



OCTOBER 2024

Supporting care experienced students:

A handbook for professionals
working in higher education



Dame Rachel de Souza
Children's Commissioner

As Children's Commissioner, I have had the privilege to hear from many brilliant and inspiring care experienced young people about their lives now and hopes for the future. Care experienced young people are rightly ambitious for their futures and have told me what support they need to help them meet their own goals.

To help ensure every care experienced young person is supported to achieve their aspirations, this handbook has been created in collaboration with the young people on my Care Experienced Advisory Board and incorporates insights from professionals working in the sector.

Higher education institutions in receipt of government funding are required to develop Access and Participation Plans to address the needs of young people less likely to access higher education. The Office for Students highlights young people from care experienced backgrounds as a group who may benefit from access and participation interventions.

This handbook's purpose is to help professionals working in higher education institutions recognise the challenges faced by care experienced students and encourage them to embed policies which would help to improve their lives. The handbook aims to provide professionals working in all types of higher education institution, including smaller provisions and distance learning, with ideas to improve their offer to care experienced students over time.

This practical handbook covers support from pre-admissions through to finishing studies including financial assistance, social integration, career development, and overall well-being. It will help you create inclusive, supportive, and nurturing environments for care experienced young people.

The recommendations outlined in this handbook come directly from care experienced young people. Through my board, they have come up with practical proposals that would make the experience of higher education better for care experienced people, as professionals you can tailor the recommendations to what works for your students.

Through amplifying the voices of care experienced young people and sharing this set of recommendations developed by them, I encourage colleges, universities, apprenticeships and support networks to provide the assistance care experienced students need and the welcoming environments that can help them thrive. Together, we can make a difference in the lives of these resilient individuals, empowering them to pursue their educational goals with confidence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Children's Commissioner for England's Care Experienced Advisory Board, who have shaped this handbook. The Board is made up of young care experienced people, some of whom are currently in education and/or employment, and this handbook is based on their insights and experiences.

Throughout this report, spoken statements and written comments by care experienced people are quoted. These come from the Children's Commissioner's Care Experienced Advisory Board, the Department for Education Care Leaver Network, Civil Service Care Leaver interns, and the Children's Commissioner's The Big Ambition survey.

Thank you to all those who provided case studies and quotes. Thanks also to professionals working in the sector for sharing knowledge to support the handbook's development.

This includes professionals from the following organisations:

Brighton and Hove City Council

Bolton College

Gloucestershire County Council

Help at Hand

HEPI (the Higher Education Policy Institute)

Kingston University

Manchester Metropolitan University

National Network for the Education of Care Leavers

Rees Foundation

Royal Central School of Speech and Drama

UCAS (the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service)

Unite Foundation, This is Us and All of Us.

University of Bradford

University of Birmingham

University of Exeter

University of Law



THANK YOU TO THE MEMBERS OF THE CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER'S CARE EXPERIENCED ADVISORY BOARD:

Brad	Kayleigh
Bryony	Luke
Carla	Mahnoor
Courtney	Maz
Fatmata	Megan
Flory	Mei
Georgia	Sapphire
Hannah	Scott
Ira	Semiloore
Jamilat	Shannon
Jon	Tiana
Kaitlin	Zachary

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE NEED FROM HIGHER EDUCATION:

An overview of the handbook

The Care Experienced Advisory Board have developed this handbook, which is split into seven sections, each including reflections from care experienced young people, questions to ask yourself and recommendations to ensure your offer is as strong and supportive as possible.

The board have also created a hierarchy of needs for care experienced young people to support your understanding. You can use this page to navigate through the handbook.



CONTENTS

Understanding care experienced young people	6
1.1 Hierarchy of needs for care experienced young people	7
1.2 Offering support to anyone who has been in care	12
1.3 University experience: Case study	14
Pre-admissions, move in and starting higher education support	16
2.1 Access and awareness of higher education support	16
2.2 Improving pathways into higher education	18
2.3 Admissions process	20
2.4 Move in and starting higher education support	22
Financial security	24
3.1 Housing and accommodation	24
3.2 Financial aid	26
3.3 University and local area employment	28
Wellbeing and social support	30
4.1 Supporting mental health and wellbeing	30
4.2 Counselling and mental health support	34
Care experienced young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)	36
5.1 Supporting students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)	36
Help with career planning and next steps	38
6.1 Supporting students' career development	38
6.2 Supporting students with transitioning into careers or postgraduate study	40
Training and resources for staff	42
7.1 Training for staff	42
7.2 Resources for staff	44
Conclusion	45
Annex	46

RECOMMENDATIONS

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 01 Provide the same offer for all care experienced young people and understand their needs. | 02 Share clear information about your offer and the experience care experienced young people can have at your institution | 03 Work closely with Virtual School Heads on how you can support individual children to access and apply for higher education |
| 04 Work with schools and colleges to offer opportunities to meet role models and experience your institution | 05 Work closely with Virtual School Heads to support individual children to access and apply for higher education | 06 Offers and standard entry requirements should be adapted to take into account additional challenges |
| 07 Provide a phone call on results day to discuss their place in higher education and what to expect | 08 Consider making a revised offer on results day and provide clearing support | 09 Physical package and person to meet them on move in day or at the start of their studies and offer set up and integration support |
| 10 Offer year-round housing for care experienced students with priority access and flexible contracts | 11 Recognise that care experienced young people do not have guarantors and offer accommodation support | 12 Offer financial assistance to cover resources, such as course books and subscription services and for travel |
| 13 Provide budgeting and financial management workshops | 14 Promote bursaries and scholarships for care experienced young people, and provide clear information on hardship funding | 15 Actively promote student roles to care experienced students |
| 16 Offer guaranteed interviews for student and institution job roles to care experienced students | 17 Signpost to job offers in the community and support applications | 18 Understand requirements of care leavers to meet with professionals potentially during work hours |
| 19 Have a primary point of contact for care experienced students | 20 Offer regular wellbeing check ins for care experienced young people and promote peer mentoring | 21 Support care experienced students to create an "All About Me" document |
| 22 Support with social integration, belonging and inclusion | 23 Give care experienced students who need it priority access to mental and physical health support that recognises their needs | 24 Aid with referrals to healthcare professionals, such as GPs and dentists, and getting a mental health diagnosis |
| 25 Offer joined-up support to help with all additional needs | 26 Have a Disability Services Office or equivalent ensuring that care experienced students with SEND receive support | 27 Support the development of practical skills, independent living skills and job specific skills |
| 28 Help source and promote diverse internship programmes and jobs and help with applications | 29 Offer mentorship opportunities to help with the career journey | 30 Celebrate care experienced young people when they complete their studies |
| 31 Offer financial support to those completing their studies and those transitioning into postgraduate study | 32 Provide the opportunity for staying in touch and having a legacy to avoid the cliff edge of leaving higher education | 33 Provide training and resources for staff members to support care experienced students |

1 UNDERSTANDING CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE

A care experienced young person is anyone who is currently in or has been in care.

This can include:

- › Those looked after by the local authority in foster care
- › Formal kinship care agreements (e.g. with a special guardianship order)
- › Informal kinship care arrangements (e.g. with family and friends)
- › Residential care homes
- › Youth justice settings such as Young Offender Institutions, at any stage in their childhood, for any length of time

For the purpose of this Handbook, the definition of care experienced includes adopted children who were previously looked after and estranged young people.

“Overall, my university experience was good, but I wish I had done my own research about what support was out there for care leavers. I relied solely on the information my PA gave me, but I've now come to find out that there are so many charities out there that could cover university accommodation costs, tuition fees or offer a bursary. My university offered more help for care leavers that I didn't know about. I would advise anyone working in a university reading this to make sure that they are doing all they can to actively inform care leavers about what's on offer, and not assume they will find it themselves.”

Beginning higher education can be both exciting and daunting for any young person. However, for care experienced young people, it can feel particularly challenging. Unlike many of their peers, they often lack the family support system that provides guidance and comfort during this transition. Additionally, most care experienced young people will not be supported by local authorities, resulting in feelings of isolation.

Care experienced young people share the same aspirations and needs as their peers as well as coping with additional hurdles that mean they require more support. They want the opportunity to pursue higher education and realise their academic dreams. However, they often lack the guidance and support necessary to navigate the process successfully.

To access and succeed in higher education, care experienced young people need an equitable approach. Taking an equitable approach does not mean providing everyone with the same support and resources (equality) but recognising that to access the same experiences and take part in their studies in the same way as their peers, care experienced young people need additional support. Ensuring that there is equity for care experienced young people requires taking a young person centred and needs-based approach, recognising that these young people have different additional challenges to their peers but can achieve the same things.

1.1 Hierarchy of needs for care experienced young people

The Children's Commissioner's Care Experienced Advisory Board have created a hierarchy of needs (see diagram on following page) based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. It is a visual guide to help professionals working with care experienced young people understand their needs and how to unlock their full potential.

The different levels of the pyramid consider the basic requirements that care experienced young people need to live, to feel safe, to feel a sense of belonging confident and self-fulfilled, enabling them to access and participate in any experience. The bottom of the hierarchy starts with the most basic needs. The basic foundations are minimum requirements, without which no student can succeed in their education.

Particular needs will be different for different individuals. It is important to talk to, and support, each young person to explore what the top of the pyramid looks like for them. Reaching the top requires feeling like you have everything you need and that you are able to achieve the things that you want to achieve and are happy in yourself.

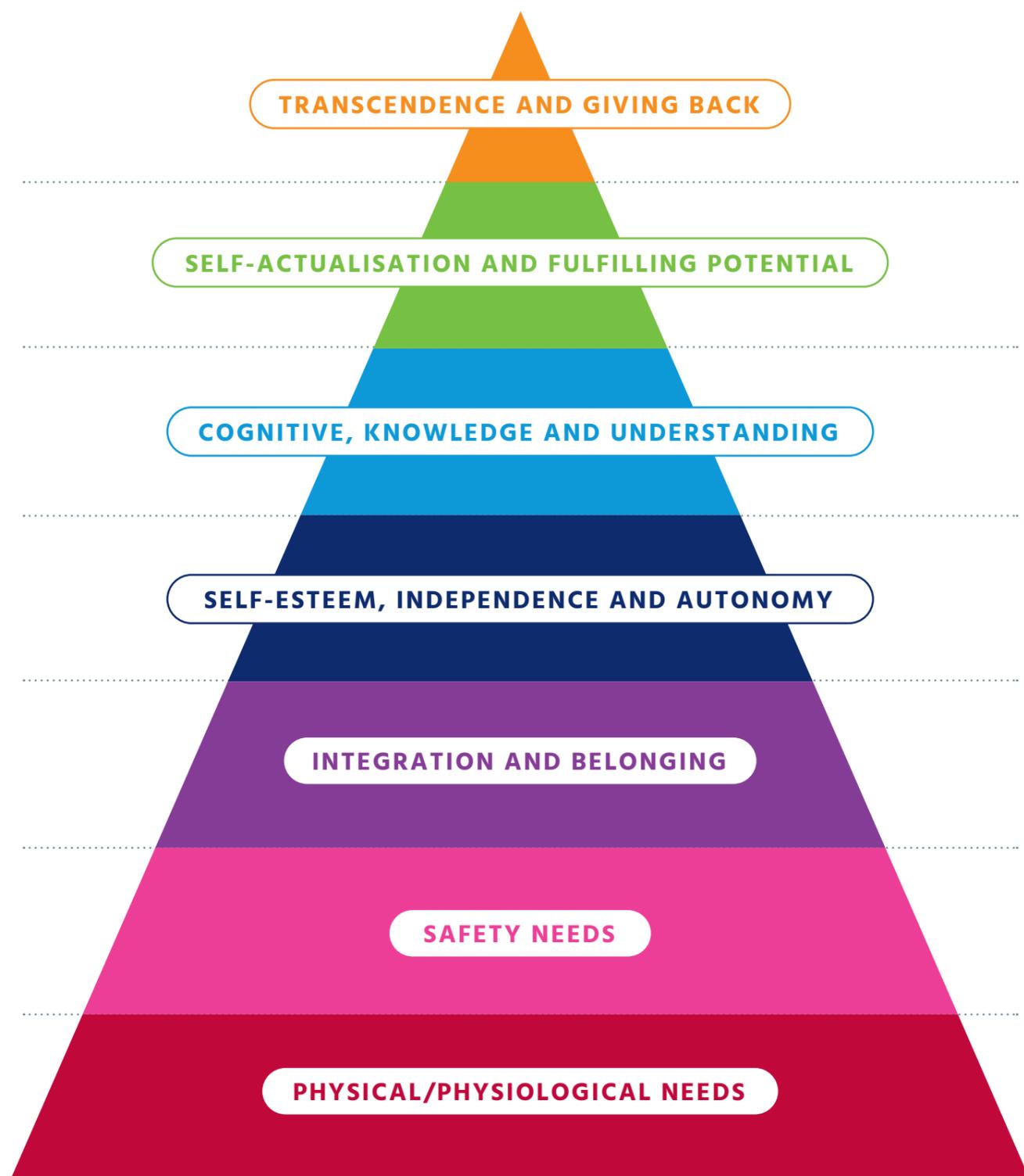
As higher education professionals you won't be able to cater for all of the needs within the pyramid, but it is useful to understand each level to best support the young people you are working with.

“Ensure we are listened to and our needs are taken into consideration, we need agency and to have a voice in decisions that affect us.”

“If you look back at what you've achieved and you're happy with it, I think that's the kind of stage of fulfilment. If I look back in 30 years, I'll be like, yeah, I did that and I'm proud of it. I think at that point I'll feel self-fulfilled and feel like all my needs have been met and I've been able to make the most of life and I've made a difference.”



HIERARCHY OF NEEDS FOR CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE



Physical/physiological needs

- > Food
- > Water
- > Shelter – a safe, decent and affordable place to live at all times, support with homelessness
- > Warmth – heating and clothing
- > A bed, bedding, sleep, rest
- > Physical activity
- > Appropriate temperature and air quality
- > Physical comfort

Safety needs

PERSONAL

- > Corporate parents
- > Network of trusted and supportive people e.g. carers and regular check-ins
- > Support from authorities or services such as the police, and knowing that there are safe people/organisations if required
- > Relocation where required
- > Safeguarding and trauma-informed practice
- > Young person to be involved in their own safety plan and pathway plan
- > Support with family contact
- > Communication among the adults in their life
- > Support in transitions and moving out of, or back to, their local area
- > Transport to and from services and activities

HEALTH

- > Resources and services to support with health
- > Support accessing services such as signing up for a GP or dentist
- > Exercise and access to leisure and fitness services
- > Understanding different services and knowing where to go for different support e.g. guide dogs and at-home care
- > Support getting a diagnosis for neurodiversity and SEND or mental illnesses
- > Personalised support and being involved in decisions around their own healthcare plan
- > Explanations in accessible language and being able to make informed decisions about their own health
- > Feeling cared for and respected
- > No stigma around being care experience when accessing services and support
- > Understanding among healthcare professionals who provide services for care experienced young people

FINANCIAL

- > Support with the cost of living
- > Help with the costs of course resources
- > Help with the costs of travel
- > Advice, resources and lessons or workshops regarding finance and learning to budget, including how much things cost and typical spending on things like food and a car
- > Knowing what they are entitled to at different ages
- > Knowing about bursaries, extra funding, hardship funds, grants, benefits and support accessing or applying for them
- > Recognition of special occasions through celebrations such as a card/present
- > Resources to relocate to a safer space if needed



EMOTIONAL

- › Professionals that listen to and work with them and are there when needed
- › Regular check-ins and not just being left to their own devices even if they are doing well independently
- › Communication between professionals – “All About Me document” to support this
- › Transparency - open and honest conversations
- › Secure access to resources and services to support with mental health, including helplines
- › Dedicated safe person and safe spaces
- › Being treated as an individual through personalised support
- › Support with accessing care records
- › Recognition of the stigma faced by care experienced people and support to overcome it
- › Independent advocacy to support expressing their wishes
- › Reducing the cliff edge of care by offering follow-on support
- › Encouragement and support to dream big



Integration and belonging

- › Support to take part in hobbies and clubs and recognising the benefits of this
- › Making connections in their local area - opportunities to meet people and support in building trusting and long-lasting relationships
- › Support to make friends and get advice from the right crowd
- › Support in transitions and moving out of or back to their local area
- › Opportunities to make connections with and join communities of other care experienced young people
- › Celebrating traditions and their cultural and ethnical identity – support for learning about and maintaining their roots/background.
- › Finding out about local community hubs and spaces offering activities such as libraries
- › Support when wanting to live with friends

Self-esteem, independence and autonomy

- › Choice - the ability to choose their own path, rather than what caregivers and others want for them
- › Skills development and enrichment
- › Continuous teaching on how to be independent – not just a one-day course
- › A passport to independence introduced before age 16
- › Mobility – help with getting around such as driving, cycling, and being able to attend activities or clubs
- › Support with their identity, recognising their values, what is important to them, and goal setting
- › Someone to go to, to find out how to do practical things such as apply for a passport, deal with issues about accommodation etc – or online resources (videos and guidance) to do these things
- › All schools including alternative provisions offer skills and independent living development opportunities

Cognitive, knowledge and understanding

- › Knowing who and what they need to succeed
- › Support with life transitions
- › Knowing what options there are for education and careers
- › Support to apply for further study and jobs
- › Recognising backgrounds and challenges when pursuing education at different stages
- › Research skills – make informed decisions based on understanding evidence
- › Knowledge and skills required to undertake higher education or jobs

Self-actualisation and fulfilling potential

- › Rising above the obstacles faced due to care
- › Feeling able to achieve dreams
- › Having a fulfilling life
- › Succeeding in personal goals and having drive
- › Stretch goals and pushing to reach full potential
- › Feeling content and positive looking back on achievements and what's to come
- › Feeling confident in decisions made
- › Knowledge of self and own identity

Transcendence and giving back

- › Feeling part of wider society
- › Being able to provide a unique perspective based on lived experience
- › Opportunities to make a difference in particular within the children's social care system and helping others going through it
- › Going beyond ordinary limitations and goals



1.2 Offering support to anyone who has been in care

Spending any amount of time in care can have a significant impact on a young person's journey through education and their outcomes. The unique challenges faced by care experienced young people require specific support across the range of themes covered by this handbook. As an institution you should support the full range of care experienced young people.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“For me personally I've always wanted to go to university and I'm in the process of applying but it's been very isolating trying to explain to student finance that I don't have parental support.”

“We need consistent, high quality offers for care experienced young people from local authorities and universities.”

“A huge issue is that universities and colleges promise support but don't necessarily deliver!”

“Being on an apprenticeship is harder as my apprenticeship provider always goes through my Personal Advisor instead of me. My apprenticeship provider was not particularly happy I was care experienced, that they have to go through my PA/care leaver team, and I don't think it's right to not give you, personally, the options and to just ask your PA to make decisions on your behalf.”

“Children in care are not encouraged or supported (financially or otherwise) to go to university, and once they do go it's unlikely that their university will support them.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- 01 Do you understand the characteristics of the care experienced students who are applying, being accepted, and completing their degrees?
- 02 Are you doing enough to support care experienced students to apply to higher education?
- 03 Are you doing enough to support care experienced students to stay in higher education and complete their studies?
- 04 Do you know their background knowledge coming into higher education?
- 05 What is preventing you from widening the definition of who can access your offer to all care experienced students, and how could this be overcome?
- 06 How could you make the case with colleagues for widening access and support for care experienced young people to attend your institution?
- 07 Does your offer meet the needs of your care experienced students?
- 08 Is there more you can do to build or strengthen links with local care experienced networks through schools, colleges, local authorities and leaving care teams?

RECOMMENDATION 1

Provide the same offer for all care experienced young people and understand their needs

Having consulted with care leavers and care experienced young people, the first recommendation in this handbook is to provide all care experienced young people with the same support and funding opportunities as they have all faced and continue to face similar challenges and barriers. Some higher education providers only offer support to specific definitions of a care leaver (see annex for definitions) and young people involved in the development of this handbook would like institutions to relook at this policy and the support they can offer to the wider definition of care-experienced young people who all have similar challenges and needs.

Some care experienced young people will go into higher education, in particular university, after turning 25 years of age and will need the same support as younger students. In recognition of this, some institutions have increased their offer to age 30. This is an important and much needed change that should be considered by all institutions.

Care experienced young people can tick the box in their UCAS applications to make themselves known but some won't do this or might miss it, so it's a good idea to offer them an additional way to notify you after their application has been submitted.

Promising practice

Professionals in the sector have showcased that there are lots of institutions already providing support to the broad group of care experienced young people as defined earlier in the handbook.

The National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) began as a volunteer network in 2013, run by higher education institutions and national organisations committed to the progression and support of care experienced students in further and higher education. NNECL work collaboratively with education practitioners and care system professionals to transform the progression of children in care and care leavers and those who are estranged, into and through further and higher education. On their website they share institutions who are NNECL members and showcase best practice approaches to supporting care experienced students: nnecl.org/pages/84-nnecl-members

1.3 University experience: Case study



In college, my form tutor and careers advisors were always there to help, whether it was offering guidance on drafting my personal statement or providing advice on my academic journey. My friends and classmates who were also applying for university offered support, sharing their experiences and insights.

As a first-generation student, I found a different kind of support from my peers. While they may not have understood the specific challenges of being a care leaver, their encouragement and assistance were invaluable in navigating the complexities of the application process.

Being part of my local Children in Care Council offered more support. My virtual teacher played a crucial role, helping me review my application and ensuring that I was well-prepared for the next steps. They also provided essential information on the support available to care leavers, ensuring that I knew what I was entitled to.

A charity also supported me with insights into which universities offered support for care leavers and the various support packages available. With the guidance and support of these individuals and organisations, I felt empowered to pursue my educational dreams with confidence.

The decision of whether to stay in London and commute to university or to live on campus weighed heavily on me. Living in a YMCA at the time added another layer of complexity, as I was in the process of bidding for housing. Unfortunately, my housing situation narrowed my choices, limiting me to options within London. I had just secured a flat, but I couldn't trust that there would be adequate housing support after university if I moved away.

My primary concern was security. I wanted a stable living situation where I wouldn't have to worry about finding accommodation or facing financial struggles, which were making me really anxious.

Transitioning to university life proved overwhelming, especially considering the fast-paced nature of my course, on top of managing my housing issues. My schedule left little room for anything social or fun. I had to commute two hours a day, which robbed me of the university experience I had hoped for. Feeling excluded from the community and opportunities available to other students, I struggled to find my place.

I received no support from the university's Care Leavers Participation officer who was absent most of the time due to leave



and sickness, with no replacement in their absence, which left me feeling unsupported.

There were moments when dropping out seemed like the only option, but thankfully, my professors provided unwavering support. They assisted me with resubmissions and extended deadlines when needed.

The burden of taking out a loan weighed heavily on me, serving as a constant reminder that dropping out was not a choice. The desire to be the first in my family to graduate served as a powerful motivator, which helped me to persevere despite the challenges.

The Participation Officer from the Children in Care Council was a source of support, offering a sympathetic ear, and advocating on my behalf. However, despite my efforts to explain my difficult housing situation and its impact on my attendance, the university did not give me the flexibility I needed.

Seeking counselling in my first year provided some relief but took an emotional toll. Despite attending an attendance review, it was social services, not my university, that proved more understanding and supportive of my circumstances.

A Care Leavers Bursary provided by my university gave crucial assistance and was hugely beneficial. Credit for this vital information goes to my Virtual School, who told me what financial support was available from the universities I applied to.

There were moments when dropping out seemed like the only option, but thankfully, my professors provided unwavering support.

As I approached the end of my undergraduate studies, discussions about my future became more frequent. I had sessions with my Participation Officer, discussing my aspirations and potential paths forward. Sadly, the support from my Virtual School fell off at this point - while they may assist with admissions, their support did not extend to planning for life beyond university. The key support I wish I had was post-graduation support, to help me understand my options, such as careers and educational options that could have been available to me."

2 PRE-ADMISSIONS, MOVE IN AND STARTING HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT

Care experienced young people have said that they need support in advance of going on to higher education. They have stated that they did not always understand the application process or the challenges they might face following admission.

Professionals in the sector feel that we all need to be doing more to support care experienced students at this stage. Local authorities should be doing more for care leavers in line with their statutory duty, universities should have more standardised offers for care experienced young people, and information on support from institutions needs to be more accessible.

This section looks at supporting access to higher education, improving pathways and communication between local services and higher education institutions, the admissions process, and support for move in and starting courses.

2.1 Access and awareness of higher education support

To support care experienced young people considering studying at your institution it is essential for you to have an online presence and physical packages with clear information about your offer and the experience they can have.

“We need practical help and understanding on what to do when you move to university.”

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“Honesty is the best policy, use language that we can understand”

“We need information clarity, to be told the right information and clarity on exactly what bursary we can get.”

“As a care leaver I was not aware that my university had specific support for people like me.”

“They should have names and contact details published and widely available.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- 01 Why should care experienced young people come to your institution?
- 02 What do care experienced students need to know before they apply, and before they arrive?
- 03 Is there a complete list of the forms of help and support available to care experienced students at your higher education institution?
- 04 Is all the information about your offer and the support available accessible in one place?
- 05 Can current or previous care experienced students share their stories to put new students at ease and show what to expect?

“Schools and colleges should give specific care leavers practical info to their students who are applying to university, so that they are aware of what they will face when they enter university.”

RECOMMENDATION 2

Share clear information about your offer and the opportunities care experienced young people can have at your institution

Your support offer should be transparent and easy to access to empower care experienced young people to make informed decisions about their educational paths. You should share comprehensive information online regarding:

- › application support
- › contextual offers that take into account individual circumstances
- › funding opportunities, grants, and bursaries and how to access a hardship fund if required
- › accommodation support
- › arrival and welcome
- › mental health and wellbeing support available
- › guidance around careers and next steps
- › contact information for key support staff
- › testimonies from recent care experienced students

This accessibility is crucial for attracting care experienced students to higher education institutions and ensuring they feel welcomed, supported and not singled out because of their background.

Promising practice

The University of York has a page for care experienced students applying to the university <https://www.york.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/applying/care-leavers/> and a page for care experienced students studying at the university <https://www.york.ac.uk/students/support/care-experienced/#tab-1>. These pages share a range of information, from pre-admissions and visit days, to contextualised offers and financial and accommodation support, to dedicated contacts and sports and society memberships, to graduation celebrations. It's important for all this information to be clear and in one place for young people to access.

2.2 Improving pathways into higher education

To support access to higher education for care experienced young people you should work with local services. This includes working closely with Virtual School Heads on how you can support individual children, working with schools and colleges to offer opportunities for care experienced young people to meet role models and visit to attend open days, taster sessions, outreach events and day or summer schools with travel expenses covered and working closely with local authority leaving care teams to enhance your offer.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“We need support in completing applications or [finance] forms.”

“Links to open days and care teams at unis, communicating these links to schools, colleges, PAs etc is vital.”

“I didn't have a permanent home address to add to the forms and it caused lots of issues.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- 01 Do you have good working relationships with the leaving care team in your nearby local authorities, and Virtual School Heads?
- 02 Do you have care experienced role models from your alumni network who could go into local schools/children in care councils/care leaver forums and share their experiences?
- 03 What knowledge and skills are required to undertake studies and thrive?
- 04 Do you offer open days/trial days and arrange travel for these?
- 05 Could you offer an experience day just to care experienced students so they can meet other new students and form bonds before starting?
- 06 Can you offer support for individual children planning to apply to and attend your institution?

RECOMMENDATION 3

Work closely with Virtual School Heads to support individual children to access and apply for higher education

Many care experienced young people will not have families or friends to support with this crucial step in their life, so it is vital for schools, colleges and Virtual School Heads to start conversations around higher education options as early as possible. This will help care experienced young people to make better informed decision about their future and have supportive adults in their life to help shape that awareness and catered support.

Individual children may need additional support and help with applying and being able to talk to someone at the institution they wish to attend can be particularly beneficial.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Work with schools and colleges to offer opportunities to meet role models and experience your institution

Care experienced young people often don't have a family network of support to help with career goal building, so career support in secondary school is particularly crucial. Higher education institutions can help by starting conversations about different options, provide role models to showcase different careers, and provide career guidance from a young age.

Offer open days and experience days with funding for travel. If possible, offer a meet up or experience day for care experienced students so they can meet other new students and form bonds before starting or when they first start their studies.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Work closely with local authority leaving care teams to enhance your offer and support care experienced young people

Work with leaving care teams to enhance their expertise in advising care leavers on various post-secondary options, including university, apprenticeships, college, distant learning courses and work. Personalised guidance and comprehensive knowledge of available support services are essential for empowering care leavers to pursue their aspirations and navigate the transition to higher education successfully.

Promising practice

A 22-year-old care leaver approached the Children's Commissioner's Help at Hand service in 2022 as she was at risk of homelessness and was not able to claim social housing in her local area. Her parent local authority had placed her out of the region when she was a child. She was attending university but was not able to cover all her living expenses while studying full-time.

She had experienced two changes of Personal Advisers and had not received any information from her current Personal Adviser or the Leaving Care Duty Team for several months. Her university's Care Leaver Support Service was very helpful, they tried to approach her local authority Leaving Care Team but had received no response and so escalated her case to Help at Hand.

After several months of representations from Help at Hand, including attending meetings with the young person and professionals, the Leaving Care Team assisted her in securing a private tenancy in the area where she was settled. She was also finally given her higher education bursary payments, which had been stopped for over 10 months. In addition, she received assurances in writing that she would be given extra financial support if needed to maintain her flat, until she completed university and secured a full-time job.

2.3 Admissions process

Consider your admissions process and how offers and standard entry requirements can be adapted to take into account the additional challenges care experienced young people may have faced or be currently facing. To create a welcoming atmosphere and explain practicalities offer a phone call on results day or just after, to put care experienced students at ease and reduce worry. In this call consider making a revised offer. Offer the same pre-admissions support to care experienced young people coming through clearing.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“ I got a call before move-in, I liked being on the receiving end of this.”

“ I would have liked them to reach out in person - seeing their faces is much better.”

“ We need to be better informed of practical issues around coming to university.”

“ Having a care experienced person on care leavers teams at uni, as they are the first point of call...”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- 01 Recognising the additional challenges care experienced young people might face, do you provide contextualised offers?
- 02 Do you offer additional academic support to those you provide with contextualised offers?
- 03 Do you share practical information about what will happen during move-in and during term time, as well as during holidays?
- 04 Can you alter your offer on results day or ensure someone is at the end of the line to talk to them about clearing?
- 05 How do you support care experienced students through the clearing process, and how could this support be improved?

RECOMMENDATION 6

Offers and standard entry requirements should be adapted to take into account additional challenges

Universities should review their application processes and forms to ensure that they are care experience friendly, taking into account the additional challenges these young people will have faced and may currently be facing.

Contextual admissions should be used to support care experienced young people into higher education. UCAS provides more information on contextual admissions: <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/individual-needs/contextual-admissions>

Additional academic support should be provided to those with contextual offers to ensure the young people can meet the demands of the offer, this is to make sure the system is equitable, and these young people are provided with everything they need to succeed. This could be extra help in advance of the course, during it, or both.

Higher education institutions should also be sensitive and flexible when faced with circumstances such as multiple addresses, lack of family contacts, and the absence of emergency contacts. By addressing these concerns, higher education institutions can create a more inclusive environment for care experienced young people.

Promising practice

Many universities offer contextual admissions to students who have let them know they are care experienced in their UCAS application and some offer the opportunity to provide details of care experience directly.

For example, the University of Sheffield has a contextual offer scheme of up to two grades below the standard A-level entry requirements of courses. It has an Access+ eligibility declaration in which care experienced students can let them know of their background to benefit from contextual admissions. They also provide a Disrupted Studies form, particularly if young people believe their circumstances may have affected, or will affect, their ability to meet the entry requirements (standard or contextual). If a young person in these circumstances misses the conditions of their offer, they will give their application additional consideration to see whether the young person might still be sufficiently prepared for degree study with them. [sheffield.ac.uk/study/policies/access-sheffield](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/study/policies/access-sheffield)

RECOMMENDATION 7

Provide a phone call on results day to discuss their place in higher education and what to expect

On results day or shortly after, a phone call to care experienced young people can make a big difference. In particular, care experienced young people have noted that when this call is made by a current care experienced student working with the Widening Access team at the higher education institution it can have an even bigger impact, with a member of the Widening Access team on hand and available to talk as well. Points to discuss on the call include:

- › Admissions - You've met your offer, or, you haven't met your offer, but you are entitled to an adjusted offer
- › Practical issues – What happens next, what you need to be prepared for, what will happen when you come to attend the institution
- › Expectations around study and overall experience of attending your institution
- › A personalised approach to congratulations or commiserations

Promising practice

“I applied for a job to support the Widening Participation team at my university and we would ring round care experienced applications on results day, I would ring care experienced applicants to say: ‘You've met your offer, congratulations, here's some information about coming to our University’ or ‘You haven't met your offer but you are entitled to an adjusted offer.’ I would let them know that ‘someone can meet you on your first day and help you settle in’ and share that I was care experienced and a bit about my experience at university – what's on offer and what support is available. This role was advertised in the uni job shop.”

RECOMMENDATION 8

Consider making a revised offer on results day and provide clearing support

On a case-by-case basis, the applications of care experienced students who have not met your offer (either standard or contextual) should be given additional consideration, as in the promising practice examples above. During the phone call on results day, if the young person has not quite met the grades required, you could make a revised offer reflecting the challenges they've faced and their ability to still undertake higher education study.

If the young person is coming through clearing, the same pre-admissions and move in support should be offered and additional reassurance provided

2.4 Move in and starting higher education support

Starting higher education can be daunting to care experienced young people before even considering the basic things they'll need and what to expect once started, alongside navigating having to live independently. They likely won't have someone to come with them or know others attending the institution and will need support moving in or at the start of their studies including someone to meet them to offer set up and integration support. A physical package is also incredibly important to this group of young people in making them feel welcome and providing the things they'll need to succeed.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“Something introduced after I was at uni was a welcome pack with pots and pans, bedding, stationary, chocolate, local things, and a handwritten card. The bare minimum would be physical resources (like the pots and pans) but do check in with students as well, because some will already have some of these things.”

“I didn't know the area at all, I didn't know I had to move GPs or about temporary GP registration, I moved GPs then had to reregister in my local area and needed help to reapply, I didn't understand about voting in different areas.”



RECOMMENDATION 9

Physical package and person to meet them on move in day or at the start of their studies and offer set up and integration support

Move in weekend or the start of higher education studies can be particularly daunting to care experienced young people. Anxiety can be reduced by knowing there is someone there to meet them. Reach out in advance to let the care experienced young person know they can be supported and have someone to meet them and help them.

You should provide:

- › A point of contact at the institution that they can reach out to when needed (within the care leavers support team or widening participation team)
- › Priority access to setting up support, as they do not have a family to support them
- › Someone who is care experienced to sponsor or mentor the care experienced young person
- › Tips for things to do and ways to integrate
- › Information about what support is on offer and groups or societies to get involved with
- › Information on the local area and practicalities such as GP surgeries, registering to vote and local dentists.

Some universities offer move in packages that include essential items such as stationary, utensils, pots and pans, bedding, flyers or leaflets about the support on offer and groups to join which make a huge difference. Ask the young people coming to your institution which things would be most useful to them to include in a package.

Promising practice

The University of Birmingham offers complimentary welcome packages if you move into university owned accommodation, including bedding, saucepans and other useful products. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/apply/care-leavers>.

The University of Law told us it does not have its own accommodation and offers places for commuting students. Their care experienced students either will rent their own accommodation or continue if they are able to in previous accommodation. They offer support for them in generally settling in and welcoming, including sending welcome packages to them irrespective of their accommodation situation.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- 01 What happens on the day a care experienced student arrives or when they start their studies?
- 02 Will anyone from your institution greet them when they arrive to help them transport and unload their boxes, or when they start their studies to help them integrate and provide information about the area and opportunities at the institution?
- 03 Have you checked if the care experienced young person has the necessary kitchenware, stationary, bedding and other items or digital equipment for their time in higher education?
- 04 Is there a borrowing system, fund, allowance, or bursary available at your institution for care experienced young people to buy necessities?
- 05 Do you speak to students on the phone before they arrive to explain what will happen on move in day or at the start of their studies, and remind them of the support on offer to help them integrate?
- 06 Are care experienced students given a single point of contact?
- 07 On their first day is there a current student who could meet them and provide some insight and settle nerves?
- 08 Towards the start of their course are there other care experienced students at the institution who could meet with the young person and support them to integrate?

3 FINANCIAL SECURITY

Finance can be one of the biggest issues facing care experienced young people, and the Care Experienced Advisory Board involved in creating this handbook have cited it as a key barrier that has deterred them from participating in Higher Education. They are also more likely to have many more financial responsibilities than others their age and less likely to have a safety net of support from family if they are struggling.

This section looks at how you can offer support around financial security including housing and accommodation, financial aid and bursaries and university and local employment.

3.1 Housing and accommodation

In most cases, care experienced students will not have somewhere to go back to in the holiday periods and may need year-round housing. Care experienced students should be given priority access to campus accommodation and flexible contracts that will house them over the holidays.

They also will not be able to provide a guarantor and this should not be requested of those living in university owned accommodation. They should be supported to find appropriate accommodation where required.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“Many universities only offer 40 weeks per year of accommodation.”

“We need 365 [days per year] accommodation, guarantor covered, discounted books/ support with accessing course books/sites.”

“Care leavers who want to go to university away from their home area may lose their opportunity for a council property.”

“Guarantors – big issue. My university department acted as a guarantor, but this was ‘off the books’ and is rare.”

“While I was at university my student finance covered my accommodation costs, I had a part-time job to cover any extra expenses for myself and my local authority covered my accommodation cost during the holidays when I stayed with my foster carer [under Staying Put arrangements].”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- 01 Where will care experienced students live outside of term time?
- 02 If care experienced students can't continue living in their term time accommodation what accommodation can you offer them?
- 03 Can you ensure that the care leavers team or widening participation staff within your institution always liaise with students' Leaving Care teams to make their accommodation seeking process go smoothly?
- 04 Do you offer flexible contracts for university owned accommodation?
- 05 What scheme or option do you have in terms of acting as a guarantor?
- 06 Can you ensure that the care leavers' team staff raise accommodation with care experienced students soon enough in their application process, or through the first year if they are in halls of residence, in preparation for the following year's move into rented accommodation?
- 07 Has your institution paired with Housing Hand or Your Guarantor to provide a rent guarantor scheme?

RECOMMENDATION 10

Offer year-round housing for care experienced students with priority access and flexible contracts

One of the main worries for care experienced young people is housing. Care experienced young people say they often fear instability and not having a permanent home. Most care leavers worry about the financial strains of renting and finding flexible accommodation. Year-round housing provides them with a sense of security, allowing them to focus on their studies and navigate the challenges of university life with confidence. They often will not have somewhere to go back to during the holidays and having accommodation during these times is critical.

“Try their best to reduce university fees and make more monetary funding available to people aged 11-18 from lower income general backgrounds as well as opportunities for that group too.”

 **RECOMMENDATION 11**

Recognise that care experienced young people do not have guarantors and offer accommodation support

Generally, care experienced students will not have someone who can act as a guarantor for them. Asking for a guarantor for university owned accommodation from this group of young people should be reconsidered as it creates unnecessary worry and can cause emotional distress with young people trying to get someone to act as their guarantor, highlighting that they are different to their peers.

Support with having rent secured through a rent guarantor scheme for care experienced students is essential for their stability, emotional well-being, and academic success.

Currently, the only guarantor schemes available are from Housing Hand Home | Housing Hand and Your Guarantor Your Guarantor – UK rent guarantor for university students. They have both joined up forces with several universities to provide their care leaver students with a rent guarantor scheme for the duration of their degrees.

Research for this handbook by the Children's Commissioner's office finds that less than half of universities (38%) provide care leavers students with at least one of a rent guarantor scheme, a rent guarantee scheme, or with all year accommodation in their halls.

Some local authorities will provide their care leavers with guarantor schemes while at university, but the Children's Commissioner's office understands that these are fewer and fewer in number, and never for the whole duration of their degree. If they do act as guarantors for their care leavers to go to university, they will state that in their local offer for care leavers.

You could also work with local student housing services and landlords to encourage them not to require guarantors for care experienced young people. If required, as an institution you should act as a guarantor.

3.2 Financial aid

Financial aid is greatly needed by care experienced students, this is to support with the costs of resources required for studies, such as course books and online resources as well as travel assistance including travel cards to attend courses. Budgeting and financial management is particularly critical, and workshops should be provided. Bursaries and scholarships specifically tailored for care experienced young people should also be promoted.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“ Having to pay for prescriptions. I didn't realise that.”

“ Help with coping with the stress of budgeting would be useful.”

“ They had 100 hour contracts at my uni – £10/hour for 100 hours, so you know you're going to get £1,000. This was good.”

“ I wish I was told about the right bursaries I could access.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

01 What local grants and charities' offers can you share with care experienced students to access?

02 Can you liaise with young people's local authorities to make sure they are receiving any local authority funded support?

03 What bursaries do you offer care experienced young people and how do you advertise them?

04 Do you offer workshops or one-to-one support on budgeting and financial management?

 **RECOMMENDATION 12**

Offer financial assistance to cover resources, such as course books and subscription services and for travel

Care experienced young people have said that the financial burden of university and the cost of living is an immense barrier to applying and attending.

Travel assistance helps ease the financial burden of commuting, enabling care experienced young people to travel to and from university, and to work without added stress.

Consider partnerships with local businesses and charities such as book shops to facilitate discounts.

 **RECOMMENDATION 13**

Provide budgeting and financial management workshops

Budgeting and financial management workshops help care experienced young people build necessary skills to effectively manage their finances, promoting financial stability and independence.



RECOMMENDATION 14

Promote bursaries and scholarships for care experienced young people, and provide clear information on hardship funding

Recognise the implications of not having any family financial support while studying and ensure young people coming to, or already at your institution, are aware of what funding support is on offer to them. In addition, information on how to access hardship funding should be made clearly accessible. Support to know how bursaries may affect benefits is also required.

If a young person is on an apprenticeship, support them in obtaining their bursary throughout the duration of their course.

3.3 University and local area employment

As many care experienced students don't have financial support from family members to attend higher education they may need to work to make enough money for independent living while completing their studies.

To make this as easy as possible to fit around their course you can actively promote student roles to care experienced students, offer them guaranteed interviews, signpost to offers in the community and support job applications.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“ More internships for care leavers advertised widely.”

“ Offer paid employment experiences, lasting a few months, to young people at university and college.”

“ It's hard to get a job that only needs you for term time..”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

01 Can we offer a guaranteed interview scheme to care experienced young people applying for jobs?

02 Are there specific paid roles that would benefit from being filled by care experienced young people, such as staff to provide open day support, widening participation calls during results, a widening participation support member or internship?

“ Student jobs must be flexible to the individual needs of care leavers, and make reasonable adjustments for them.”

“ I feel an interview should be guaranteed, and support for interviews should also be provided.”



RECOMMENDATION 15

Actively promote student roles to care experienced students

Care experienced young people often rely on extra sources of income to navigate higher education and life expenses. With the financial burden of accommodation and other costs, having a part-time role provides vital financial security, and student jobs are often the best fit with student timetables. These jobs can also help care experienced young people to start building a CV, and gain experience and new skills.

RECOMMENDATION 16

Offer guaranteed interviews for student and institution job roles to care experienced students

Offering guaranteed interviews can help ease the stress of applying for roles and ensure that good candidates are not excluded from the process based purely on their written communication skills.

RECOMMENDATION 17

Signpost to offers in the community and support applications

Speak to the young person about their interests and send targeted information on job roles and voluntary opportunities in the community. Offer tailored information, via a website or newsletter, through groups or in one-to-one meetings about jobs within the community and support applications including acting as a referee and providing interview advice and practise.

RECOMMENDATION 18

Understand requirements of care leavers to meet with professionals potentially during work hours

Within university employment, work with managers to help them understand the needs and requirements of care experienced young people. One of the things that care experienced young people may have to deal with is the requirement to meet with professionals such as personal advisors potentially in work time. If they have a Personal Advisor who has to visit them during term-time, they may be just told a time and will have to step out of work or studies to be part of this meeting. This has happened throughout care experienced young people's lives, with them being pulled out of school to meet with social workers at convenient times. Be understanding and flexible when these infrequent meetings have to happen. With local employment discuss with the care experienced young person how they can explain their care experience to their managers, and broach the fact that they might have to meet with a professional during work time, but will provide as much notice as possible.

4 WELLBEING AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

Care experienced young people are more likely to be affected by poor mental health than their peers, and many have emphasised feelings of anxiety and worry when it comes to their academic journey. Providing wellbeing support is crucial in helping to retain students and offer them the support they need to successfully progress through their academic journey.

In this section we share how mental health and wellbeing of care experienced young people can be supported and how you can help these students access counselling and mental health support.

4.1 Supporting mental health and wellbeing

To support the mental health and wellbeing of care experienced students it is essential that they have a primary point of contact. Your institution should offer regular wellbeing check ins and promote peer mentoring, in particular during the first year of studies.

Supporting care experienced students to create an "All About Me" document will support their experience throughout their time with you and also help you get to know them. It's important to offer support with integration and inclusion as many care experienced young people can feel isolated and different to their peers and aren't sure of what to expect and how to integrate in the unfamiliar environment of higher education institutions.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“There should be one or more designated contacts so if someone is unwell or on annual leave, there will be someone from the team stepping in to help the young person.”

“Mental health - it needs to be made clear the amount and availability of services (and access to them).”

“Not enough consideration of the impact of being a care leaver who is also from a minority background.”

“I would have liked a peer support group and more out of hours support.”

“Normalising idea of uni as a place for everyone, having events that speak to young people in care.”

“I found it helpful having a buddy who was also care experienced.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- 01 Do you have someone whose role is dedicated to or involves supporting mental health and wellbeing within the care leavers or widening participation team?
- 02 What contingency support is in place for when designated contacts are not available?
- 03 Is it clear to the young people who they can contact for different queries?
- 04 Do you proactively reach out to young people to check in on them?
- 05 What additions or adaptations could be made to the mental health and wellbeing offer for all students, to make it more suitable for care experienced students?

“You shouldn't underestimate the impact of mental health as a barrier to care experienced people accessing higher education. If you don't have the right therapy when you need it, you may not be in the right place mentally to be able to contemplate university or manage it when you get there, when you don't have family for support.”



 **RECOMMENDATION 19**

Have a primary point of contact for care experienced students

It's important that young people are given a single point of contact who has undertaken training to understand their needs and can offer tailored career guidance, wellbeing support and information regarding educational journey. They also need an alternative contact if this person is on leave or unwell.

This person should support with integration, participation and careers and offer signposting to wellbeing support and information regarding the educational journey. This point of contact should have regular contact with care experienced students to ensure they are coping with the demands of being in education.

Wherever possible, there should be a member of the widening participation team and mentors with lived experience in the care system as this can help to foster a sense of trust and understanding among care experienced young people, encouraging them to seek guidance and support.


 **RECOMMENDATION 20**

Offer regular wellbeing check ins for care experienced young people and promote peer mentoring

All educational institutions should be offering regular wellbeing check-ins for care experienced students, this can be in the form of a 1-to-1 chat, a call or text, online, or in other ways that the young person feels comfortable with. Regular wellbeing check-ins by supportive staff members offer care experienced young people a sense of care, connection, and belonging, conveying empathy, and understanding, and help to identify any emerging difficulties. Ask the young person how regularly they would like to have these check ins and in what format.

Peer mentoring, particularly in the first year of studies, can be beneficial to care experienced students. Peer mentoring should be flexible, for example, in-person or online. It is important for students to have someone who understands their experiences to sponsor and welcome them.

Reaching out during the crucial first week and months of term will allow care experienced young people to feel supported and have someone to talk through their worries with peers who have already been through similar experiences.

Once care experienced young people have settled in, regular catch ups at intervals decided by the young person are essential to support them staying in higher education and ensuring that they have everything they need academically and generally.

Care experienced young people have also emphasised the need for support with navigating the online world and the impact it can have on mental health and for professionals working with them to understand the additional challenges they might be facing such as family contact and the decision they might be making around accessing their care records.

 **RECOMMENDATION 21**

Support care experienced students to create an "All About Me" document

Care experienced young people should be supported to create an "All About Me" or Pathway Plan document, beginning in secondary school, which should be edited and adapted as they progress through their educational journey and passed onto their higher education institutions. If this has not been created, it should be something developed when they first begin higher education. The document is to help understand each care experienced student's individual needs and preferences, guiding staff in offering personalised support.

The All about Me document could include:

- › Introductions
- › How they want to be addressed/whether they want to meet in person/to check in via text etc
- › Background
- › Interests
- › Achievements and things they are proud of
- › Strengths and challenges
- › Support needed
- › What they need to succeed in the institution
- › Goals and life aspirations
- › Other things they'd like you to know about them

Promising practice

"All About Me' is a project that my local authority have for care experienced people to introduce them when they are out of home/arrive at Uni, this good practice should be followed by all universities (it makes it easy for us to introduce ourselves as opposed to having to repeat our story to everyone)."

 **RECOMMENDATION 22**

Support with social integration, belonging and inclusion

Offer integration support and information to help care experienced students to not feel isolated when in higher education. Signpost to societies and offer events for care experienced young people to meet and support each other. Take time to understand the expectations of care experienced students including social stigma and pressure to succeed and be a role model for other care experienced young people from their local area.

Recognise the additional difficulties care experienced students from ethnic minority backgrounds face and those who have not had role models who have attended higher education and university to offer advice and reassurance about what to expect.

Check in with how the students are integrating and finding living with new people and offer advice and support if they aren't feeling they are fitting in.

Support needs to be in place particularly during holidays and quiet times at university as many care experienced young people won't have people to meet with or places to go back to during these periods. Find out if there are local groups such as Children in Care Councils and Care Leaver Forums providing events during these times as these could be a great opportunity for the care experienced students to give back while also getting to be part of a community. It is also good to link up with these local care experienced offerings during term time as well as with youth clubs and community hubs to provide opportunities.

Promising practice

For ideas of how to support care experienced young people over the Christmas period in particular one of our Care Experienced Advisory Board members has written this blog post 'How to Support your Care Experienced and Estranged Students this Christmas: A Practical Guide for all higher education Staff': heprofessional.co.uk/edition/how-to-support-your-care-experienced-and-estranged-students-this-christmas-a-practical-guide-for-all-he-staff.

4.2 Counselling and mental health support

Offering care experienced students priority access to mental and physical health support can help aid their success at your institution. They also might need help with referrals to local GPs and in getting mental health diagnosis. Mental health and counselling services should acknowledge the needs of care experienced students.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“ I would struggle talking to someone in a conventional therapy session, I would like someone to walk with me.”

“ Remove the cliff edge of mental health support for care leavers, and make it cheaper or free.”

“ When I told the counselling line at my university I was a care leaver they said I could get priority access.”

“ Contact with birth family can be a source of distress – you need help getting across what you want and being respected for that. Getting your records is an additional stress and decision.”

“ My physical health at university was an issue for me, I was told you could register with a local GP to the university, but then you would lose your area GP registration. There should be practical help to get health support for care experienced young people in their university area too.”

“ There needs to be follow up with a consistent person we trust.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

01 What mental health support do you offer within your institution, and how often do care experienced students access it?

02 Do you have someone young people can go to in order to initially discuss mental health issues such as Mental Health First Aiders?

03 How and when do you share information on mental health support available at your institution?

04 Do you link up with your local community mental health trust to support care experienced young people in crisis, or at early onset of deterioration of their mental health?



RECOMMENDATION 23

Give care experienced students who need it priority access to mental and physical health support that recognises their needs

While we recognise the resilience of care experienced young people, we have to also recognise the burdens they carry with past traumas and uncertainties about the future. Many care experienced young people will have diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health needs. By providing mental health and counselling support, institutions can help tackle some of the root issues to provide the help that is needed.

All educational institutions should offer care experienced students priority access to mental and physical health support as it is crucial for their well-being and success in education.

University mental health and counselling services should acknowledge the needs of care experienced students and ensure they receive timely and adequate support. They should offer diverse support services, including online options. Care experienced young people need to access the support they need in ways that resonate with them personally, fostering a supportive environment for their overall wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION 24

Aid with referrals to healthcare professionals, such as GPs and dentists, and getting a mental health diagnosis

Higher education institutions should help young people find healthcare providers and register for GPs and dentists. In addition, they should also support young people in getting a mental health diagnosis if they are showing symptoms of any disorders. Generally, care experienced young people won't have a trusted adult to attend appointments or discuss outcomes after.

5 CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES (SEND)

Care experienced young people are more likely than other young people to report having special educational needs, which may be invisible, may or may not be declared, and can be overlooked when it comes to support.

Joined-up support to help with all the additional needs a care experienced student will face will be vital in their success and wellbeing during their studies. Care experienced young people with special needs want to all be heard and seen and want their needs to be recognised and supported.

This section shares things to think about and support to offer care experienced students with SEND.

5.1 Supporting students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Care experienced students with SEND require reasonable adjustments and overlapping support to help with all their additional needs. Ask them what adjustments they need and work to provide these. Offering specialised transition programs and welcome sessions can support their wellbeing by providing tailored help to address unique academic and social challenges they may encounter and help them adjust to the academic and social aspects of university life.

Having a Dedicated Disability Services Office can ensure that care experienced students with SEND receive necessary accommodation and have a main point of call to support with other issues e.g. exam arrangements. They can also offer support with Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) applications.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“SEND & mental health support – priority access to early diagnosis. Reducing waiting lists. Exam considerations. It is stressful not being diagnosed.”

“I got support and had a laptop, printer, recorder, extended time for exams.”

“Especially when it comes to healthcare we get ignored because we often don't have people to support us e.g. ADHD diagnosis.”

“Funding for assessments for ADHD and ASD should be the norm across all universities; it would be a win-win for both as also universities then would not have students that will easily drop out if they received the right SEND support.”

“We need support with other finances like disability allowance”

“I found it difficult trying to get a dyslexia assessment at university because of being care experienced and the financial cost of the assessment.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- 01 Do you offer transition support and welcome care experienced students with SEND to your institution?
- 02 Do you have a link up service/team with adult social care or with specialist support from care experienced students' local areas, to help understand what support is required for these young people?

“Understand the additional challenges that care experienced young people with disabilities and invisible disabilities have”

– Care experienced young person



RECOMMENDATION 25

Offer joined-up support to help with all additional needs

Recognise the need for a holistic approach to support for ensuring care experienced students with SEND make a smooth adjustment to higher education. Provide tailored support to address the unique academic and social challenges they may encounter.

By offering comprehensive support services, universities can empower care experienced students with SEND to navigate their educational journey with confidence and success, ensuring they have equitable access to opportunities for academic and personal growth.

Universities should offer transition programs and welcome sessions specifically designed for students with SEND to help them adjust to the academic and social aspects of university life.

RECOMMENDATION 26

Have a Disability Services Office or equivalent ensuring that care experienced students with SEND receive support

Higher education institutions should have a dedicated office or department that oversees accommodation for students with disabilities. They should also have a main point of call to support with other issues such as exam arrangements and support with their studies.

A dedicated Disability Services Office ensures that care experienced young people with SEND receive the necessary accommodation and support to thrive academically, providing a central point of contact for their specific needs.

Universities should offer counselling and mental health services as a priority, which can be particularly important for students with SEND who may experience additional challenges.

Higher education institutions should support applications for neurodivergent diagnosis if they or the student believes there are signs of a possible disorder and should support with Disabled Students' Allowance applications and additional pastoral support should be offered.

6 HELP WITH CAREER PLANNING AND NEXT STEPS

Care experienced young people have less informal guidance from extended family when it comes to their academic journeys. Care leavers face a higher risk of becoming a young person who is not in employment, education or training. Careers support and help transitioning out of education, specifically tailored to their needs, is particularly important.

This section looks at supporting students' career development and support with next steps and transitioning from university.

6.1 Supporting students' career development

To support students' career development there should be a focus on the development of practical skills, independent living skills and job specific skills.

There should be someone at the higher education institution who can help source and promote diverse internship programmes and jobs related to care experienced students' interests and provide help writing CVs, practising interviews and writing job applications.

Care experienced young people should also be provided with the opportunity to be mentored, wherever possible by someone with experience of the labour market and lived experience of the care system. This could be a former student of the institution who is now in employment or who has progressed onto further study or someone working or studying at the institution or externally. Speak to the care experienced student to try to find the best match to support them.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“I think that children should be taught more life skills and introduced more to career options and how to go about it.”

“Promoting internships and placements in your local authority (so many options – HR, finance, housing...) would be good. You get experience in a large organisation, which offers apprenticeships, office experience...”

“There needs to be a care leaver hub that hold events or puts on little workshops that teach life skills, woodwork/DIY, how to read a gas meter/smart meter, who to go to if the boiler is making a funny noise. A place to go where care leavers can learn these things. Setting up gas/electric/water bills.”

“It is vital to have a mentor with care experience.”

“My Personal Advisor told me about the civil service internship, which I decided to apply for.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- 01 Do you have a career team who is trained to assist with these young people's needs when looking at their employment and career options?
- 02 Do you offer skills workshops to help with independent living and job specific requirements?
- 03 What job-relevant mentorship opportunities do you offer?
- 04 Do you offer paid internship opportunities or signpost to paid work experience opportunities in your local area?

“I was worried about my future, I wasn't sure where I was going to end up after uni... my career advisor told me about some internships but I wish she told me sooner so I could have applied with a bit more time.”

RECOMMENDATION 27

Support the development of practical skills, independent living skills and job specific skills

Care experienced young people have emphasised the need for support in developing the skills to live independently and thrive both in education and life generally. Offer workshops and signpost to places these can be developed both online and in-person. Support in building networking skills and networks for progression into employment.

RECOMMENDATION 28

Help source and promote diverse internship programs and jobs and help with applications

Higher education institutions should help source and promote diverse internship programmes and jobs related to care experienced students' interests to help with their career journey. Unpaid internships and work experience are not accessible for most care experienced young people and can limit opportunities to get jobs. Help with CV writing, interview practise and support with writing job applications should be provided. This will help open doors to valuable work experience, but also provides guidance and support in navigating the complexities of career planning.

RECOMMENDATION 29

Offer mentorship opportunities to help with the career journey

Providing a mentorship scheme can offer great support to care experienced young people and help them transition into employment. It's ideal if you can proactively seek out the right mentors from across the institution that align with young people's interests.

Wherever possible, there should be a member of the widening participation team and mentors with lived experience in the care system as this can help to foster a sense of trust and understanding among care experienced students, encouraging them to seek guidance and support.

6.2 Supporting students with transitioning into careers or postgraduate study

Care experienced students should be celebrated on completing their studies and given recognition. There should be the offer of financial support to those completing their studies and to those wanting to continue into postgraduate study and the opportunity to keep in touch to help care experienced students leaving Higher Education to avoid the cliff edge of losing support and to feel isolated when first transitioning out of education.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“At graduation some universities give out final payments (grants) to tide you over. This can make a big difference.”

“I wish I'd had someone I could contact when I first moved out of uni, it felt like I was just left on my own.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- 01 Do you do anything to celebrate the young person on completing their studies? Do you send a card, present, text message to accompany exam results, and on graduation day?
- 02 Can you offer financial support towards the end of studies, such as a graduation bursary?
- 03 Do you offer grants to care experienced students continuing into further study?
- 04 How do you stay in touch and check in with care experienced students once they have left your institution?
- 05 Are there opportunities that you could offer past care experienced students such as acting as role models to new students, supporting the widening access team?



RECOMMENDATION 30

Celebrate care experienced young people when they complete their studies

Care experienced students often won't have the same support from families so send a present or card to congratulate them on completing their studies. It feels like a small thing but make sure you send them a celebratory card and text message congratulation as it will really make their day.

RECOMMENDATION 32

Provide the opportunity for staying in touch and having a legacy to avoid the cliff edge of leaving Higher Education

Once the young person has left higher education offer them access to a forum, care leavers alumni group or keep in touch days, and provide them with a named contact they can call once they've left in case they need some support and don't have anywhere else to obtain it. This is particularly important in the first few months following higher education as they will appreciate someone they know to talk to and while they are making the transition to working or further study.

You could ask them to share their stories to support other care experienced young people applying and offer role model opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION 31

Offer financial support to those completing their studies and those transitioning into postgraduate study

Finishing higher education or transitioning into postgraduate study can be a particularly daunting time and the stress of how students will cope financially is a big concern. On completing studies or just before finishing, offer students a final payout of their bursary or offer a graduation bursary.

Also offer subsidies for the extras that they will need to graduate such as renting a gown and having an official photo to provide a memory of the day.

Promising practice

Kingston University awards care leavers a £1,000 graduation bursary upon successful completion of their degree and a Graduation Support Fund that care experienced students can apply for, following an 'outduction' meeting to help plan next steps to deal with the transition with their KU Cares team. KU Cares is Kingston University's package for care leavers, estranged students, young adult carers and sanctuary scholars. It includes financial support, support with accommodation, paid work opportunities, mentoring schemes, social and networking events, and contributions to research, as well as a dedicated KU Cares Team: <https://www.kingston.ac.uk/undergraduate/access/care-leaver-support/#KUCaresteam> who support from the point of application through to graduation. They also offer pre-application support which includes a Head Start summer programme: <https://www.kingston.ac.uk/undergraduate/access/head-start/>.

Brunel also offers access to a graduation support package including free cap, gown and photography package: <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/study/schools-and-colleges/widening-access/Care-Leavers>

7 TRAINING AND RESOURCES FOR STAFF

It's important that all staff in higher education institutions go through training, and specific roles who will work with the young people more closely undertake additional training. This section of the Handbook shares suggested training and resources for staff.

As professionals you have a duty of care for care experienced students who will need additional support surrounding academic studies in order to succeed.

7.1 Training for staff

Training to support staff at your institution to understand the needs of care experienced young people can make a big difference, here we provide recommendations on the training that would be useful.

WHAT CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE SAID

“First interaction has to be open and honest.”

“All staff that we come into contact with should have some training, and better links could be made between careers services and widening access teams.”

“By investing in training for staff, educational institutions not only empower care experienced students to pursue their aspirations but also create a supportive and inclusive environment.”

“Training for all professionals in mental health. Starts with team being able to deal and cope with these things, don't experience burnout.”

“Improve support so that approaches are trauma informed and not focus solely on the presenting behaviours.”

“Raising awareness is key. Professionals not understanding e.g. doctors, teachers – can cause trauma.”

“Understanding why young people might have behavioural issues. How it affects different people.”

“It's important to develop loving and nurturing relationships with adults and professionals that show they care for us.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

01 What training is available for professors and lecturers to help them support care experienced students?

02 Could you offer training or support to personal tutors or example questions to support them in building a trusting relationship with their care experienced students?

03 Do you provide staff with an understanding of care- experienced young people and the academic and wellbeing support they might need?

04 Do you support staff to personalise their interactions with care experienced students?

“Some of my professors were supportive but others weren't, wish all university staff were trained in supporting us... we need all the support we can get”

RECOMMENDATION 33

Provide training and resources for staff members to support care experienced students

As a principle for a strong support offer all educational institutions should provide training for all staff members, including lecturers and support teams, in areas such as safeguarding and trauma, to help ensure that care experienced students receive the holistic support they need to thrive academically and professionally.

Children in care, care leavers and care experienced young people have had contact with numerous professionals throughout their lives. It's really important that interactions with professionals make them feel welcome, heard and respected. Some may not have had good relationships with professionals in the past and trust has to be earned and built over time.

Provide training and resources for all staff members, including lecturers and support teams on:

- › Safeguarding
- › Trauma informed practice and the impact of trauma on learning
- › Mental health basic support, ideally Mental Health First Aid
- › SEND
- › The importance of maintaining a person-centred approach

By investing in enhanced training for specific staff members, educational institutions not only empower care experienced students to pursue their aspirations but also create a supportive and inclusive environment where students are understood and their needs are met.

cont...

RECOMMENDATION 33 cont...**Provide training for staff members working closely with care experienced students on:**

- › Enhanced Trauma informed practice
- › Enhanced Mental health support – ideally Qualified Mental Health First Aiders
- › First Aid
- › SEND
- › The needs of care experienced students and awareness of the barriers they may face
- › Cultural specific training
- › How local authority support works so they can help students navigate this alongside the university support
- › Knowledge of peer networks membership such as NNECL
- › Training offered by the charity Become <https://becomecharity.org.uk/professionals-and-carers/training/supporting-care-experienced-young-people-on-their-journey-to-higher-education/>
- › UCAS training <https://www.ucas.com/advisers/help-and-training/toolkits/adviser-toolkit-supporting-students-individual-needs/supporting-care-experienced-students>

Specific support for personal tutors working with care experienced young people should be offered, to work with the young people they are tutoring to ensure they are managing with the academic and social elements of higher education.

7.2 Resources for staff

- › There is a network for professionals in higher education network: heprofessional.co.uk
- › The Unite Foundation: HE professionals peer-network exists to support HE professionals wanting to create and maintain communities for care experienced and estranged students at their institutions, email Info@UniteFoundation.org.uk to sign up
- › NNECL network: nnecl.org
- › The Rees Foundation offer information and support on caring for care leavers into higher education
- › Principles to guide higher education providers on improving care leavers access and participation in higher education: gov.uk
- › UCAS Step-by-step guide to supporting care experienced students through application process <https://www.ucas.com/file/848986/download?token=ElrGwgVd>
- › The Estranged and Care Experienced Students (EaCES) Handbook <https://sites.google.com/view/eaces-handbook/>
- › Helplines – there are general helplines for care experienced young people and young people with SEND and mental health diagnosis but there also may be local ones in your area. The Children's Commissioner's Help at Hand service can provide representation for care leavers where required <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/help-at-hand/>
- › IMO website has a list of care leaver support teams in colleges and universities, an Education hub and an applying/going to university hub
- › UCAS has a Care experienced Students Guide
- › Become host the Propel guide to higher & further education for care leavers
- › The Care Leavers Association offer support to care experienced students while accessing Further and Higher Education
- › Care Leaver Covenant - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) provides additional support for those leaving care
- › Help For Young People - Drive Forward Foundation can support young people in higher education and finding job opportunities
- › Unite Foundation: thissusatuni.org

CONCLUSION

This handbook sets out the range of ways higher education institutions can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for care experienced students, as proposed by care experienced young people themselves. In practice, institutions will need to adapt and customise, in line with their existing needs and policies.

By implementing the changes and improvements outlined in this handbook, institutions can empower care experienced young people to excel academically, socially, and personally.



ANNEX

WHAT IS A CARE LEAVER?

A care leaver is a young person between the ages 16 to 25 who lived in care for part of their life (depending on the duration of their time in care they will be classified either as a 'former relevant child' or 'qualifying child').

Care leavers are individuals who have been looked after by the local authority in foster care, legal kinship care agreement, residential care homes, or youth justice settings such as Young Offenders Institutions.

In many cases, a former relevant child is the only type of care leaver who would qualify for the maximum amount of financial support while in higher education.

From the Children Act 1989, Transition Guidance:

A former relevant child (fully entitled care leaver up to the age of 25) is defined in Section 23C(1) of the 1989 Act as a young person who is:

- (a) aged 18 or above, and either
- (b) has been a relevant child and would be one if he were under 18 (that means aged 16 or 17, looked after by children's services for a period of 13 weeks since the age of 14 and looked after for a period of time after their 16th birthday), or
- (c) immediately before he ceased to be looked after at age 18, was an eligible child (which is aged 16 or 17, looked after by children's services for a period of 13 weeks since the age of 14, and currently looked after).

Children's services are required to support care leavers, and all former relevant care leavers should have a Personal Advisor. A Personal Advisor should work with care leavers up until the age of 25.

Former relevant care leavers are entitled to a Pathway Plan which is completed either by their social worker or Personal Advisor. The care leaver's Personal Advisor or social worker should complete a needs assessment looking at areas including health, education and finances. This forms the basis of a Pathway Plan which is a document outlining how the local authority will

support care leavers to live independently. It includes plans for a care leaver's health, education, training and development, contact with family, and finances. These plans are reviewed with the young person at least every six months.

Some former relevant care leavers may also have the option to remain with their carers beyond the age of 18 through a "Staying Put" arrangement. However, this isn't available to everyone. A Staying Put arrangement is a legislative arrangement when a child in foster care continues to stay with their foster carer after turning 18 and has been decided by the child and foster carer.

WHAT IS A CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PERSON?

A care experienced young person is anyone who is currently in or has been in care at any stage in their life, for whatever length of time, including adopted children who were previously looked after. Care experienced is used also for those who left care at 16 or the qualifying children who were under a special guardianship order (SGO).

The Care Leavers' Association defines care experienced young people as:

"Any adult who spent time in care as a child (i.e. under the age of 18). This care would have been approved by the state through a court order or on a voluntary basis. It can range from as little as a few months to as long as one's whole childhood (18 years). Such care could be in foster care, residential care (mainly children's homes) or other arrangements outside the immediate or extended family. The care could have been provided directly by the state (mainly through local authority social services departments) or by the voluntary or private sector (e.g. Barnardo's, The Children's Society and many others). It also includes a wide range of accommodation. For example, it would include secure units, approved schools, industrial schools and other institutions that have a more punitive element than mainstream foster or residential care."

WHAT IS AN ESTRANGED YOUNG PERSON?

Estranged young people may not have been in care, or known to social care services, however, even though having a parent, they are estranged from them and are not supported in any way financial by them to put themselves through the university system and complete their degree.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CARE LEAVER AND A CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE?

Whether a child is legally classed as a 'former relevant care leaver' indicates what level of support they are entitled to from their local authority as they transition into adulthood and independent living. Not all children who spend time in care will be classed as 'former relevant care leaver' when they are an adult, because they will not meet the legal criteria, but they will often have the same lack of support systems and will require the same additional support. Only 'former relevant care leavers' will be financially supported by their local authority.

Many organisations broaden the definition of a care leaver, including The Care Leavers' Association, to any adult who has spent time in care as a child. Throughout, this document uses the all-encompassing term care experienced young people.

PROFESSIONALS WHO CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE MAY STILL BE IN CONTACT WITH

Social worker

a social worker's role is to listen to and support people, protect people from harm when necessary (often called 'safeguarding'). Social workers work with a variety of different children and young people, which is referred to as a caseload.

Virtual School Head

The Virtual School Head (VSH) is a role created by the Children and Families Act 2014 who monitors looked after children, previously looked after children and those children with a social worker as if they were in one school, the virtual school. In June 2021, the role of the VSH was extended to include non-statutory responsibility for the strategic oversight of the attendance, attainment, and progress of all children with a social worker as well as looked after children.

Personal Advisor

Personal Advisors or Leaving Care Workers should work with care leavers up to the age of 25. They can be social workers or a worker from the local authority's Leaving Care Team.

Leaving care teams

The team of professionals who will support care leavers until they reach the age of 21 or 25 (under the Children and Social Work Act 2017)

Housing Officer

All care leavers registering to bid for social housing will be allocated a housing officer, who should facilitate their social housing goal to be given their tenancy and liaise with landlords and housing associations for any issue relating to the property.

Police named contact

e.g. to support victims of domestic abuse (on campus police can provide specialised support too).

Advocates

The role of an advocate is to support children and young people to express their wishes and feelings to decision-makers, and ensure their rights are upheld. Children have statutory rights to advocacy in a number of circumstances. Looked after children, care leavers, disabled children, children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), children in mental health hospitals, and children in custody all have a statutory right to independent advocacy.



CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Sanctuary Buildings,
20 Great Smith Street,
London SW1P 3BT

020 7783 8330
childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

 @childrenscommissioner

 @ChildrensComm

 @childrenscommissionersoffice



childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/help-at-hand/



childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/imo/