



Care-experienced Parents Unite for Change

Peer researchers' project exploring
the experience of becoming a parent

by Care Journeys
December 2022



About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2021-22 we supported 357,276 children, young people, parents, and carers, through a mixture of one-to-one support, school-based programmes and our children's centres and family hubs. At Barnardo's, we have a long history of supporting children in care and young people who are transitioning into independent adulthood. In 2021/22 we supported 1112 children in care and 2788 care-experienced young people. As the UK's largest voluntary fostering and adoption agency, we placed 976 children with foster families and 124 with adoptive parents. We continually explore innovative models of foster care and residential care that promote strong and long-lasting relationships.

About Care Journeys

Care Journeys is one of Barnardo's core priority programmes (key areas of focus for our voluntary funds). At the centre of our theory of change is a simple vision: **that everyone who interacts with a care journey (across the wider care system) feel loved, supported, and given opportunities which matter to them.** To achieve this vision, we have three areas of work: building caring communities and systems change, getting to positive destinations through positive experiences, and transformative practice. We conduct our work through five values.

- Learning, creativity, and change.
- Fighting for what is right.
- Procedure never comes before supporting people's needs.
- Unconditional belief and participation.
- Love, care and being human.

Acknowledgements

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The research team comprised of;

Kerry, Jade, Jayde, Iownie and Maxine our peer researchers.

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Natalie Dixon, National Programme Development Manager.

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Foreword

My name is Kerry, and I am a care-experienced parent who has been working as a peer researcher for this research.

I applied to work with Barnardo's because I believe that even years after my own experiences in care, I can still see the same unfortunate patterns, behaviours and negative perceptions occurring within the system. I truly want the voices of care-experienced parents to be amplified and heard across the country. Conducting this research has confirmed what I already believed, which is that the label of **'care-experienced' should not be used as a prediction tool for our life or parenting abilities. Negative experiences do not have to lead to negative outcomes.**

This research shows there is a need for change in the system. Currently, too often there is a lack of continuity from service providers, care-experienced parents often face discrimination and too many have a negative experience of support. However, this research also highlights many care-experienced parents have positive qualities, values, and outcomes. As a group, we are often resilient, good at problem-solving, family orientated and strong individuals and some of the young people we met in this research are genuinely amongst the absolute best examples of parenting there are. Some of us care-experienced people are current and future social care workers: each using our experiences for good and to empower others.

We must listen to these stories. We know the outcomes of being in care, we know what it is like to feel unwanted, unloved, and neglected, we know what not to do and we know the risks that are involved when children's needs are not prioritised. Too often care-experienced parents are not afforded the luxury of failure and testing boundaries like those who are not care-experienced. We are all too aware of the stigma, discrimination and scrutiny that surrounds us.

The feelings of care-experienced parents can vary but most often include fear of the unknown, shame, embarrassment, rejection, isolation, loneliness, and hopelessness. These types of feelings are not unusual in any way and are shared amongst thousands of children placed into care every year. Self-fulfilling prophecies can come into play, and whilst I refused to let those perceptions of me come true, others may feel that fighting the stigma is pointless. If people have low expectations, then how can they encourage us to break the cycles, fulfil our potential and excel in life?

Corporate parents need to step up and take on their parental role including a corporate 'grandparent' role. Providing stability, compassion, and continuity so that care-experienced parents feel respected and empowered. There is no such thing as a 'care leaver' and the experiences will never leave us. We have the same potential and life chances as anyone else if we are empowered and supported and our rights are upheld.



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1. Executive summary

More than 10,000 young people leave care every year in England¹. Many young people in this group have suffered significant past trauma and they often have overlapping and intersecting vulnerabilities. Yet despite this vulnerability and while the average age for leaving the family home is 23², young people leaving care are expected to live independently usually at the age of 18, some as young as 16³. This transition to independent living is often sudden with young people not always getting the quality of support they need⁴.

While the experience of leaving care is tough for most young people, those who face additional challenges can find it especially difficult. One group who can face particular challenges are those care-experienced young people who are already a parent themselves.

Young people who grew up in the care system are around 2.5 times more likely to become pregnant compared with other teenagers⁵. These young people face the challenge of transitioning to independent living, while also having to ensure the needs of their child are met. As a group they are at increased risk of isolation and loneliness, can find it difficult to access mental health support and often face financial difficulties – since they face the additional costs of raising a child often on a very low income. Many care-experienced parents also have a long-term mistrust of social care professionals which can make it difficult to ensure they are accessing the support they need.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care recently published its final report⁶. It recognises that the system needs

to do more to support young people when they leave care. It sets out five missions for care-experienced young people, these include; that no young person should leave care without at least two loving relationships, creating at least 3,500 new well-paid jobs for care-experienced young people each year, and increasing the life expectancy of care-experienced people, by narrowing health inequalities with the wider population. However, if these missions are going to become a reality, the Government's Implementation Strategy for the Review will need to ensure it considers the needs of all care-experienced young people including those who are parents.

Despite it being well understood that care-experienced parents face additional challenges there is a lack of recent research about the realities of care-experienced parenthood. In particular there is very little research led directly by those with lived experience. This research project aims to fill that gap. Through a set of in-depth interviews with care-experienced parents, we explore in detail the challenges they have faced throughout their parenting journey. We also seek to place these experiences within the wider context the support provided by both local authorities and other statutory agencies.

The implementation of the Care Review in England offers a once-in-a-generation chance to reform and improve our children's social care system. This report highlights some simple changes that could be made to ensure that the needs of care-experienced parents are better met.

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2021-to-2022>

2 [Milestones: journeying into adulthood – Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

3 [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting Year 2021 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

4 [No Place Like Home. A look at young people's experiences of leaving the care system. | Barnardo's \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)

5 [Teenage pregnancies among children in care: research \(2008\) https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2008/01/23/teenage-pregnancies-among-children-in-care-research/](#)

6 [The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf \(childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk\)](#)

Our recommendations should ensure that these young people receive the support they need and also help to reduce the need for further social care interventions later on. Thus, they would play a vital role in breaking a cycle where the children of care-experienced parents end up coming into care themselves.

Key findings



Care-experienced parents often do not get effective support during pregnancy.

The care-experienced parents we interviewed discussed their experiences of preparing to become a parent including when they first told their personal advisor or met with their midwife. Many explained how they had felt scared and judged instead of the pregnancy being seen as a time of excitement and celebration. Care-experienced young people have a range of needs during pregnancy including support with practical issues such as housing. Yet the young people we spoke to explained they had often struggled to access this support in a timely manner.



Care-experienced parents struggle to access an informal support community, similar to that which

would be provided by an extended family. Care-experienced parents explained that while their non-care-experienced peers were able to share news of a pregnancy with a wide network of family and friends, they themselves often had a very limited support network. Some of them reflected that the start of the pregnancy was the start of assessments and in-depth conversations about their past and how they planned to care for the baby when it was born. The perception was often that the

pregnancy was not happening in 'normal' circumstances in comparison to their peers who are not care-experienced – this caused many young people a great deal of anxiety and worry.



Professionals supporting care-experienced parents can seem judgemental rather than supportive.

Young people reflected that at times professionals involved in both social care and health could display unreasonable expectations of their ability to parent, and the support received did not always feel encouraging or helpful. The parents we interviewed felt the expectations were not those expected from their peers – first-time parents who are non-care-experienced. The young people we interviewed felt that in preparation to become a parent there was a great deal of focus on assessment instead support. The parents reported that they felt they were unable to make mistakes without scrutiny and it felt like they were often being judged. This feeling made some of the parents reluctant to ask for support with issues when they needed it, such as when they had concerns about their mental health. Young people valued personable, supportive, and encouraging relationships and being told 'well done' when they are doing well. They wanted professionals who could act as a 'mum-like figure' able to give advice and guidance on how to navigate the challenges of early parenthood.



Care-experienced parents feel stigmatised and discriminated against because of their care status.

This had a detrimental impact on their access to services. Care-experienced parents felt that some professionals they had worked with had assumptions of their parenting ability due to them having been in care, with historical details kept on file

and used to assess risk years later. This caused parents to be apprehensive and not reach out for support out of fear professionals would have a negative view on their parenting ability. Many of the parents interviewed reported feeling their treatment by professionals, including those in social and health care, was significantly different compared to their non-care-experienced peers.



Care-experienced parents struggle to access mental health and wellbeing services.

All the parents in this study reported that they had at some time had concerns about their mental health and yet many of them reported barriers to accessing support with this issue. This was partly due to a lack of available services which could meet their needs, but it is also because young people said they did not want to seek support out of fear they would be viewed negatively by social care and health services.

Recommendations

We believe the following five recommendations for change would improve support for care-experienced parents and should form part of the implementation plan for the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England.

- **Recommendation one:** There should be a family hub available in every area providing a one stop shop where parents and prospective parents can go for advice and support. These hubs should be accessible to all including care-experienced parents.
- **Recommendation two:** Care-experienced parents should get support to build their own 'village' of informal support, which aligns to the proverb, *'It takes a village to raise a child.'* This should include having access to family finding support and 'buddies' or independent visitors. These services should be available to all care-experienced young people up to the age of 25.
- **Recommendation three:** All local authorities should develop policies on how they support care-experienced parents as part of their local leaving care offer.
- **Recommendation four:** More public bodies including the NHS and police forces should have a statutory responsibility to support children in and leaving care. This would extend the role of being a 'corporate parent' beyond children's services to include for example midwives and health visitors.
- **Recommendation five:** Care-experienced parents need to have access to mental health support. How to provide the mental health support care-experienced young people need should be a key consideration for new Integrated Care Boards as they develop their plans for children and young people's services. There should also be a new role created for virtual mental health leads in every local authority whose job it would be to improve mental health services for children in and leaving care.



2. What does existing research tell us about the experience of being a care-experienced parent?

Ahead of the research design phase a literature review was completed. This found there was little recent literature about care-experienced parents specifically. What there is, it is often written from a professional or service perspective, with the voices of those with lived experience notably absent. What we do know is that care-experienced young people are disproportionately disadvantaged in society and these vulnerabilities are further exacerbated for those who are parents.

When looking at why care-experienced young people choose to become parents, the literature suggests that the desire is often fuelled by feelings of loneliness and isolation along with wanting to have a loving family. Some care-experienced young people seek to ‘fill the void’ of wanting someone to love and care for⁷. Care-experienced parents can see the opportunity of becoming a parent as a chance to ‘break the cycle’ of previous negative experiences of parents and childhood⁸.

There is a stigma attached to care-experience which is further emphasised when they become parents. There is often mistrust of their ability to be a good

parent: professionals, and even young people themselves can have unreasonably high expectations – wanting to ensure that history does not repeat itself. Young people who have grown up in care are seen as having learnt ‘what not to do’ as they often have little in the way of positive role models to draw on⁹. The literature suggests that care-experienced parents often do not feel listened to by their workers. The support that is available can sometimes be perceived by young people more as a way of monitoring their parenting rather than a genuine offer of help. This means there is often a mismatch between the high expectations placed upon these parents by professionals and the practical and emotional assistance that is available¹⁰.

The word ‘fear’ is commonly used to describe the feeling of care-experienced young people who are or are about to become parents. Workers are seen as supportive but also someone to mistrust¹¹. This is because professionals play a dual role of support and judgment of young people’s parenting¹². It is also made more complicated since what is deemed as success or failure as a parent can be subjective¹³. There is often only minimal consideration given to the wider context,

7 Barn, R. and Mantovani, N. (2007) ‘Young mothers and the care system: Contextualizing risk and vulnerability’, *British Journal of Social Work*, 37(2), pp. 225–243.

8 Connolly, J., Heifetz, M. and Bohr, Y. (2012) ‘Pregnancy and Motherhood Among Adolescent Girls in Child Protective Services: A Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Research’, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 6(5), pp. 614–635.

9 Roberts, L., Maxwell, N. and Elliott, M. (2019) ‘When young people in and leaving state care become parents: What happens and why?’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 104(March), p. 104387.

10 Roberts, L., Maxwell, N. and Elliott, M. (2019) ‘When young people in and leaving state care become parents: What happens and why?’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 104(March), p. 104387.

11 Roberts, L. (2021) ‘The Children of Looked After Children. Outcomes, Experiences and Ensuring Meaningful Support to Young Parents in and Leaving Care,’ pp. 133–149.

12 Fallon, D., Broadhurst, K. and Ross, E. (2015) ‘Preventing unplanned pregnancy and improving preparation for parenthood for care-experienced young people’, *Coram*, (October), p. 44. Available at: <http://www.scie-socialcareonline.org.uk/preventing-unplanned-pregnancy-and-improving-preparation-for-parenthood-for-care-experienced-young-people/r/a11G000000DeHRMIA3>; Roberts, L. et al. (2021) ‘“It’s Been a Massive Struggle”: Exploring the Experiences of Young People Leaving Care During COVID-19’, *Young*, 29(4_suppl), pp. S81–S99.

13 Weston, J. L. (2013) ‘Care leavers’ experiences of being and becoming parents’, (July), pp. 1–132

particularly the ongoing role of corporate parents in ensuring these young people have the practical support they need, such as access to housing, financial support, and emotional wellbeing advice¹⁴.

There is limited research on the experiences of care-experienced fathers. One study suggests high levels of offending amongst fathers with little or no positive support from social services. This study reported that social workers do not pay enough attention to the needs of care-experienced fathers and their role in the child's life, often not regarding fathers as a positive influence – many young men therefore give up¹⁵.

It is evident from the literature that services are not always tailored to individual needs and can have a one-size-fits-all approach. This causes parents to disengage and ultimately not receive the support they need. For both mothers and fathers, the importance of key trusting relationships is highlighted – good relationships with professionals are particularly important¹⁶.

Much of the literature we looked at included wider systemic studies about the role of corporate parents rather than focusing purely on experiences of parenthood for care-experienced people¹⁷.



14 Roberts, L. (2021) 'The Children of Looked After Children. Outcomes, Experiences and Ensuring Meaningful Support to Young Parents in and Leaving Care,' pp. 133–149.

15 Tyrer, P. et al. (2005) "Dealing with it": Experiences of young fathers in and leaving care', *British Journal of Social Work*, 35(7), pp. 1107–1121.

16 Tyrer, P. et al. (2005) "Dealing with it": Experiences of young fathers in and leaving care', *British Journal of Social Work*, 35(7), pp. 1107–1121; Roberts, L., Maxwell, N. and Elliott, M. (2019) 'When young people in and leaving state care become parents: What happens and why?', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 104(March), p. 104387.

17 Connolly, J., Heifetz, M. and Bohr, Y. (2012) 'Pregnancy and Motherhood Among Adolescent Girls in Child Protective Services: A Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Research', *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 6(5), pp. 614–635.

3. About this research

Aims and objectives

Aim

To hear and amplify the voices of care-experienced parents using their words to create culture and systems change.

Objectives

- To better understand the experiences of care-experienced young people who become parents and the support systems around them.
- To explore what care-experienced parents' experiences are like during the whole of the parenting journey including before, during and after pregnancy and to particularly consider the experience from the perspective of care-experienced parents themselves.
- To better understand the role of the corporate parent, from the level of individual practitioners to the wider system of children's services and support networks.

The core research questions were:

- What does being a parent mean to you?
- What do care-experienced parents need to support them in becoming the best parents they can be?
- What is care-experienced parents' knowledge of corporate parents' responsibility?

Please see appendix B for the interview questions used.

Peer-led research

This research has a unique insight – it was a peer-led research project with the research conducted by those who have lived experience of care and parenthood. We defined experience of care as anyone who has left care in any format: kinship care, foster care, residential care or adoption. Our researchers had all also become a parent whilst in care or whilst still receiving support from leaving care services.

This was a key part of the project – care-experienced parents designed and produced the research focusing on the voices of those with lived experience. At the beginning of the project, we conducted several consultations with 15 care-experienced parents across England to identify the issues they face, create a direction for the research and influence the research questions. At the start, eight peer researchers were supported, trained, and developed through the various stages of the research. This training was provided by a young parent consultant and a Barnardo's policy and research assistant, both of whom have lived experience. The training provided was informed by Barnardo's Young Researchers Guidance and Toolkit¹⁸. This project was supported by the wider Barnardo's organisation and a media agency who provided ideas around creative methodology and producing creative outputs to accompany the project. The peer researchers inputted into all the elements of the research including design, implementation, analysis, and dissemination. This included in-depth consultations around the research questions and delivering the interviews. The support around the project was thorough, addressing any biases as

¹⁸ Dr Louca-Mai Brady and Berni Graham (2021) Young Researchers Guidance and Toolkit

much as possible, debriefing after each interview and regular reflection journaling. The team ensured the research project proposal was validated by Barnardo's Research Ethics Committee to ensure the needs of our peer researchers and interviewees were met in an ethical and balanced way.

It was important to demonstrate that while it is important to improve the support for care-experienced parents it is as important to involve them in designing the solutions. From the outset we wanted care-experienced parents to lead on projects that matter and affect them the most. Once the research was completed, peer researchers helped to identify areas to influence change and improvement, alongside sharing positive experiences and evidence of what works.



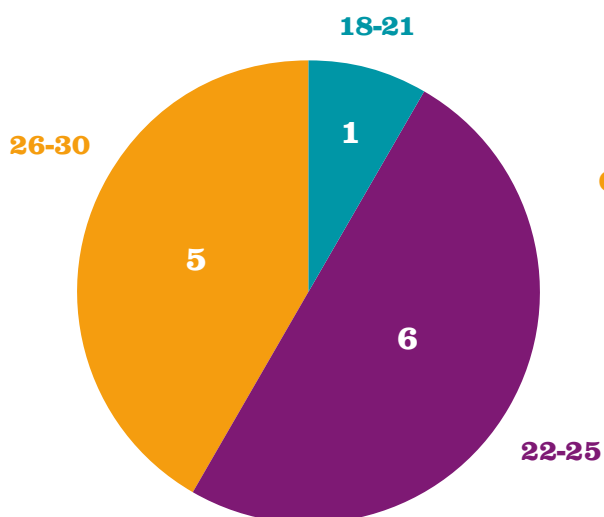
4. Methodology

The research was undertaken by peer researchers conducting 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews online (a video call over one or two sessions) with care-experienced parents. Participants included 11 care-experienced mothers and one care-experienced father, living in five locations across England. This research had a qualitative approach and the researchers aimed to access insights using open-ended questions and creative methods. Using this approach enabled the interview to be flexible and shaped to fit the individual parents' interests, who were then able to expand on different themes which were most relatable to them. Participants also had the choice to determine how much information they shared about a particular topic.

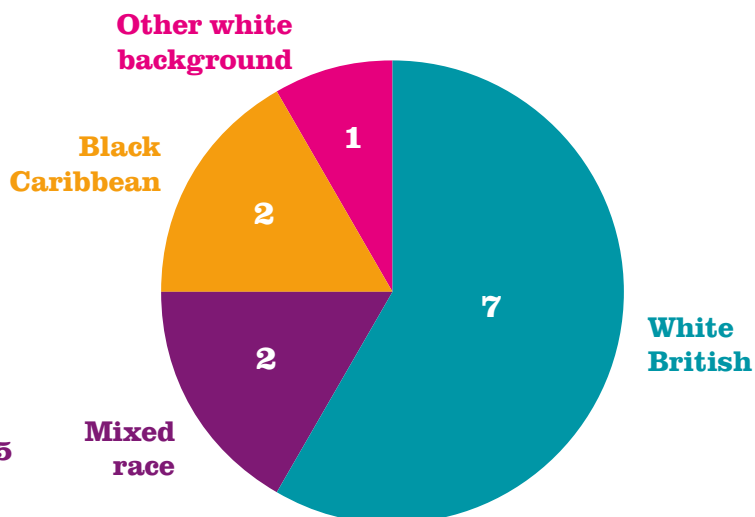
About our participants

12 participants engaged in the study.

Ages:



Parents ethnicity identification:



80% participants had one or more child under the age of 5

5. Findings from our research

One of the biggest questions you can ask a parent is, ‘*what do you want for your child?*’, what this research evidenced was that care-experienced parents’ answer to this question was no different from most other parents. They want their child to grow up feeling safe, happy, and loved. Arguably many parents are able to take for granted that their children will grow up with these basic rights, however, for those that are care-experienced, their experience of past trauma means they cannot make the same assumption. The parents we interviewed were passionate about wanting to provide a happy childhood for their own children that was very different to the one they had experienced. As one parent said:

“The most important thing to me as a parent, what I focused on with my children is to try and make them as happy as possible and so that all of the memories from childhood are happy ones.”

The parents commented on how they valued their role as amplifiers of their child’s voice, being the person who always puts them first and wants the best for them. Care-experienced parents reported feeling strongly that there were times when they needed to stand up and advocate for their child and that they were determined that their child’s needs wouldn’t be ignored by services. They know that families thrive best when they have a support network around them and when there are many positive adults in their children’s lives.

“Family is about loyalty, honesty, respect. If you feel a type of way, you’re allowed to have an honest conversation without being abusive.”

It was abundantly clear from our interviews that care-experienced parents want and can be amazing parents, who are powerful advocates for their children. Our research identified several key barriers which are preventing care-experienced parents from getting the support they need in their parenting journey. These were:

- **Care-experienced parents do not receive good quality support during pregnancy.**
- **Care-experienced parents struggle to access an informal support community, similar to that which would be provided by an extended family.**
- **Professionals supporting care-experienced parents can feel judgemental rather than supportive.**
- **Care-experienced parents can feel stigmatised and discriminated against because of their care status.**
- **Care-experienced parents cannot access mental health and wellbeing services.**

5.1 Care-experienced parents do not receive good quality support during pregnancy

The care-experienced parents we spoke to highlight several occasions where they felt they had been unsupported during pregnancy. This lack of early support can mean that parents are not always ready to provide the best possible care for the baby when the child is born. Key themes that the parents interviewed identified were:

- Invasive assessment processes focused on parenting ability rather than support
- Limited practical support, including with issues such as accommodation and learning how to care for the baby
- Limited understanding of care-experienced parents' emotional support needs.

Invasive assessment processes focused on parenting ability rather than support

The care-experienced parents we spoke to reported they felt unsupported in their parenting journey and that this problem often started as soon as the announcement of the pregnancy was made. In the worst cases, mothers reporting feeling pressure from their corporate parent to terminate their pregnancies. One parent shared their experiences of how their social worker had taken them to the clinic and sat in on the medical consultation after commenting that they felt she would not be ready cope with the baby.

When a care-experienced young person announces that they are pregnant invasive assessment processes are undertaken. This can also cause difficulties particularly when social care conducts parenting assessments on both parents, even if the other does not have care experience. One care-experienced mother commented how this had a significant negative impact on her personal relationship with the father

and that she had suggested she and the father went their separate ways to avoid the intense involvement from social workers. This mother also reported how she felt she had to disclose historic details of her past to her partner, even though she did not want to as they were going to be brought up in the parenting assessment:

“He had to have his background check. He had to have everything. I felt sorry for him. The thing is, it was a very tough time, to begin with because he was young. And when we first found out we agreed to go separate ways. Because I said to him, I didn’t want him dealing with social services. Because they were going to need to know everything about him. They will need to know his life. Even though he’s had a good life. So again, it wasn’t ideal, but he, he had to do it for us. That was the only way he could be involved in our lives really if he went through it.”

Care-experienced parents interviewed shared how they felt that support during pregnancy was not used to ensure they were well prepared for the birth but to judge their parenting abilities. As earlier existing literature showed ‘fear’ is a common word used to describe how care experienced young people feel about their pre-parenting experiences, this was echoed by the care-experienced parents we spoke to. This was the case for when they had to tell a professional their news about expecting a baby and when needing to access support for issues like mental health.

We asked the care-experienced parents to share their own experiences of the support they received during pregnancy. Here is an extract from an interview relating to one care-experienced mother detailing her experience of being given a lifelike doll to look after to help ensure she was prepared for the reality of looking after a baby. She explains the experience of this assessment process in her own words:

“We got 100%. She said that she found that hard to believe and that there might be a possibility we’ll have to do it again. I was like I’m not doing it again; I have done it. I’ve got 100% You don’t believe that? I was like, what more do you want from me? You know, I’m doing everything that you’re asking me. You cannot get a score any better than what we had? That was the best score that you could get on the virtual baby.”

This parent also told us about being shown pictures of different home scenarios and how she was told to point out the hazards to a baby. She felt instead of this being a learning opportunity, she was being tested and was anxious about getting her answers wrong.

Limited practical support, including with issues such as accommodation and learning how to care for the baby

The care-experienced parents in our study reported that pregnancy could present several practical problems in ensuring they were prepared for the arrival of their child. This included issues with accommodation, finances and learning how to care for a baby. However, the level and standard of support services available to care-experienced expectant parents varies across the country.

Access to good quality accommodation is critical when a young person is about to become a parent yet pregnancy itself can result in a previously stable living situation becoming unstable. For example, some of the pregnant care-experienced parents who were living in supported accommodation or residential homes reported being told that there were policies in place preventing parent and baby placements. This meant suddenly having to move house to a different area in late pregnancy leaving young people cut off from friends at a time when they were most needed.

One parent shared that she felt there was no housing support at all, leaving her with no choice but to move in with her partner’s parents. This was outside of the catchment area for her current social work team, and she believes her case was not kept open to offer further support after a basic safety check on the new house.

Our research also suggested corporate parents are not offering enough support to prepare young parents for the experience of caring for a baby. This is important, particularly for a group who often only have their own complex parenting experiences to draw on. As a result of the lack of support, many of the parents we interviewed found themselves feeling unprepared, both practically and emotionally and asking themselves *‘How am I supposed to know if nobody has told me?’*

Parents living in different areas across England shared they were not aware of baby groups or classes about developmental advice such as weaning, baby massage and sensory. The findings from interviews suggested a lack of consistency in both the information provided and the services available for care-experienced parents.

Limited understanding of care-experienced parents’ emotional support needs

Our research showed accessing much-needed emotional support in pregnancy could be challenging. For example, one mother reported how they had become pregnant at the age of 13-years-old from non-consensual sex. She felt despite this there was no support or understanding from the adults around her on how this impacted her feelings about the pregnancy and parenthood.

Care-experienced parents frequently require emotional support in handling relationships with their birth family. Sometimes this is linked to needing to know information about genetic conditions during pregnancy which could affect their child’s health, but many also talked about

the feeling of wanting to know whether their child looked like another family member. We heard several examples where social workers failed to empathise with and support young people with their mixed feelings about contact and the past trauma this could bring up.

What works well

Our research showed that the system worked best when professionals were focused on supporting young people through their pregnancy and preparing them for the experience of parenthood. Care-experienced parents commented on the benefits of having a professional who could come along to pregnancy scans so they were not alone, or who would remember when they had appointments and check in over the phone afterwards. In these cases, social workers, or other professionals were acting in a role very similar to one that biological parents often provide.

Good support involves providing care-experienced parents with supportive and practical preparation for birth and parenthood. One parent explained how her foster carer had provided her with this practical advice, although she also commented that there was limited emotional support available:

“My foster carer gave me practical preparation, how to make bottles and things but there was no emotional support for how I was feeling; and that my baby was being put on child protection. I felt like I needed a parent at that time to guide me through that.”

What care-experienced parents need:

All prospective care-experienced parents need access to easily available support to help prepare them for birth and parenthood. To achieve this, we would like to see **a family hub available in every area which provide a one stop shop where parents and perspective parents can go for advice and support. These hubs should be accessible for all with efforts made to ensure they are welcoming and available to care-experienced parents.**

5.2 Care-experienced parents struggle to access an informal support community, similar to that which would be provided by an extended family

Care-experienced parents involved in this research reflected how they felt disadvantaged by not having the informal networks of support many non-care-experienced parents take for granted. Many of the parents we interviewed have never had a loving, nurturing relationship and it can therefore be difficult for them to know how to provide this for their children. In these cases, parents told us they felt guilt and anxiety as they strived to be the best parent they could.

“I didn’t want my relationship with my kids to be like, my relationship with my mother. Because I don’t have a relationship with my mother and I haven’t for a long, long time, but I think that was the most frightening thing as a parent it was kind of scary because I felt like, I’d only known her parenting. So, I didn’t know anything else.”

Not having access to informal support networks was very limiting for the parents in our study, they explained that having a limited informal network means:

- Care-experienced parents have less practical support in raising their children.
- Care-experienced parents have less emotional support and are more likely to feel lonely and isolated.
- The assessment processes around care-experienced parents can act to break rather than build on a young person's existing support network.

The impact of each of these points is explained in more detail below.

Care-experienced parents have less practical support in raising their children

Many care-experienced parents compared the difference in their situation to their non-care-experienced friends. They explained that their friends can turn to their parents, anytime, anywhere to ask for help. This includes having access to grandparents to help with shopping, cleaning, babysitting, and buying gifts for the baby; things many care-experienced parents can only imagine.

The lack of access to this support can result in care-experienced parents feeling lonely and isolated. For example, one parent was met with disbelief by her employer when she told them she had no one else to call on to collect her child from school when they were sick. A lack of social networks can also lead to care-experienced parents feeling very vulnerable. For example, when one mother's relationship with the baby's father broke down this resulted in disagreements around contact. The father had a big family on hand to support them. On one occasion they sent their relatives to the mother's house where they threatened her, and physically removed the child. This made the mother feel vulnerable and isolated, with nobody there to advocate for them and their parental rights.

Care-experienced parents often have limited emotional support which can result in feeling lonely and isolated

As well as practical support care-experienced parents' want someone to celebrate with when their child does well at school, someone to vent to when they have had a long day and someone to phone and ask, 'Am I doing this right?' The lack of these relationships impacts parents health, confidence, and development opportunities.

Friendships can be difficult for care-experienced parents to make and maintain often due to frequent changes in home and area. The parents we interviewed reported that it was difficult to build networks through conventional mother-and-baby groups and while these groups can be helpful for their children to build friendships it was difficult for them to find people they could connect with. This put some parents off attending altogether, especially those who were experiencing anxiety or depression. Parents commented on how groups that specifically target care-experienced parents, including dads, could support them to build peer support networks. One parent we spoke to explained the benefit they had experienced through a monthly online community of care-experienced adults.

The assessment processes around care-experienced parents can act to break rather than build on a young person's existing support network

Children need a 'village' of support around them to support them to grow and thrive. Therefore it is critically important that care-experienced parents are supported to develop as many positive relationships as possible to help them on their parenting journey. However, our research found the opposite and procedures put in place could often fracture the few relationships a young person had. For example, one care-experienced parent explained how when her foster carers with whom she had previously had a good relationship

were required to supervise and feedback on her parenting it dramatically changed the relationship. The parent described it as being 'policed' in her own home and the relationship with the foster carer became so tense that the placement broke down and mother and child had to leave.

Similarly, care-experienced mothers reported instances where they felt the role of the father of the baby was not supported but ignored. We heard one experience of a child's father who was also care-experienced finding it difficult to be a consistent presence in the child's life. The mother reported social services did little to help or encourage the relationship, offering no support and disregarding the father's involvement. This means that the father now has no contact with the child and the mother has been left to parent alone.

What worked well

The relationships the care-experienced parents we spoke to valued most were with adults that **unconditionally cared for, listened to, and advocated for them**. Helping parents to identify a positive parenting role model can be extremely valuable in supporting them on their parenting journey. When young people had carers who taught them life skills such as budgeting, cooking, and cleaning this was also seen as good preparation for practical parenting skills.

"I've had a range of role models for parenting, and I've taken a little snippet from each of them. My foster mom being one, she was there for me."

Case study

"I met my auntie when I was 13 and I saw the way she was with her kids. I've never seen anything like it really before. So nurturing, she made their lunch, like every day, like all these things that I didn't perceive a parent to do, and she did it with such love and she was always cuddly and then she did that for me as well. She'd make me a hot chocolate and want to talk to me and all these really nurturing things that I've never had before like she did. And I do think it had a massive impact on the way that I saw you could be with your children if you know what I mean. I think I would have struggled more to show love if I hadn't seen her do it, if that makes sense."

The parents we interviewed reported that they benefited from professionals who understood the importance of making memories and having relationships in their personal lives. For example, we heard about a social worker that took the family to the zoo for the day, and sourced funding for visits to see family members that lived far away. The parent described being able to call her family support worker when she was having a difficult day and she would come around to help with the dishes, make a cup of tea, and talk.

"My care and after worker managed to get me like £600. So, I could go and visit my family on the Isle of Wight, like, literally, so I could go and stay there for a week and go and see my family. Like, it's like those sorts of things, those extra touches were like, it's like she can see, I'm missing my family or something like that. And to try and make that happen. And I think she could do it, but it's like that kind of like personal understanding of what means a lot to me. And she knew that seeing my family and my niece and my nephew and everyone means a lot to me. And I think yeah getting to know someone and her getting to know me, what means a lot to me has helped our relationship if that makes sense."

What care-experienced parents need:

Action is needed to help support care-experienced parents to build an informal network of support they can rely on, both in pregnancy and beyond.

Care-experienced parents need support to build their own ‘village’ of support with access to family finding support and ‘buddies’ or volunteer mentors.

5.3 Professionals supporting care-experienced parents can feel judgemental rather than supportive

We know from other research on leaving care that many young people feel ‘alone’ or ‘isolated’ and do not know where to get help. Care-experienced young people report having no one they can talk to about how they are feeling, and one-third report not knowing where to get help and support¹⁹. For those who are pregnant or have just become new parents having good relationships with professionals is especially important. One parent shared their views on what happens when this does not happen:

“It was quite bad. I got moved into really inappropriate properties. My social worker just didn’t really check in on me. We didn’t really have a relationship. I was just kind of left if that makes sense. And I was fine with that at the time because I wasn’t really bothered. But looking back now, it could have been dangerous, if that makes sense. And I think I was just quite lucky that it didn’t go really bad.”

Care-experienced parents reported specific barriers preventing them building good connections with professionals, these were:

- High worker turnover and an overstretched service can discourage young people from asking for help.
- Previous negative experiences of professional relationships making it hard to trust.

High worker turnover and an overstretched service can discourage care-experienced parents from asking for help

Evidence shows that children in care often experience a high turnover of professionals – in 2017/18 60% of children in care, experienced at least one change of social worker and just over a quarter of children experienced two or more changes²⁰. Concerns about constantly changing professionals were reflected in the findings of this research, with care-experienced parents commenting on how changes in key professionals had had a negative impact on their ability to build trusting relationships.

A key reason for this is that services are often very overstretched. There have been significant cuts to spending on children’s services over the last decade. This trend has now reversed but analysis by ProBono economics for Barnardo’s and other children’s charities calculated that spending on children’s services is still £249 million below 2010-11 levels and this is despite there being more children in and leaving care than ever before²¹.

19 [Keep on caring: supporting young people from care to independence – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/614442/keep-on-caring-supporting-young-people-from-care-to-independence.pdf)

20 Children’s Commissioner (November 2020) Stability index 2020, technical report available online at <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/stability-index-2019>

21 [CSOC03 - Childrens Services Funding Alliance Final 1.pdf \(actionforchildren.org.uk\)](https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CSOC03-Childrens-Services-Funding-Alliance-Final-1.pdf)

Limited-service provision can mean that services seem to want to actively discourage care-experienced parents from reaching out. Parents interviewed reported being told they were becoming too dependent when they did ask for help. For example, one parent reported feeling belittled when asking for foodbank vouchers. Where these attitudes are evident, they risk parents becoming reluctant to contact statutory services, and therefore missing out on essential support and guidance.

“I think it’s very important in establishing a relationship with the young person, especially social workers. And the difference in the system now is that social workers are so far removed from what they used to be. They were much more hands-on years ago when I had a social worker than how they are now. And well, that’s because, you know, the budgets are caught in the stretch, they’ve got so many more cases now and then just haven’t got the time to, you know, to spend building that relationship up with the young people whom they work with.”

Such experiences can have a negative impact on parents health and wellbeing. For example, one care-experienced parent reported on how when they moved into independent living they were forced to survive on biscuits for months because after buying the essentials they had no money left over for food for themselves. The young parent reported that their initial requests for help were met with disbelief and a ‘telling off’ from her social worker for not managing her finances better. It was only months later when the issue was raised again that the social worker finally listened and realised the mother needed support to claim all the benefits she was entitled to.

Previous negative experiences of professional relationships can make it hard for care-experienced parents to build trust

Some of the care-experienced parents reported that they had had very negative experiences of professional relationships in the past and that this impacted on their confidence to ask for help even when it was available. Parents explained that instead of seeing professionals as supportive they considered them to be judgemental. This prevented them from seeking support for many issues including mental health, domestic abuse, or when they had a question or concern about parenting. This lack of trust in professionals can have a significant impact on the support a care-experienced parent receives. In one case the parent’s partner reached out to her health visitor with concerns about her mental health. This parent firstly shared that she felt a betrayal of trust, despite now being grateful that he cared and realised she needed support. This mother was so wary of professionals being involved with her family that she would not have asked for help herself.

It is important that professionals supporting this group recognise this as a barrier and work to build trust with young people. Care-experienced parents can face many barriers in their life, and they must feel confident in seeking professional support when they need it.

What worked well

It is essential that professionals working with care-experienced parents understand the many barriers this group can face in their lives and have an approachable and empathetic nature. Small offers of support can make a big difference – for example, we were told by one parent how much she appreciated her social worker agreeing to drive her to the mental health appointments and sitting in the waiting room with the baby as she had nobody to watch her child. This enabled the young woman to access the support she needed.

Consistency in professional relationships is also key. We heard one example specifically of a professional who recognised the ‘rejection’ a care-experienced parent felt when their worker moved on. In this case the Personal Advisor (PA) took the decision to her manager, advocating for the importance of support continuing. This parent spoke positively of the relationship with her PA and felt this was attributable to her having the same worker throughout her pregnancy and beyond. In comparison, another care-experienced parent reported not getting the chance to build relationships with her social workers as they changed every six months.

There were other examples of where consistency of worker was valued. For example, we heard the experience of one young person accessing a sexual health clinic who was offered the same worker, in the same room at every appointment. This helped them to engage in pre-parenting support.

There is also value when young people can continue to get support from professionals they have worked with in the past even after the official ‘relationship’ has ended. One care-experienced parent told us she had stayed in touch with a worker from her children’s home and how important this relationship is to her. She often takes her children to visit, to have Sunday lunch together or take a trip to the beach. Care-experienced parents are acutely aware that this is not normal practice, but these are the key people in their lives, just like any other family.

“There was a support worker that I had, and I call her Mama Bear. I can still call her now that 10 years later, I’m 26 now. I can still call her now and be like Mama Bear, I need you and she would come and help me like even if I was in the wrong.”

What care-experienced parents need:

Local authorities need to provide consistent support for care-experienced parents and ensure that all professionals that come into contact with care-experience parents understand the specific needs and challenges for this group. **We would like all local authorities to have a policy on how they support care-experienced parents as part of their local offer to care leavers.**

5.4 Care-experienced parents can feel stigmatised and discriminated against because of their care status

Care-experienced parents reported feeling that they were subject to significant levels of scrutiny due to their care-experience. The parents interviewed raised two specific concerns in relation to discrimination and stigma:

- Some professionals working with this group appear to start from the assumption that history will automatically repeat itself.
- Services and professionals supporting care-experienced parents do not always understand the impact of 'past trauma' on this group.

Some professionals working with this group appear to start from the assumption that history will automatically repeat itself

The care-experienced parents we spoke to were clear in their drive to provide their children with the best possible start in life. Many felt they have a unique insight into 'what not to do.' They described how they knew too well the feeling of being rejected, lonely and unheard and talked about how they want the complete opposite for their children.

"In every decision I make, I always get back to doing the opposite of what my mum would do. I just I feel like I can't relate, I don't ever want to relate my parenting to that if that makes sense. I've created quite a big distance."

To the care-experienced parents interviewed, it can often feel that the system is set up expecting them to fail. They reported how the experience of completing extensive parenting assessments in pregnancy just to prove their parenting ability made them feel different from their non-care-experienced peers for whom

this is not routinely expected. They also highlighted examples of interactions with professionals which gave them an overwhelming sense that they were expected to fail from the outset. One parent described how during pregnancy she was told that social care was concerned she would have no maternal instinct because her own mother had died when she was young. She felt the need to 'fight' to prove she was not going to abandon her baby.

"Think one thing that I wish I knew was that I was going to have so much eyes on me and have to go through so much. Because I was in care and having a baby."

It is important to recognise gaps and potential support needs when care-experienced young people announce that they are going to become parents. However, they should never feel stigmatised and judged because of experiences which are not their fault.

Young people reported that professionals outside of children's social care can also sometimes seem like they automatically expect care experienced parents to replicate their own poor parenting experiences. One care-experienced parent reported how she felt discriminated against when she was confronted by a professional about where a bruise came from on her child. The parent stated she did not know as her child was a toddler, this was then flagged as a safeguarding concern and the young mother had to take the child hospital where he was stripped and checked for more bruises and marks. She described how the processes were not explained to her, and that she was not made aware of her rights as a parent. There was no follow up to the referral, but it left the parent feeling horrendous and unsupported.

"I was so angry, and as a 20-year-old woman with two young children. I just felt awful. And I felt so judged. And they had the picture and like drawing where all the marks were, and it was just absolutely awful. I wouldn't wish it on anybody."

The parent reported feeling that her treatment was the result of discrimination since professionals knew she was a care-experienced parent and that she was not provided with any other reason why incident had been escalated to that kind of level.

Services and professionals supporting care-experienced parents do not always understand the impact of 'past trauma; on this group

Many care-experienced parents have experienced trauma and abuse in childhood and the parents in our research commented how this had impacted their parenting journey in many ways. For example, one parent commented how because of past trauma, she did not feel comfortable or safe living with men including her child's father. This felt the mother with less support, and more responsibility when planning the day-to-day care of her child.

Care-experienced parents felt there is a need for better trauma-informed practice when assessing parenting ability in pregnancy. Some parents reported that professionals seem to not always understand the background that had led to them being where they are now. One parent explained how her historic file records which detailed how she used to run away as a child had been used as part of a parenting assessment. This was interpreted by professionals that she was not 'stable enough' to be a parent, completely ignoring the situation, her age at the time and the significant abuse and trauma which was the root cause of her running away.

The need to be sensitive to a care-experienced parents' past experiences are particularly important when sharing sensitive personal information with other professionals as part of the assessment process. The parents in this study felt this was not always handled in a way which was trauma-informed. One parent in particular reported feeling 'belittled' by professionals during a meeting, as sensitive and confidential information was shared about her care-experience, with people she did not know. She felt she did not have a voice and that nobody had asked if they could share the information nor made her aware this was going to happen.

What care-experienced parents need:

Many professionals need a greater understanding of the needs of the care-experienced population. This would help dispel myths and pre-conceptions and ensure we challenge prejudice. To help achieve this **more public bodies including the NHS and police forces should have a statutory responsibility to provide specific support to children in and leaving care. This would extend the role of being a 'corporate parent' beyond children's services and help improve support for this group from other non-children services professionals for example midwives and health visitors.**

5.5 Care-experienced parents struggle to access mental health and wellbeing services

Care-experienced people are more likely to have poor mental health due to their adverse childhood experiences. Barnardo's own research, for example, has shown that 46% of Barnardo's care-experienced young people in the opinion of the personal adviser had mental health needs and one in four had faced a mental health crisis since leaving care²².

This same research also showed that young people often struggle to access the services they need – 65% of young people whom workers identified as having mental health needs were not receiving any statutory service. Young people leaving care often need support with their mental health due to past trauma, but this need can be particularly acute during periods of transition such as when a young person becomes a parent. All care-experienced parents interviewed described how they have struggled or were still struggling with their mental health and wellbeing describing issues such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, and dissociative disorder. Several of the care-experienced parents we spoke to shared experiences of trauma when they were younger including sexual abuse.

“I was in care for emotional abuse, I was struggling with my emotions to be able to deal with a child as a child, But I think as a care leaver you ring for reassurance anyway. Yeah. Because you always doubt yourself, I feel.”

Yet care-experienced parents interviewed also felt that there were barriers to them receiving the mental health support they needed. During our research two issues were identified:

- A lack of suitable services that care-experienced parents could access.
- A feeling of stigma if care-experienced parents asked for help.

A lack of suitable services that care-experienced parents could access

Young people leaving care can struggle to assess the mental health support they need, particularly as this group often falls between the cracks of children's and adults' services. They often find themselves too old to access CAMHS and yet not meeting the high clinical thresholds for access to adult mental health services. Access to services can be particularly difficult if the young person has a specific need. For example, one care-experienced father we spoke to described the unequal access to mental health support for dads compared to mothers. Others also mentioned mental health services could have long waiting lists.

It was clear that we need to improve access to clinical provision and therapies for care-experienced young people including those who are parents. However the parents we interviewed also talked about wanting to access lower-level support with their emotional health and general wellbeing. The parents described how often feelings of isolation and loneliness once they had given birth had made their mental health worse particularly as, they often had no one to share their thoughts or chat with. Some care-experienced parents commented that these feelings of loneliness and isolation led to in an overwhelming fear of going somewhere new and resulted in them often feeling scared or anxious. They commented how having more access to informal support networks particularly social groups specifically targeting care experienced parents could be a useful tool to improve their emotional wellbeing.

A feeling of stigma if care-experienced parents asked for help

Young people explained they often felt anxious about asking for help with their mental health in case this created a negative view of them as a parent and that they could not cope. This links to

²² [neglected-minds.pdf \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)

the feeling that our participants often expressed that they were ‘walking on eggshells’ with professionals waiting for them to fail. Experiences of post-natal depression can be particularly difficult for care-experienced parents and the parents interviewed discussed how they did not want the fact that they were depressed to be seen as an indicator of how much they loved and cared for their child.

“It’s hard to admit that you have something like that because you’re like why I love this child, why would I be depressed about it.”

One parent told the researchers that they reached out for help and support for her mental health, believing she were doing the right thing to get herself in a better place for her children; but that she believed doing this resulted in her losing custody of her children with this impacting negatively on family relationships. She shared that she now no longer sees her parents outside of jointly seeing her children.

What works well

Care-experienced parents felt that it is important preventative support is available from the moment they expect a baby to beyond postpartum. Early intervention can prevent poor mental health outcomes and addressing these issues early places parents in a much better place to support their own child.

Positive experiences of accessing mental health support included consistency with workers and having the opportunity to access varying forms of therapy relevant to their experiences. It is important to note that many of the care-experienced parents interviewed felt they were only made aware of the support available when they asked about it and there is not a consistent message from professionals, organisations, and parents. A parent we interviewed spoke highly of therapeutic interventions but that she wished they had been offered before reaching crisis point.

“I think like how I was parented had a huge impact on the way I parent now. But at the time, I thought that that was a negative. Whereas if I’d had that therapy at the time, like I’ve had it now. And that’s what’s helped me kind of understand that, if I’d have had it at the time, it might have helped me a little bit more, and I probably would have limited like postpartum depression and all that kind of stuff, it probably would have lessened that.”

The parents we spoke to commented that there was also a need for mental health support services specifically for care-experienced people. This would feel less scary to access since workers would already be aware of care-experienced people’s needs.

“If there was something that was maybe specifically for care leavers. It might be good to know that you’re not alone. And there are other people going through your experience.”

What care-experienced parents need:

Care experienced parents need to have access to mental health support. How to provide the mental health support care experienced young people need should be a key consideration for new Integrated Care Boards as they develop their plans for children and young people’s services. There should also be a new role created for virtual mental health leads in every local authority whose job it would be to improve mental health services for children in and leaving care.

6. Recommendations

This research has made clear that like other parents, care-experienced parents want to be the best parents they can be. Overall, they want to be able to love and care for their children and to provide them with a stable and happy childhood – something that many care-experienced parents themselves did not have.

However, although corporate parents are required to ensure that the needs and wellbeing of care-experienced parents and their families are met, this research highlighted that too often this support is either lacking or not available at all.

The care-experienced parents we spoke to were clear about the need for more support and guidance for this group. This was needed both during pregnancy and in the early stages of parenthood. The support needs of care-experienced parents will of course differ depending on individual needs and circumstances, but we believe that good support for this group should be guided by the following principles:

- **Professionals acting as parental figures** this involves building relationships with care-experienced parents to allow them to speak openly and discuss when something is right or wrong. All care-experienced parents need someone to speak to when problems arise without fear of judgment.
- **Continuity from services.** Our research was clear that having consistent workers with whom young people can build stable and trusting relationships is key to providing the support needed – both during pregnancy and beyond.
- **Ensuring young people leaving care have access to financial assistance.** Care-experienced young people often have lower income levels and being

a parent can make things especially difficult. Financial help with things such as travel, housing (including deposits on a flat) and childcare can make a significant difference to how they are able to manage.

- **Good signposting to a range of support services.** This includes where to go for financial support, mental health advice, sexual health, domestic abuse and parenting groups and support groups.
- **Helping to support care-experienced young people to be part of their community.** This includes considering how to build up a young person's informal support networks, helping them make new connections while also strengthening those they already have.

To support local authorities and other public bodies to provide better support for care-experienced parents, the Implementation Plan of the Independent Review of Children's social should include the following five policy changes:

Recommendation one: There should be a family hub available in every area providing a one stop shop where parents and prospective parents can go for advice and support. These hubs should be accessible to all including care-experienced parents.

A clear message from this research was that care-experienced parents need effective early support from the moment they get pregnant. This needs to be non-judgemental and empower and support young people to overcome the challenges they face.

There has been much interest in England in providing increased access to family support for all parents – recognising the need for universal and accessible help

whenever parents need it. The Conservative Party manifesto in 2019 committed the UK Government to *‘Improve the Troubled Families Programme and champion Family Hubs to serve vulnerable families with the intensive, integrated support they need to care for children’* and both the Rt Hon Andrea Leadsom MP review into early years provision and the recently published Independent Review of Children’s Social Care recognise the need to develop services in this area.

Barnardo’s currently delivers a number of family hubs and children’s centres across England. Currently we are involved in delivering hubs in Essex and the Isle of Wight amongst other places. These hubs provide family support in a holistic manner – working with parents they provide support to everyone from pregnant mothers to teenagers. Hubs act as a ‘local nerve centre’ for family support within a community, bringing together everything from stay and play groups, to breastfeeding support, to help with issues such as finding a job or applying for benefits. Hubs are therefore able to reach families earlier and before problems become entrenched. Good hubs also provide outreach work with working going out in the community and meeting parents who need support even if they are not yet ready to come to a centre. Following our experience of delivering family hubs Barnardo’s has been calling for the introduction of a family hub in every community so that all families can benefit from access to this support.

This research adds further evidence to the important role that a family hub in every community could play in supporting particularly vulnerable groups of parents, such as those who are care-experienced. It would allow a constant ‘one stop shop’

for care-experienced parents to go to get access to the advice and support they need to cope with the demands of early parenthood. Family hubs would also provide a space where providers could explore developing targeted support groups for this group of young people, enabling them to meet parents from a similar background to them in an informal and non-judgemental setting.

Recommendation two: Care-experienced parents should get support to build their own ‘village’ of informal support, which aligns to the proverb, ‘It takes a village to raise a child.’ This should include having access to family finding support and ‘buddies’ or independent visitors. These services should be available to all young people leaving care up to the age of 25.

This research found that care-experienced parents often struggle due to lack of informal support networks similar to that provided by extended family. This need to support young people leaving care to build relationships was a key theme of the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care which outlines a ‘mission’ that no young person should leave care without at least two loving relationships. This is particularly important in the context of care-experienced parents.

There are already service models which exist to help care-experienced young people build informal networks of support. Our recent *Building Our World* report highlighted how to provide mentors for young people leaving care, while our *From Pillar to Post*²³ report also highlighted the work Barnardo’s has done to roll out Lifelong Links. This is licenced by the Family Rights Group and aims to use a model similar to family group conferencing

23 [From Pillar to Post.pdf \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)

to help young people connect and get support from people in their life that in their view are important to them.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care²⁴ contained two specific recommendations aimed at helping care-experienced young people build a support network these were:

- Redesigning the existing Independent Visitors scheme for children in and leaving care to allow for long term relationships to be built.
- Local authorities to have skilled family finding support equivalent to or exceeding, the work of Lifelong Links in place by 2024 at the very latest.

We support both recommendations and hope they will form a key part of the forthcoming implementation plan for the Care Review which we expect to be published shortly. Both schemes should consider how they can be made accessible to care-experienced parents as part of the implementation, given this group would particularly benefit from these support structures.

Recommendation three: All local authorities should develop policies on how they support care-experienced parents as part of their local leaving care offer.

It was clear from our research that there is some good practice in supporting care-experienced parents, but that this support was patchy and inconsistent. Often young people's experience seemed dependent on the individual attitudes of workers and offers of support were inconsistent between the different local authorities. To help ensure a more consistent level of support for this group, we recommend that all local authorities adopt a best practice charter to improve their local leaving care offer in relation to care-experienced parents and their children. Following extensive research in Wales by Dr Louise Roberts such a charter has been developed, which we

believe provides a helpful blueprint for local authorities in supporting care-experienced parents. This includes a commitment to looking at the practical support that care-experienced young parents need, from helping to find accommodation to practical advice on how to care for baby. A copy of this charter can be found in appendix A.

Recommendation four: More public bodies including the NHS and police forces should have a statutory responsibility to support children in and leaving care. This would extend the role of being a 'corporate parent' beyond children's services to include for example midwives and health visitor.

Local authorities play a crucial role in delivering services to young people leaving care as their corporate parent, but as this research has shown they are not the only public body that offers support to this group. Many of the care-experienced parents in this research were accessing support from midwives, health visitors or other health professionals. Currently however only local authorities have a legal duty to promote the wellbeing of care-experienced people as part of their role as the corporate parent. To increase understanding and support for care-experienced young people across all public services we believe the Government should use the implementation of the Care Review in England to extend the corporate parenting principles to a greater range of public bodies. This has been the approach taken in Scotland which changed the law in 2015 to name twenty-four bodies and organisations as corporate parents, alongside local authorities. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England also recommended it.

We believe this would provide the impetus to provide training to organisations such as health services in providing services to this group and encourage the development of specific protocols for midwives and health visitors on what they need to consider when working with care-experienced

²⁴ [The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf \(childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk\)](#)

young people. This should be developed in co-operation with care-experienced young people themselves.

Recommendation five: Care-experienced parents need to have access to mental health support. How to provide the mental health support care experienced young people need should be a key consideration for new Integrated Care Boards as they develop their plans for children and young people's services. There should also be a new role created for virtual mental health leads in every local authority whose job it would be to improve mental health services for children in and leaving care.

Many children in care have experienced significant trauma or abuse and need support to help them recover. Barnardo's own research shows that the impact of this trauma often continues once a young person leaves care – with 45% having mental health needs. All care-experienced young people need access to timely mental health support.²⁵ However this is particularly true for care-experienced parents, since a failure to provide this may impact on their ability to fully parent their own child.

Currently however as this research shows many care-experienced parents struggle to access suitable mental health services. This can be a particular problem due to a 'cliff edge' at 18, when young people no longer qualify for access to children and adolescent mental health services but often do not meet the threshold for adult services despite there being a clear need for support. More must be done to ensure that the right services are available locally to meet the needs of the care-experienced population.

Integrated Care Boards, which have responsibility for NHS functions and budgets, will play a key role in helping to improve services. Each Board will have to develop a plan setting out how they will address the needs of children and young people under the age of 25. It is vital that each Integrated Care Board considers in its plan, the steps it will take to address the mental health needs of children in care and leaving care, including how it will end the 'cliff edge' often experienced at age 18.

Effective local leadership is key to improving access to support. The introduction of virtual school heads has helped to improve Looked After Children's access to education through better coordinated leadership. Introducing a virtual mental health lead (which was included as part of the mental health assessment pilots) could achieve comparable results in the field of mental health. In particular they could play a key role in co-ordinating action from different stakeholders, including CAMHS, mental health support teams in schools and community health services.

²⁵ [neglected-minds.pdf \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)

7. Tops tips for anyone working with care-experienced parents

We have developed a list of tips for anyone working with care-experienced parents to use and share. (Available as separate image/pdf)

CARE EXPERIENCED PARENTS TOP TIPS FOR CORPORATE PARENTS & PRACTITIONERS

- 1 INVOLVE ME.**

THIS IS MY LIFE AND MY CHILD I DESERVE TO HAVE A SAY ON THE THINGS THAT AFFECT US.
- 2 INFORM ME.**

EXPLAIN WHAT IS HAPPENING, WHY IT IS HAPPENING AND WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ME AND MY CHILD. GIVE ME THE INFORMATION I NEED TO MAKE CHOICES FOR MY FAMILY.
- 3 GET TO KNOW ME.**

FIND OUT ABOUT MY VALUES, HOPES AND DREAMS FOR PARENTHOOD. I AM MORE THAN MY CARE EXPERIENCE, I AM A PERSON AND A PARENT IN MY OWN RIGHT.
- 4 ASK ME.**

DON'T ASSUME YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT BEING OR BECOMING A PARENT. EVERY CARE EXPERIENCED PERSON HAS HAD A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE OF CHILDHOOD AND BEING PARENTED THAT AFFECTS OUR OWN JOURNEY THROUGH PARENTHOOD.
- 5 MAKE AN EFFORT WITH ME.**

ASKING ME HOW I'M FEELING, OR REMEMBERING MY BIRTHDAY, THESE THINGS MATTER. THE LITTLE THINGS CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE.
- 6 ENCOURAGE ME.**

SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE EVERYBODY EXPECTS ME TO FAIL. BE THE PERSON WHO POINTS OUT THE POSITIVES AND SAYS 'I BELIEVE IN YOU'
- 7 EMPOWER ME.**

LET ME KNOW ABOUT THE SUPPORT I AM ENTITLED TO AND HOW TO ACCESS IT. DON'T ASSUME I ALREADY KNOW, OR EXPECT ME TO FIND OUT - IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO MAKE SURE I KNOW MY RIGHTS AS A CEP.
- 8 EDUCATE YOURSELF.**

FIND OUT ABOUT CEP RIGHTS AND THE SUPPORT THEY ARE ENTITLED TO. DO YOU KNOW AND UNDERSTAND YOUR RESPONSIBILITY AS A CORPORATE PARENT?
- 9 RESPECT ME**

UNDERSTAND THAT I AM THE EXPERT WHEN IT COMES TO MY OWN EXPERIENCES AND WORK WITH ME COLLABORATIVELY TO MEET MY INDIVIDUAL NEEDS/TO PROMOTE THE BEST POSSIBLE OUTCOMES FOR MYSELF AND MY FAMILY.
- 10 TAKE ACCOUNTABILITY**

CONTINUOUSLY ENSURE THAT AS A CORPORATE PARENT YOU ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT METHODS AND SKILLS ARE ACTIVELY PROMOTING POSITIVE PRACTICE AND ADAPT TO ENSURE THIS IS ALWAYS PRIORITY. TAKE OWNERSHIP AND ACKNOWLEDGE WHEN YOU MAKE MISTAKES, YOU ARE ONLY HUMAN AFTER ALL.

Appendix A

SUPPORTING PARENTS IN AND LEAVING CARE: Our Corporate Parenting Commitments

As corporate parents we are committed to supporting mothers and fathers who are in care, or in the process of leaving care.

WE CAN HELP YOU PREPARE FOR BEING A PARENT AT A TIME THAT IS RIGHT FOR YOU.

WE WILL WORK WITH YOU TO MAKE SURE YOU HAVE HELP AND SUPPORT YOU WHEN YOU ARE EXPECTING A CHILD OR BECOME A PARENT WITH –

- Things you need – a place to live, money and essential items.
- Knowing your rights and entitlements – including benefits, grants, and resources in your local authority.
- Learning new things – how to bath a baby, seek medical advice or register for a school place, a dentist or optician.

PARENTING CAN BE REWARDING BUT ALSO CHALLENGING AND WE WILL MAKE SURE THAT YOU KNOW WHO IS AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT YOU WITH –

- Advice and support, even in the middle of the night or on weekends.
- Local services for all parents and care experienced parents.
- Access to leisure centres and gyms and opportunities to have a break.
- Education advice and careers guidance.
- Practical help with childcare and transport.

PARENTS IN AND LEAVING CARE, CAN EXPERIENCE STIGMA AND DISADVANTAGE. THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE. WE WILL:

- Make available resources that highlight and challenge unhelpful assumptions about parents in and leaving care.
- Make clear that referrals to Children's Services based only on care status or history are unacceptable.

IF CONCERNS ARE RAISED ABOUT PARENTING, WE WILL MAKE SURE –

- You have access to advocacy and legal advice.
- Your care history and records are not used against you.
- You are treated fairly, and your rights are respected.
- We work with you to create a safe and suitable family home.

IF YOUR CHILD HAS BEEN REMOVED, WE WILL NOT ABANDON YOU AND WILL NEVER GIVE UP ON YOU. WE WILL HELP YOU DEAL WITH THE PRACTICAL, FINANCIAL, AND EMOTIONAL IMPLICATIONS.

We will make this support available to parents up to the **age of 25** and we expect to be challenged if we fail in our responsibilities. We will keep reviewing how we are doing and will continue to work with parents, services, and charities to **make sure parents in and leaving care are well supported and treated fairly.**











Supporting Parents in and Leaving Care: #MessagestoCorporateParents – ExChange (exchangewales.org)

Appendix B

Interview questions

What does being a parent mean to you?

Providing definition of what parenting means. – “the process of raising children and providing them with protection and care in order to ensure their healthy development into adulthood.”

- What does it mean to be a parent to you? (Learning parenting styles, where their understanding of being a parent came from)
- How does being care-experienced impact on experiences of parenting?
- Do you think there are any specific positives or challenges of being a care leaver who is a parent?
- Have you ever experienced discrimination in society such as public/friends/family/GP/Midwife due to being care-experienced, if so, how did it make you feel?
- Is there anything that makes you feel you are struggling as a parent?
- What does your goals/aspirations reflect for you as a parent?
- Has there been a time that when you accomplished what you set out as a parent?
- What makes you feel like a good parent/victorious parent?
- What makes you feel you have achieved as a parent?
- How would you describe being a successful parent e.g., accomplishing a goal, it could be as small or as big you like?
- Could you give me an example to where you felt good as a parent?
- What positive parenting outcomes do you value?

What do care-experienced parents need to support them in becoming the best parents they can be? (Prompts – education/professional/informal/leaving care local offer sexual health services and/or corporate parents sexual wellbeing support).

- Social care service used in a H Form method which enables them to score their experience from 1-10 and identify the positives, negatives, and suggestions for improvements
- What kind of support have you had? What was your experience of accessing it? Has it worked?

Timeline:

- What support did you have before becoming a parent (using prompts)?
- What support did you have to prepare for parenthood (using prompts)?
- What support did you have post parent? Who supported you?
- Where were you signposted to get support from e.g., social worker/ children centre etc
- What support do you feel was missing?
- What support would you like/needs to make life easier? What support do you not need in some areas?
- If you could talk to health professional (social/health visitor) what would you say to them?

-
- Who did you feel you could trust/ turn to for advice? (Trust and accessibility of services, dual role of social worker)

What are care-experienced parents' knowledge of corporate parents' responsibility towards care-experienced parents?

- Are you aware of the offer from government/local gov around your rights and entitlements as a care-experienced person? And as a parent?
- What was your experience of corporate parents before becoming a parent in regard to your support?
- Do you feel this changed when you became a parent, if so, how?
- Do you feel you have ever experienced discrimination from your corporate parents, if so, how did it make you feel?
- Have you felt you were experiencing difficulties with being a parent? If yes, did you think your social worker supported you and where did they signpost you to?
- When is the support available? e/g over Christmas, easter, etc. (not just 9-5)
- Has there been a time where you feel your social worker / personal advisor has helped you in a positive way?
- Do you feel your views are taken seriously as a care-experienced parent?
- Do you think corporate parents delivered on the information they offered/promised?
- How did corporate parents try to understand you and build relationships?
- Have you had social work involvement for your child? Were you included in the decision making about your child's plans? Did professionals mention you were in the care system as part of making the child's plan?
- If the participant is older – Post 18/25, do you think support has changed?

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