

Vision for care leavers

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



Children in care and those leaving care are just as ambitious about their futures as other children, and so we need to be equally ambitious for them – I want every child in care and leaving care to feel as confident as the girl who told me:

'I know where I want to be in life, I know what I want to do, I know my aims, I know my dreams. I think 'cos I've got that support around me, I am able to fulfil my dreams and what I want to achieve' – Girl (age not given).

Making this a reality for every child and young person will require all of us working with and for children to be bold and ambitious. It starts in childhood, and also means making sure that once children turn 18, they continue to get the right help.

Meeting children's own ambitions for what their futures can and should look like will require action from everyone. I want everyone in local and national Government to embrace the role of corporate parent, and grandparent if care leavers have their own children, and to demand for children in care and care leavers what they would want for their own children and grandchildren. Today I am setting out my vision for what can be done to improve things for care leavers, so they can achieve all the things –

a great education, a fulfilling job, a loving family, good health, and a fantastic future – that they tell me they want.

In this report I set out clear recommendations to achieve this vision:

- Make sure every care leaver has a stable, suitable home through changes to their housing entitlements, benefit rates and ringfenced funding in the Household Support Fund.
- Support every care leaver to form and sustain loving relationships with carers and the professionals who support them, by enabling them to stay living with carers for longer and enhancing the role of Personal Advisor.
- Improve care leavers' mental and physical health with better training for professionals, as well as improved data.
- Enable all care leavers to access the training, further or higher education, and job that they want through sharing best practice and increasing financial support.

I know it can be done because I've seen so many fantastic examples of this already happening. Our mission now is to make that the case for every child and young person, wherever they live.

A vision for care leavers

Last year the Children's Commissioner conducted The Big Ask – the largest ever survey of children, which heard from over half a million children about their hopes, aspirations, and the things that were standing in their way. Children's priorities which emerged from their responses have in turn shaped and strategy of the Children's Commissioner's office (CCo). The office's work therefore covers seven key pillars - A Better World, Children's Social Care, Community, Family, Health, Jobs and Skills and Schools. This report is structured around what care leavers need in each of those areas, although as it is focused on support once they turn 18, we consider their needs in further and higher education rather than school.

Better world

Care leavers are inspiring and ambitious, not just for their own futures, but for the futures of all children. They have spoken about wanting to leave behind a better world, and a better care system, for those who come after them so that they will face fewer of the challenges they have overcome. This is why the Children's Commissioner will be launching a Care Experienced Advisory Board, to harness the insight, ambition and expertise that these young people can bring to the work of the CCo.

Children's social care

In this report, the focus is largely on what more can be done to support care leavers after they turn 18. But the foundations for all the things care leavers aspire to achieve are laid throughout their childhood, and their time in care. To improve care leavers outcomes, we therefore also need a reformed children's social care system. The Children's Commissioner has set out a vision for what children's social care should look like [here](#).

Community

Children have told the office that it's important for them to feel safe and secure within their local area. For young people and adults that sense of a safe local community, is equally important. Care leavers need to be able to develop community ties and a network of local support, as well as to have access

to secure housing and a place to call home. The CCo's Help at Hand service has heard directly from care leavers about the challenges they have experienced in finding suitable housing. Many care leavers have experienced lots of instability and placement moves in their lives – in 2020, 30.5% of looked after children had experienced two or more home moves in the previous three years.¹

The CCo welcomes the fact that care leavers will be exempted from the Shared Accommodation Rate of Housing Benefit until they are 25, rather than 22. This recognises the increased risk of homelessness that care leavers face, and means they have more options open to them when it comes to finding a home that is suitable for them. But more needs to be done.

Care leavers are currently entitled to housing either in the Local Authority (LA) that placed them in care, or the one that they lived – but only if they had lived there for two years, including some time before they were 16. This 'local connection' test should be removed entirely, so that care leavers can access housing wherever is most suitable. Likewise, care leavers should not be refused housing because they have become 'intentionally' homeless – for example because they have failed to pay rent or left somewhere that felt unsafe.

In recognition of the unique pressure that young care leavers face when settling into their own home, many LAs across the country have already exempted care leavers up to the age of 25 from paying Council Tax. Given the current pressures on everyone's finances, there is no better time to extend the exemption (that currently exists for diplomats, students and the armed forces) to all care leavers under 25. In addition to this, the Setting Up Home Allowance should be increased to make sure every child leaving care can set up a stable, happy home.

The recently extended Household Support Fund is an opportunity to enhance the support that is available to care leavers.² Findings from the National Benchmarking Forum show that some LAs are already reporting ringfencing part of the fund to funnel support directly to care leavers. Given the rise in everyday household costs, a portion of the Household Support Fund could be ring-fenced to support care leavers this Winter.³

Family

Every child should grow up with a loving family. When it is not possible for them to do so with birth families, there should be meaningful alternatives that ensure that no child grows up in an institution. Children should be able to form and sustain loving relationships that will last throughout their life. No child should have to think that there will be a point where 'care' stops – children who live at home with their families know and expect that they will continue to be loved, supported, and cared for throughout their lives. As children move on to become independent adults those loving relationships should be there to catch them when they stumble. Every young adult needs a secure base from which they can go off and explore the world, and which they can retreat to when things get tough. The same should be true for every child who lives in care – they should know that when they turn 18 there will still be someone to love, support and care about them. An 18th birthday should be an exciting milestone, not a moment to fear approaching a cliff edge, where care suddenly falls away. The Independent Family Review found that a loving, stable family can provide a protective effect for children that lasts throughout their childhood and beyond. As children grow up and have their own families, the place they most often want to turn for help is to family – often to parents. Care experienced people need this same stable, loving network that they can rely on throughout their lives. We all have a role to play in providing a shield of support around care leavers that mirrors this protective effect.

For some children in care, turning 18 can still be a frightening prospect, so more must be done to ensure that they have someone to turn to provide that love and support. As one girl put it:

'Nowadays, birth children stay with their families until late 20s and even into their thirties; as children in care we do not get this opportunity, setting us up to fail.' – Girl, Aged 15

Every child in care should be able to stay with carers until at least the age of 23, but fundamentally the moment they move on should be determined by when they are ready to, not when it suits the system. Every care leaver should be able to do this through a Staying Put arrangement, or to be able to benefit from a Staying Close scheme. If a child's final placement was in a children's home or unregulated setting, they should also be able to choose whether they would prefer a Staying Close scheme, or to 'Stay Put' with either a previous foster carer or in a new arrangement.

A care leaver's Personal Advisor (PA) can provide a trusted relationship and person to turn to. While it is a welcome step that the role was extended until a young person turns 25, more should be done to ensure PAs can provide the best possible support. Firstly, children should be given a genuine choice of who their PA is and should be able to get to know their PA well before they leave care. The role of the PA should be given greater status and supported through improved training.

Every LA is the corporate parent for children in care. The Family Review has demonstrated how as children grow up, and perhaps have their own families, parents carry on being a vital source of practical help and advice. Care leavers who have their own children need that same help and advice from their corporate parents, as well as someone to celebrate and share in the happiness of having a child. Alongside the joy of parenthood, some care leavers face particular challenges as they become parents, both practical and emotional. That is why every LA should be demonstrating the same care, interest, and ambition for care leavers as they would for their own children – and that includes setting out how they will also be a corporate grandparent to the children of people who have been in care.

Health

Mental health

Children in care who responded to The Big Ask were less likely than other children to be happy with their mental health. As many care leavers have experienced traumatic and complex challenges in their lives, it is vital that their central support networks are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support them. As PAs are well placed to act as a consistent and stable relationship in care leavers lives, this role should be enhanced.

PAs are often aware of the mental health needs of young people they support, yet research has found that PAs lacking expertise in mental health is a barrier that care leavers face in accessing support.⁴

To ensure that care leavers receive high quality support when they need it most, all PAs should have access to mental health training. In addition to this, where there is a need, there should be an expectation that care leavers can access CAMHS until the age of 25 and PAs should play a central role in supporting care leavers to access this support. This can help care leavers have a smoother and more stable transition to adulthood, without experiencing a cliff edge of support.

Physical health

Care leavers know the importance of staying physically healthy and have spoken about how staying active can improve their mental well-being. PAs are well placed to support care leavers to learn about how to identify their physical health needs and to take care of their physical health challenges – in the way that a parent would support their child.

As PAs often provide care leavers with guidance and training around how to prepare for living independently in their own home, they should also be equipped to educate care leavers around what physical health checks they should be routinely receiving (for example, dentistry and sexual health screening), as well as attend appointments with them where care leavers want more support.

For care leavers who have lived in residential care settings, foster care and kinship care, there is a higher prevalence of them experiencing limiting long-term illnesses compared to people who have not been in care.⁵ Research shows care leavers are more likely to experience premature and unnatural deaths, including deaths as a result of self-harm. Tragically, care leavers make up 7% of the deaths of young people aged 18-21 despite only comprising 1% of the population for this age group.⁶

There is a need for more robust reporting of harm to care leavers. The CCo believes if a care leaver under the age of 25 is subjected to serious harm or death, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel should be notified, who will in turn share information with Ofsted and the Department for Education. To facilitate this, the Ofsted guidance for reporting a serious incident should be updated to include reporting procedures for care leavers.

Jobs and skills

Employment

The CCo is committed to ensuring that every care leaver goes on to get the job they want. Advisory Groups that are established by large businesses such as the John Lewis Partnership, on which the Children's Commissioner sits, are an important step towards promoting the need for more businesses to step up to pledge their support for care leavers.

Apprenticeships are an essential part of the infrastructure that can support care leavers into the world of work. Currently, care leavers aged 16-24 that are signed up to a government approved apprenticeship programme that lasts more than 60 days can receive a one off £1,000 bursary. In recognition that many apprenticeships extend over several years and that care leavers often do not have access to a support network that can help them financially, young people should be financially supported until they finish their apprenticeship.

Currently, care leavers who are under 25 and seeking work get almost £70 less a month than those over 25.⁷ Care leavers have often experienced uniquely challenging situations that mean they have to live more independent lives than others their own age, without the practical help from family that others may rely on. That's why all care leavers should be entitled to benefit rates that reflect their higher level of need from the moment they turn 18. Just as parents will show forgiveness when their own children make mistakes, or offer more support when they are struggling, so too should corporate parents. More forgiveness should be shown to care leavers when it comes to benefit sanctions, with discussions taking place with PAs about any extenuating circumstances before any decision is made.

University

Children in care were just as ambitious as other children when it came to their futures – two thirds of those who responded to The Big Ask survey told the office that their top aspiration was to get a good job or career. But they face particular challenges in taking up the opportunities that will get them there. Latest government data from 2021 shows that 41% of 19–21-year-old care leavers were not in education, employment, or training, compared to 12% of all other young people in the same age group.⁸ Of care leavers that had been looked after for a year or more in 2017, only 13% had progressed to higher education by the age of 19 in 2020/21 compared to 45% of all other pupils.⁹

One girl told the office: *'to attend a top tier university which has been my dream since I was little I would have to forfeit my placement which has become my forever family and I don't think that's fair as no child should be made to choose between an education and dream career or their family.'* – Girl, Aged 15

She is absolutely right, and every care leaver should be able to have their placement remain open for them when they attend further education or university.

Many universities do really good work to support care leavers, offering a broad package of support to help them apply to university, integrate when they arrive and support them while they study. All universities should aim to replicate the offers available from the leaders in the field, such as those outlined below.

The University of York

- Conducts a thorough recruitment programme to encourage care experienced students to apply, providing preapplication support and building relationship with LAs by delivering outreach programmes. The university also operates a contextual admissions policy for care experienced students.
- The financial offer includes a Care Leavers' Bursary worth up to £3,000 a year, free year-round accommodation, a rent guarantee scheme, support with storage and a free membership for the sports facilities.
- The transitional support is holistic, with communication with a dedicated contact offered and various vouchers and support packages available, including a free freshers pass, birthday vouchers and support with accessing peer support groups.

Kings College London

- Kings offers outreach support for care experienced students through the Sutton Trust Summer School and a programme called K+ that aims to equip Year 12 and 13 students with the knowledge, confidence, and skills to transition into university. They also provide application support through a dedicated staff who offers feedback and advice about different courses.
- To support with the transition into university, they offer specific events for inducting care experienced students through bespoke information sessions, welcome events for care experienced students and counselling and mental health support.

St Mary's University Twickenham

- Graduation can be an expensive day that care leavers should be all be able to attend to celebrate their university experience. To support care leavers to attend, St Mary's offers a graduation bursary to help cover the costs of gown hire, guest tickets and photos.¹
- To help care leavers establish their lives after university, St Mary's offer support with immediate living costs after university, such as travel costs to interviews and rent.

To ensure that all universities are offering the best for care leavers, a high-quality standard offer could be produced, setting out expectations. This should build on the Children's Commissioner's practical guide for care leavers¹⁰, the pledges made by some universities through the Care Leaver Covenant, and the government's principals guide to HE¹¹. Universities should then display their offers clearly on their websites.

To help care leavers navigate the application and clearing process, an updated list of contact details for care leaving teams at UCAS coded universities and colleges should be published annually, using the Children's Commissioner's list that was published this September as a starting point.¹²

Care leavers are currently entitled to a £2,000 bursary for higher education, as well as the 16-19 bursary offer for further education, training, or unpaid internships. The bursary rates need to reflect care leavers experiences, and the 16-19 bursary could also be extended to care leavers under 25.

A Great Local Offer

All LAs across the country should work collaboratively to learn from areas of innovation and best practice in developing brilliant care leaver offers. The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Local Offer Toolkit can be used by LAs to benchmark themselves across a range of areas such as health and wellbeing, education, accommodation, and finance.¹³ PAs should also play a central role in signposting care leavers to support and identifying where the local offer needs improving.

Every area in the country should be offering what some of the best already are, with clear expectations on them all to deliver for care leavers. This should include the following:

- LAs should support care leavers to establish their home through offering a rent guarantor scheme and helping care leavers with the practicalities of moving house. Some LAs utilise council vans to help care leavers move and provided financial support with the costs of moving.¹⁴
- LAs need to set ambitious targets around ensuring that every care leaver is in suitable education, employment, and training after the age of 16. To make this possible, LAs should ringfence apprenticeships and jobs for care leavers that are paid at paying National Living Wage.
- LAs should all have a clear offer to support care leavers health and wellbeing. For example, Wolverhampton has been offering care leavers free gym membership. While in Middlesbrough in response to the need greater mental health support for care leavers, the LA appointed a Therapeutic Practitioner that is based in the Leaving Care Service. The Therapeutic Practitioner plays a central role in offering tiered mental health support and providing guidance to PAs on how to support care leavers.¹⁵
- To support with the rise in cost of living, LAs should routinely collect information on what discounts and offers businesses are providing to care leavers encourage young people to make use of the offers. LAs should develop partnerships with local businesses such a cafes and hairdressers to provide tailored support to care leavers.
- North Yorkshire County Council Care Leaving Service launched the 'Always Here' offer that provides support to care leavers after they turn 25 in recognition of the need to end the 'care cliff'. This is a great example of how LAs can offer support beyond 25 by making use of existing support services and structures.¹⁶

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