

Improving Cross-Government Support for Care Leavers

Parliamentary briefing | December 2024

Summary

There are **over 80,000** children in the care system in England and every year **around 13,000** young people leave care.

The state has a special responsibility towards care leavers, with local authorities being the 'corporate parent'. However, on average, compared with the general population, care leavers have poorer physical and mental health, worse educational outcomes, and are more likely to become homeless than their peers.

This briefing sets out the key actions each government department could take to transform outcomes for care leavers.

1. Department for Education

On average, children in care achieve an Attainment 8 score less than half that of the overall pupil populationⁱ and 39% of care leavers aged 19- 21 are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), compared to around 13% of all young peopleⁱⁱ. Meanwhile, just 14% of children in care go to university, compared with 47% of their peers.ⁱⁱⁱ

To address this, the Department for Education should:

- **Extend the statutory role of the Virtual School Head to include a duty to promote the educational achievements of care leavers up to the age of 25.**
- **Introduce a new government-backed kitemark scheme for higher education to encourage more universities to provide specific support for care leavers.**

2. Department for Health and Social Care

Adults who grew up in a residential home are between three and four times more likely to say their health is 'not good' rather than good^{iv} and 50% of children in care meet the criteria for a mental health disorder^v compared to 20% of all children and young people aged 8-25^{vi}.

To address this, the Department for Health and Social Care should:

- **Provide free prescriptions to all care leavers up to the age of 25.**
- **Introduce a Virtual Mental Health Lead for children in care and care leavers in every local authority to co-ordinate their access to mental health services.**
- **Work with Integrated Care Boards to ensure that local service plans for children detail how they will meet the specific needs of children in care and care leavers.**

3. Department for Work and Pensions

Research over many decades has also shown care leavers are financially vulnerable and often live at or near the poverty line^{vii}. As a result of the cost-of-living crisis, one survey found that 82% of care-experienced young people said they were struggling to afford food all or some of the time.^{viii} Whilst data is not collected on the exact number of care leavers claiming benefits, we know that a high proportion are likely to be reliant on Universal Credit for some or all of their income.

To address this, the Department for Work and Pensions should:

- **Reform Universal Credit so that all care leavers eligible for the benefit are entitled to the over 25 rate (in recognition that they are unlikely to have support from family).**

- **Introduce bespoke pathways into work with funding for specialist support (such as help with ‘soft skills’), as part of the forthcoming ‘Youth Guarantee’. This would help to break down the barriers that prevent care leavers accessing employment.**

4. Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government

Around half of 24-year-olds in the general population still live with their parents^{ix}, yet most care leavers live independently at 18. It is estimated that one in three care leavers become homeless in the first two years after they leave care^x while latest figures show that more than one in 10 care leavers aged 19-21 are in unsuitable accommodation or it is not known if it is suitable.

To address this, the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government should:

- **Make it a legal requirement that private landlords may not refuse to rent a property to someone on the ground that they grew up in care.**
- **Require all local authorities to provide rent deposit and guarantor schemes for care leavers.**
- **Amend the Housing Act 1986 to abolish the requirement of ‘unintentionality’ so that all care leavers aged 18-25 are owed a duty by the local authority to secure accommodation should they become homeless.**

5. Department for Transport

22% of care leavers say that they ‘always/often’ feel lonely compared to 10% of all young people^{xi} and 15% of care leavers say they do not have a good friend compared to 5% of all adults^{xii}. Access to transport can play a key role in helping to connect young people with communities, as well as making sure they can access jobs and education opportunities.

The Department for Transport should provide support care leavers will access to transport by introducing a national scheme of free bus travel accessible to all care leavers up to the age of 25.

6. The Home Office

Care leavers are disproportionately likely to have contact with the Criminal Justice System. 52% of care leavers have a criminal conviction by age 24 compared to 13% of non-care-experienced young people^{xiii}. Nearly 1 in 10 Black children in care have served a custodial sentence before they are 18 – compared to less than 1% of children in the general population^{xiv}.

The Home Office also has a specific obligation towards care leavers who came to the UK as Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. These children account for around 9% of all children looked after by local authorities, and the number has been steadily growing in recent years^{xv}.

To better support care leavers, the Home Office should:

- **Work with local authorities and the police to make sure the national protocol on the unnecessary criminalisation of children in care and care leavers^{xvi} is better implemented at a local level.**
- **Commit to providing quicker immigration decisions for children seeking sanctuary in the UK, with the aim that in most circumstances young people should not leave care without their immigration status being settled.**

7. The Ministry of Justice

While the emphasis should be on keeping children in care and care leavers out of the Criminal Justice System, there is also a need to improve support for those who do come into contact.

To better support care leavers, The Ministry of Justice should:

- **Make legal advice opt-out rather than opt-in for children in police stations (learning from the trial of this approach undertaken by the Metropolitan Police).**
- **Update the Prison and Probation Service Strategy for Care-Experienced People^{xvii}. This strategy should be backed by government funding and emphasise the need for joined-up support between children’s services and the prison system.**

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For more information contact public.affairs@barnardos.org.uk

ⁱThe average Attainment 8 scores for children in care are 19 compared to 46.7 in the overall pupil population. Statistics from the Department for Education (April 2024) [Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England, Reporting year 2023 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

ⁱⁱ Statistics from the Department for Education (Nov 2024) [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ CIVITAS (2023) <https://civitas.org.uk/content/files/Breaking-the-care-ceiling.pdf>

^{iv} Nuffield Foundation (Oct 2021) [The lifelong health and well-being of care-leavers. - Nuffield Foundation and UCL policy briefing. - Oct-2021.pdf \(nuffieldfoundation.org\)](#)

^v Bronsard, Guillaume MD, PhD; Alessandrini, Marine MD; Fond, Guillaume MD; Loundou, Anderson PhD; Auquier, Pascal MD, PhD; Tordjman, Sylvie MD, PhD; Boyer, Laurent MD, PhD (Feb 2016) [Medicine \(lww.com\)](#)

^{vi} NHS England (Nov 2023) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey - NHS England Digital](#)

^{vii} Department for Health (2000) [helpingCL.pdf](#)

^{viii} National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (August 2022) [Cost of Living report August 2022 full\[34\].pdf](#)

^{ix} Office for National Statistics (2024) [Milestones: journeying through modern life \(2024\) – Gov.UK](#)

^x All- Party Parliamentary Group for Ending Homelessness (2017) [appg for ending homelessness report 2017 pdf.pdf \(crisis.org.uk\)](#)

^{xi} Coram Voice, the Rees Centre (Nov 2020) [1883-CV-What-Makes-Life-Good-Report-final.pdf](#)

^{xii} Coram Voice, the Rees Centre (Nov 2020) [1883-CV-What-Makes-Life-Good-Report-final.pdf](#)

^{xiii} Office for National Statistics (2022) [The education background of looked-after children who interact with the criminal justice system - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

^{xiv} Hunter K PhD, Francis B, and Fitzpatrick C PhD (September 2023) [Policy-briefing-Katie-Hunter.pdf \(adruk.org\)](#)

^{xv} Statistics from the Department for Education (Nov 2024) [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

^{xvi} Department for Education, Home Office and the Ministry of Justice (November 2018) [The national protocol on reducing unnecessary criminalisation of looked-after children and care leavers](#)

^{xvii} HM Prison and Probation Service (2019) [Strategy for care-experienced people](#)