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Launch of new mentoring service across London to support care leavers as they transition into adulthood

It can be very frightening, lonely and confusing for a young person who is leaving the care system, especially if they are without family or previous carers they can turn to for advice, information or support. Having an enduring and stable friendship with a positive, caring adult makes an enormous difference at this crucial point in their life. To help these young people navigate the challenges they face when transitioning into adulthood, Family Action's Friendship Works is launching a new mentoring service specifically for care leavers aged 18-25. Initially this is a three year pilot during which time we will be supporting around 60 young people across London; however we will be working hard to extend the service to reach more care leavers in the years to come.

Friendship Works will match young care leavers with an individual volunteer adult mentor who will support them and help them build resilience, life skills and a sense of self worth. This will subsequently place them in a better position to access employment, training or education and, perhaps most importantly, to have hopes for the future.

Kate Gledhill, Head of Service Delivery for Friendship Works said

"For many years care leavers, those working with them and the Government have expressed great concern about the negative outcomes for many young people leaving care - ranging from loneliness, isolation and emotional or mental health difficulties to unemployment, homelessness and involvement with the criminal justice system. Friendship Work's new service, based on our 40 years of mentoring experience and knowledge will give these young people the help and support they need to ensure they can look forward to a brighter future and thrive."*

The young people will be matched with especially trained mentors, who are older than the care leavers. They will meet at least three times a month, largely at weekends and in the evenings. The relationship will be activity based and within the community or, if appropriate and safe to do so, in the young person's home.

Using their own life experience and knowledge, mentors will provide a range of both emotional and practical support, depending on what the young person needs and wants. This will include practical help with learning the skills necessary for adulthood and independent living, for example, cooking, DIY, form filling or travelling. Additionally mentors will support care leavers to develop a greater understanding of the world of work; increase their confidence and develop tools and skills necessary for work.

Care leaver, Shalyce Lawrence shared

"When I left care I was depressed, really depressed and I struggled – I ended up dropping out of university, but the worst was feeling isolated and very lonely. I felt like I had no body to talk to or have anyone to understand what I was going through. But I was lucky – I had two people in my life who became mentors. They gave me space to grow, offered me a shoulder to cry on and, most importantly, they believed in me so I then believed in myself and knew I could achieve something. I went back to university and got my degree and am now in a really good place. I believe having a mentor is probably one of the most important things that a care leaver can have."

To find out more please visit www.family-action.org.uk/friendshipworks or contact friendshipworks@family-action.org.uk to volunteer.

ENDS

*Statistics

- Almost a quarter of the adult prison population and almost half of young men under 21-years-old in the criminal justice system have spent time in care *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds, Ministry of Justice (March 2012)*
- 25% of homeless people have been in care. *Care leavers' transition to adulthood, National Audit Office (July 2015)*
- 6% of care leavers move into higher education (*Care leavers' transition to adulthood, Fifth Report of Session 2015–16, House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (October 2015)*)

The Government's 2016 Care Leavers Strategy "Keep on Caring" described support currently provided as 'patchy' and recognised that Personal Advisors cannot always provide the practical and emotional support needed. It also highlighted that mentoring is a new way to provide the personal support networks care leavers need to thrive.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/535899/Care-Leaver-Strategy.pdf

More Information about the service:

The Friendship Works model of mentoring is based in an understanding of children's experiences of trauma and disrupted attachments. Children in care have by definition, experienced both (60% being in care as a result of neglect or abuse) and for many the negative impacts of early childhood experiences compounded with growing up in care, become even more pertinent as they leave care and transition to adulthood. It is at this very crucial point in a young person's life that an enduring and stable relationship with a positive, caring adult makes an enormous difference. Using what Friendship Works knows are the tremendous benefits of our long term model of mentor, we are piloting a new service for care leavers aged between 18 and 25 at the point of referral. The overall aim for the project is for the mentor to establish a trusting relationship with the care leaver and through that relationship build resilience, life skills and sense of self worth that will subsequently place them in a better position to have hopes for the future and access employment, training or education. As with the traditional Friendship Works model, the relationship remains young person led and it will not set any external targets at the outset, but develop as the young person chooses, within their timescales and encompassing their interests and wishes.

The aims of the project are for care leavers to:

- have the opportunity to experience a long term, caring, supportive, stable and consistent relationship with a positive, supportive and reliable adult
- have a relationship with an adult who is independent of their family and the "care system"
- have new experiences and perspectives open to them
- increase self esteem, confidence, sense of identity and efficacy in their lives
- begin to feel able to take greater control in their lives
- be supported to make and take forward plans for their future training, education or employment

The young people will be matched with volunteer adult mentors; it is important that the mentors are older than the care leavers and are able to bring to the relationship life experience that the care leaver has not, to date, had the opportunity to gain. The mentors will meet three times a month (minimum) with the care leaver, largely at weekends and in the evenings. The relationship will be activity based and within the community or, if appropriate and safe to do so, in the young person's home.

Mentors will provide a range of support both emotional and practical, as the young person needs and wants. As part of their training, mentors will be given an introduction to trauma and its impact on cognitive functioning abilities and emotional responses. They will be trained to be able to actively listen, to demonstrate acceptance, empathy and compassion. They will help young people explore, understand and express their emotions; to problem solve; and to plan and organise.

Whilst keeping with the young person led approach of the mentoring, mentors will provide practical help with learning the skills necessary for adulthood and independent living as the young person requests, for example, cooking, DIY, form filling or travelling. Additionally, drawing on their own experiences of education, training and/or employment, mentors will support care leavers to develop a greater understanding of the world of work; increase their confidence of succeeding in that arena; experiment and experience different aspects and environments of work; develop tools and skills necessary for work, plan and take the necessary next steps towards their chosen path. This might, for example, require mentors to discuss options and possibilities, help with applications or CV writing, or help young people identify their strengths, talents and interests.