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Comments from the roundtable: Judy Corlyon, Aggrey Burke, Harriet Ward and Victoria Lowry reflect on issues discussed at the event

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There is considerable overlap between the needs of the looked after population and those of people in prison, but the two groups are very different. At least 70% of children and young people in care never offend, and those who do have usually begun to commit offences prior to entry (Darker, Ward and Sempik, 2008). Confusion arises because the same vulnerability factors that precipitate children and young people into the care system (for instance family dysfunction, abusive or neglectful parenting and the emotional or behavioural difficulties that are often the consequences of abuse) are also found in prison populations.

Childhood maltreatment is associated with adult mental health problems, deficits in communication and social skills, poor literacy and numeracy and gaps in education, all of which increase the likelihood of poverty, homelessness, unemployment and (re)-offending. Neither prison nor care offers sufficient effective, specialist support that might help their populations overcome these problems. The retributive aspects of criminal justice policy have always impeded the development of programmes designed to help prisoners improve their employment prospects, however effective they might be in reducing offending, and current austerity measures make this task even harder.

Over the last twenty years numerous policies have been introduced to improve the outcomes of care. The Care Matters programme was part of the wider Every Child Matters initiative that set out an outcomes framework for the whole child population and explored ways of reducing the gap between looked after children and their peers. This finally marked an explicit rejection of the pernicious Poor Law principle of less eligibility- that the state should never provide vulnerable children and families with a higher standard of care than the poorest labourer might be able to offer. This huge conceptual advance legitimised programmes designed to address the consequences of past adversity, and reduce the likelihood of care leavers encountering poverty, unemployment and homelessness and/or joining the prison population in adulthood. It is therefore imperative to question a public discourse that increasingly vilifies vulnerability and attempts to reintroduce concepts of the deserving and undeserving poor (the strivers and skivers). Unless this is challenged, it may again appear acceptable to discriminate against looked after children by arguing that they deserve less than their peers.