

Book Review

Jo Dixon & Mike Stein (2005). *Leaving Care: Throughcare and Aftercare in Scotland*. London: Jessica Kingsley. 192pp, ISBN 1-84310-202-1 (Pbk), £19.95.

It is good to come across a book about leaving care written in a Scottish context. Dixon and Stein's *Leaving Care* gives a 'warts and all' look at the experiences of young people leaving public care in three differing authorities in Scotland, referred to in the research as *City, County and Shire*. These authorities were markedly different in regards to demographics, social, economic, and geographical situations, and therefore reflect Scottish life more broadly, not just the circumstances for young people in the central belt of Scotland.

The book is well written, readily accessible, thorough in its analysis, and draws upon current and previous research by the authors. It demonstrates many parallels between the experience of Scottish young people and their counterparts across the UK, drawing a picture of patchy support services and equally patchy outcomes for young people embarking on the challenge of early adulthood. Dixon and Stein highlight pertinent messages and emphasise for readers and policy makers alike, those services and circumstances that are more likely to lead to positive outcomes for young people.

Some of these issues should come as no surprise to professionals working in the field, but the fact that they have been highlighted continuously in research studies north and south of the border should concern politicians and practitioners. Stability and continuity of placement, early preparation and planning for post-care outcomes, and multi-agency collaboration with careers services, health professionals and housing agencies all require active consideration when looking at children's need for a stable life after care.

Whilst critical of many aspects of the services or lack of services to meet the needs of these young adults, this book is not sensationalist in tone. Dixon and Stein take a balanced approach in discussing many successes of young people and exploring why their outcomes were positive. They also address how agencies can be, and are becoming, more responsive to the needs of this client group.

Written to guide practitioners, advise agencies and to contribute to legislative change, this book describes research conducted by the writers in 2002. Dixon and Stein point out that children discharged from public care have 'accelerated transitions into adulthood' and leave home well before their non-care peers. The authors advise that unless these children are well prepared for this transition they often fail to cope with adult systems and expectations. In these situations, some cope but many fail and become the statistics that make up the unemployed, the homeless, the socially excluded, and the population of institutions for young offenders.

As an active residential practitioner, it disappointed me that residential services had such a limited role in the lives of the young people. Dixon and Stein commented that residential workers were active and supportive of young people in the early stages of their

research. However, it was clear that by the second stage of their study, six months later, the role of residential staff had become almost non-existent. Dixon and Stein attribute this to 'the pressure to fill beds' and a sense that by the aftercare stage, the care job was felt to have been done. This explanation was not blaming or seen as a failure by the authors. Rather, it was considered a by-product of the care structure. As a residential practitioner, I feel I would be more critical of services and structures, and would call for a continuing role for residential workers in supporting care leavers.

When it is functioning well, residential care acts as a fixed point for young people, and therefore the relationships formed while in care can serve as a vital support in aftercare situations. Better outcomes for young people are far more likely if residential practitioners are treated as essential, and supported in developing and using their skills in a post-care context.

Yet despite my disappointment in this aspect of the study's findings, this book for me was an essential read. It was focused, pertinent and informative. I would recommend that other practitioners and students take a look.

Maxwell Smart

Assistant Residential Support Manager,

Lothian Villa Resource Centre, East Lothian Council