ko te puawaitanga o te whakaaro.”  
“When I awaken from my dreams, they shall be realised.”*



The programme they deliver is highly intensive and was developed by Treatment Foster Care Oregon (TFCO). It has 4 key elements:

1. Providing young people with a consistent environment where they are mentored and encouraged to develop academic and positive living skills.
2. Providing daily structure with clear expectations and limits, with well-specified consequences.
3. Providing close supervision of their whereabouts.
4. Helping them to avoid deviant peer associations while providing them with the support and assistance needed to establish positive peer relationships.

The young people are placed with foster carers for a minimum period of 6 months but can continue up to 2 years. The foster carers are highly trained in this programme and as a result are better paid than other foster carers. However, due to the challenging behaviour of the young people they will care for, appropriate foster carers are difficult to recruit. They, and the young people in their care, are very closely supervised and attend weekly meetings with their programme supervisor. These meetings are video-ed and scrutinised by specially trained therapists in the USA.

## Youth Horizons/Kia Puāwai continued

The programme is very much based on positive reinforcement rather than punitive consequences with a focus on:

- Close supervision
- Fair and consistent limits
- Predictable consequences for rule breaking
- A supportive relationship with at least one mentoring adult
- Reduced exposure to peers with similar problems

During the first 3 weeks of the programme the young person is not allowed contact with any of his/her former friends/peers/family/etc. They are not allowed phones and are subject to random searches. Points are earned for positive behaviours/attitudes and these can then be exchanged for treats/privileges. The young people are teamed up with 'buddies' who demonstrate how to enjoy life without drugs, joining gangs, etc.

The parents/whanau of the young person (or other aftercare resource) also receive intensive therapy and training in order that they can appropriately support him/her when they make their transition to independent living.

This is an expensive therapeutic programme which costs over NZ\$100,000 per young person but it has an excellent team of educational psychologists, skills trainers, individual therapists etc and, as a result, has a 66% success rate. This may not appear to be a huge success rate but when taking into consideration that these young people have extremely complex and challenging behaviours and are usually referred by juvenile courts, probation officers, mental health and child welfare caseworkers, this is actually considered an excellent result. It is essential that this success rate is maintained as, if at any time it falls below 50%, there is a high risk that Government funding could be withdrawn.

This treatment is apparently applied in the UK but the high cost is prohibitive so it is not readily available to the majority of looked after young people. Given the years of research and associated costs involved in developing this programme, TFCO are, understandably, extremely protective about the details of their therapy and disclosing their customers so only a very broad overview was given. It has also been difficult to ascertain exactly where and under what circumstances this therapy is applied in the UK.



## The Dingwall Trust

The Dingwall Trust is a residential community that provides a range of services to support children and young people in care. It is situated in a lovely residential area of Auckland and when I first visited the site, the ethos of the community felt very similar to former Quaker areas, such as Bourneville in Birmingham, which I was familiar with.



There was a range of red-roofed, whitewashed bungalows arranged around a central children's play area. These bungalows provided office/administrative accommodation as well as several residential homes which housed 1/2 foster carers and up to 7 young people (comprising of sibling groups and/or single children) of varying ages. There is also a residential unit specifically set up to support those young people preparing for independent living. This unit allows them the opportunity and freedom to live semi-independently whilst having support and day-to-day training. Dingwall have a very flexible approach and, although entitlement to out of home support officially ends then the young person reaches 17, they continue to support their young people, post-17, until they have achieved the skills need to do so safely and successfully.

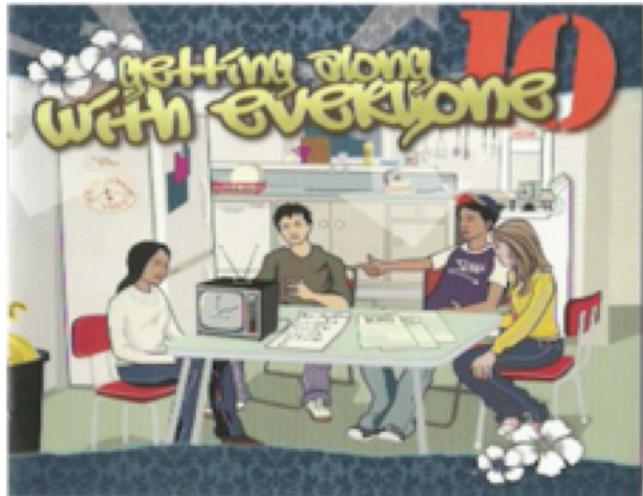
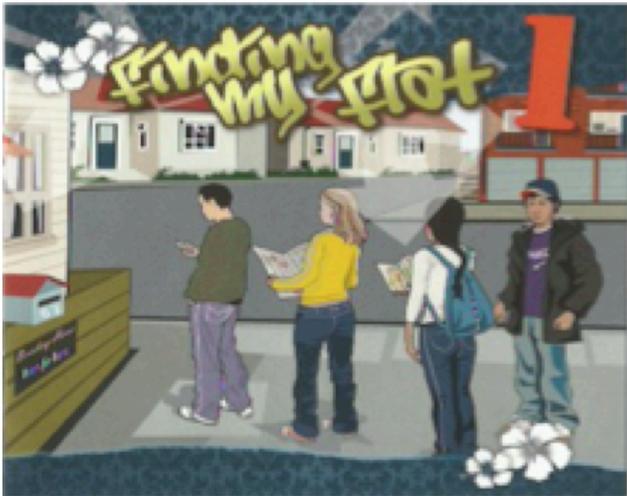
The 'Launch': Care to Independence programme is a support service funded by CYF and is based at Dingwall. It offers mobile, community based support to young people transitioning from care to independent living, across the Auckland area. This service is youth-led and provides support and advice to young people aged 15-20 years.

A Personal Advisor provides individual support to the young person to help them to achieve their goals, linking them to other services and resources where required and ensuring they have access to all that is available to them.

## The Dingwall Trust continued

Since 'Launch' was a mobile service it was considered essential to develop a tool that was compact and easily transportable but useful to the young people it was aimed at. A 'Flat Out' pack was developed with the help of some of the young people and which consists of a CD case within which is a DVD, whose content and writing was adapted to suit the 'street' style and language of today's young people. There are also a series of small booklets covering a range of issues associated with finding/maintaining a flat. The topics covered are:

1. Finding my flat
2. Paying for my flat
3. What's a Tenancy Agreement
4. Setting up my flat
5. Keeping safe
6. Keeping it clean
7. Food for my flat
8. Looking after my gear
9. Staying healthy
10. Getting along with everyone.



The information contained within these packs is also available here in the UK but, as far as I have been able to ascertain, not in such a 'street' friendly and contemporary format.

## Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) - NSW

My time in Australia was relatively short and my main contact was with Mr Andrew McCallum, CEO, the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) and its associated training organisation Centre for Community Welfare Training (CCWT).

ACWA is a non-government body representing community organisations working with vulnerable children, young people and their families. Their aim is to work with their members, partners, government/non-government agencies and other bodies to bring about positive systemic reform that will deliver better outcomes for children and young people living in out-of-home care.

Mr McCallum's view was that out of home fostering care does not fit the bill for long term 'safe home for life' and NSW are moving towards an Open Adoption approach.

Open Adoption is very different to previous adoption practices in that it will ensure children know their identity and can remain in contact with their birth family while in the safety and permanency of an adopted family.

This option will be strongly considered if children cannot be transitioned to their biological parents. However, it is considered unsuitable for Aboriginal children where the focus is for placement with kinship carers.

In terms of transition to independent living, there are strong similarities between Australian practices and those in New Zealand and the UK. However, It is acknowledged that many young people who have grown up in care in Australia also experience a rapid and abrupt end to formal support from the child protection system between the age of 16 and 18. There is a view that New Zealand (and the UK) are making better progress in this and they are closely watching how things develop in New Zealand.

## Philanthropic Support

### L'Oreal 'Face the Future – Reach for the Stars'

Since 2009, L'Oreal staff have been involved in a special annual event called 'Face your Future – Reach for the Stars'. Young people in foster care, aged between 16-18 years, are nominated to attend the event which focuses on bringing positive and inspiring stories from high profile people/celebrities who have pushed through hardship in their lives and yet have succeeded in their businesses/careers.

Over the years they have had a wealth of 'celebrity' speakers from artists, actors, musicians, politicians and sportsmen who tell their stories. I was advised that one of the key messages which is frequently communicated by these celebrities is that: "we've all had a sh\*\*\*y start, now put it in a box, put the lid on it and put it behind you".

This is a 2-day event which encourages the young people to think about their futures. They explore career options and L'Oreal demonstrate the wide range of opportunities which exist in companies like theirs – from research & development, logistics, marketeering, advertising, retail and so on. They also try to dispel the young people's perception that L'Oreal is a female orientated organisation and demonstrate that they do not have a gender bias.

On day 1 the young people often arrive sullen and unco-operative. They have been told by their social workers that attendance at this event is a priority but they really have no idea why they are there or what to expect. This is sometimes the first time they have been in a group of foster kids of the same age and none of them want to be labeled as 'fostered'.

They often arrive wearing dark glasses and their hoods up. They slouch and are difficult to win over and are often very unco-operative. However, when the talks start they often struggle to deal with the raw emotions on display and will often leave the room.

At some point during the event the boys are taken to the 'man cave' and taught basic grooming. They are taught about good hygiene and its importance to health as well as how to shave, etc.

The girls get the opportunity for 'make overs', trying out new hairstyles and make-up, skin care regimes, etc.

They are all also taught other basic skills which most of us take for granted such as how to present themselves (particularly at interview), smile, look people in the eye when speaking to them as well as how to shake hands.

On day 2 there are more inspirational talks and messages. The young people take part in a range of fun activities, they tour L'Oreal's facilities and before the end of the day their attitudes have undergone transformations. They are hugging each other, swapping telephone numbers and Facebook friend invitations. They are beginning to believe "They're Worth It".

## L'Oreal

### 'Face the Future – Reach for the Stars' continued

Each year L'Oreal bring back one of the young people from the year before to talk about their experience. They are usually very nervous but usually very positive. This year the young person spoke about sitting in their place last year, how she didn't want to be there and then something suddenly clicked with 'Face the Future'. Afterwards she decided to stick it out at school and subsequently signed up to do a design degree. When she graduates, she told her audience, she will be the first member of her family/whanau to have ever taken part in any learning outside school. These stories send out very powerful messages to their peers.

L'Oreal was founded in France in 1909 and French law dictates that organisations of a certain value must commit 2-3% of their profits to philanthropic causes. This ethos is extended across the L'Oreal organisation and they all have a 'Citizen Day' when employees volunteer to take part in philanthropic activities.

Nowadays most corporations of any worth consider it appropriate to have some social obligation. Also, recruiting great talent is difficult so organisations are striving to become desirable places to work. They want to look after their communities and provide sustainability etc. Potential new recruits want to know what 'added value' elements they have in place to make their organisation the most attractive proposition. Tanya Abbot, NZ's Group Corporate Communications Manager, gave an example of a really bright marketer that L'Oreal were keen to recruit. During the interview process one of the questions asked was "what is L'Oreal doing for charity?"

While the L'Oreal company may benefit from the 'Team Building' element gained from this event, that is not its main motive and its staff never have to be coaxed to take part.

They wanted to align themselves to an NGO who needed some support, were doing a good job but not getting recognition. Negative attention from the media brought Fostering Kids to their attention which, at the time, was a new organisation, started at the home of its founder with a view to provide support, mentoring and training for foster carers - it struck a chord with L'Oreal and 'Face the Future' was born.

While organisations in the UK also support a range of charitable and community ventures, it would appear that there is an opportunity for them to be more involved in this way, to gain all the team building benefits but provide these disadvantaged young people with a glimpse of the potential opportunities available to them.

## GOING FORWARD

It is clear that early and thorough planning for independent living is crucial for young people leaving the care system and there are many examples of excellent practice. Comprehensive Pathway Plans are being drawn up with the young person at the centre of the process, but care needs to be taken that these plans do not merely end up as recording tools. They need to be efficient and effective in ensuring the young person has the skills and support to make the transition to independence successfully and there needs to be a collaborative approach involving all individuals involved in their care, including foster carers, to ensure the best possible outcomes.

There are also vast amounts of academic research into this issue and practical tools and plans have been put in place to improve outcomes not only in New Zealand and Australia but also here in the UK. Neurological research has shown that the part of the brain that is responsible for social interaction and self-awareness, as well as risk-taking behaviour, undergoes the most change during adolescence. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is at this time we witness many of the negative and often risky behaviours in our young people. It makes sense, therefore, to allow them to remain in care longer than is currently the case in both New Zealand and Australia, which is one reason why in both those countries they are closely monitoring the UK's 'Staying Put' policy.

While there is good news amongst the professional partners involved in the process, it would appear that involvement of foster carers is not consistent. Again, there are examples of excellent practice where carers are fully involved and consulted on a continuous basis. They are supported and guided to ensure that they are, in turn, able to guide and teach the young people in their care to acquire the skills they will need to live independently. But not often enough. It is clear that we need to:

- Ensure that we begin preparing our young people sooner.
- Adopt a more collaborative, team approach by fully involving foster carers.
- Provide foster carers with the tools they need to confidently prepare the young people in their care.
- Encourage foster carers to be more assertive and involve themselves fully in the process.
- Maintain excellent communication channels so that everyone involved is aware of progress and any negative issues.

Since my return to the UK I have been in consultation with a senior social work practitioner and a highly skilled teacher (who received an MBE in 2000 for her services to education and who has twice been named the Times Education Supplement (TES) teacher of the year). Together with a group of dedicated foster carers, we are working to develop a comprehensive training tool aimed at foster carers who are supporting young people making this transition. Such training would undoubtedly raise the value of foster carers and so improve the outcomes for the young people we care for.

In addition, we are looking at drawing up a proposal with a view to engaging some of the UK's top firms to consider a similar philanthropic programme to that which L'Oreal NZ supports.

## REFERENCES

1. Prison Reform Trust
2. The Who Cares? Trust
3. CoramBaaf Adoption & Fostering Academy
4. <http://www.cyf.govt.nz/about-us/key-statistics/kids-in-care.html>
5. [www.aph.gov.au](http://www.aph.gov.au)

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In 2004, as part of a job application I had to undertake a psychometric test. One of the rather strange but negative statements within the results was 'applicant is afraid to travel alone'. I was unsuccessful in that application but I think this wonderful experience afforded me by the WCMT has well and truly redressed that criticism.

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