

A system that cares:

A manifesto for care-experienced
children and young people

BECOME.

**THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS**

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becomecharity.org.uk

The care system in 2019

We want to see a care system which provides all children and young people with the support, stability and love they need to recover from trauma and lead happy and healthy lives. When it works well, the care system achieves this. Unfortunately, we know that for too many young people the system can instead compound the instability and trauma they have experienced in their lives.

The number of children in care continues to increase. There are now over 75,000 looked after children in England, up from 67,000 in 2012. 88 children enter care every day.ⁱ

At the same time children's services face a funding gap of over £3 billion by 2025.ⁱⁱ

The ages of children coming into care and the reasons why they are entering care have changed significantly over the past few years. Children are now more likely to enter care as teenagers having experienced exploitation or violence – driven in part by an increase in other social problems such as sexual and criminal exploitation and county lines. The number of teenagers aged 13 or over growing up in care rose by 21% between 2012/13 and 2017/18.ⁱⁱⁱ The system has failed to adapt to these changes.

There aren't enough good foster carers or children's homes in the areas where they're needed most. Too many young people are forced to live apart from brothers and sisters and away from their local area in places which fail to adequately protect and care for them.

Decisions on where children live are often driven by financial pressures and what is available rather than by a child's wishes and feelings and what is in their best interests. Too little attention is paid to long-term stability and the development of loving, caring relationships which last through a young person's time in care and into adulthood.

Our health, education, justice and immigration systems aren't sufficiently responsive to the needs of care-experienced young people. Young people continue to face a sudden and significant drop in support at age 18 and can find themselves unsupported as they enter adulthood.

This must change.

The challenges facing care-experienced young people today are not inevitable. We have the opportunity to change the care system so that it gives every child the opportunity to heal and lead the life they want.

A well-funded care system focused on children's individual needs, supported by highly-trained and caring professionals and responsive to the expertise of those with lived experience is possible. Delivering this must be at the top of any future agenda for government.

This manifesto outlines how we think we can get there.

Our key asks

A comprehensive independent review of the care system which listens to children and adults with lived experience of care to address culture, policy and practice.

Long-term stability as the goal for every child in care, delivered by increased capacity across foster and residential care and better support for kinship carers and birth families. There should be independent scrutiny where a child experiences repeated home moves.

Relationships as a key consideration in all decisions, encouraging continuity through childhood to adulthood and supporting a sense of identity and belonging. No young person should be separated from their siblings apart from in exceptional circumstances and 'contact' with siblings should be afforded the same importance as with birth parents.

Improved support for those leaving care and an end to uncertainty about where young people will live, with no young person forced to move on their 18th birthday and consistency in support until the age of 25.

Additional funding for expanded Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to deliver trauma-informed support to all care-experienced young people until the age of 25.

For a full list of our asks of the next government, please see pages 8-9.

Delivering a system that cares.

Changing the system

Local authority children's services are facing a £3.1 billion funding gap by 2025.^{iv} There is currently insufficient funding for many local authorities to adequately fulfil their duties as corporate parents and deliver safety and security for each child in their care.

Isolated 'innovation' funding is not enough to meet the needs of our children. Cuts have meant local authorities slashing funding for family support in an attempt to cover their statutory obligations, but this vital early work can help children to remain safely with their birth families rather than entering care after problems have escalated.

There are not enough appropriate accommodation options for young people in and leaving care. Children deserve to live somewhere they can feel safe and secure, suited to their individual needs in a place they can call home, not somewhere which puts them at additional risk of harm.

The number of children living in unregulated placements has soared by 70% in the last decade; over 5,000 teenagers now live in unregulated semi-independent or independent placements, up from 2,900 in 2009.^v Cases of younger children being placed in unsuitable, unregistered accommodation including hostels and caravans also appear to be on the rise.^{vi} In addition, an increasing number of children are forced to live far from where they once called home; more than 4 in 10 children in care are currently living outside of their home local authority area.^{vii} These are symptoms of, not solutions to, an acute shortage in the number of suitable places for children to live.

Stability, relationships and voice

We believe three priorities should be at the heart of the care system: promoting long-term stability, supporting the development of loving relationships, and listening to and acting upon the voices of care-experienced people.

"I love my siblings more than anything. I had to protect them. When I went into care, I had no control over what was going on. I used to think about my sisters more than anything else. I couldn't see them, and I had no idea what was going on."

Young person, aged 22

Children in care need stability in order to heal from the trauma which led to them entering care in the first place. Yet last year, 7 in 10 young people in care experienced a change in where they live, where they go to school or who their social worker was.^{viii} This figure is far too high. Having security in where you live and who cares for you allows children to develop a sense of identity and belonging, to grow and to thrive.

The job of building trust and emotional security should start the moment a child comes into care. Too many young people find their experience of care compounds earlier feelings of loss and disconnection; one in five care leavers say they feel lonely compared to one in ten young people in the general population.^{ix} The care system isn't there just to guarantee physical safety but should help young people build social networks and develop loving relationships which will continue to support them into adulthood. Relationships are 'the golden thread' in children and young people's lives.^x

This includes relationships with their birth families when safe to do so. Too many children, especially younger children, aren't helped to understand why they've come into care. Knowing what has happened in your life is critical to building an identity and an understanding of who you are, supporting young people to move forward with their lives. Continuity in relationships is paramount to every child's emotional wellbeing and sense of identity. Young people tell us they particularly want professionals to support them in maintaining relationships with their siblings, who they are often separated from in care but who may have been their key support and the only people who really understand what they have been through.

"We are expected to fail and it is a stigma. I hated telling people I was in care because it feels like people judge you."

Young person, taken from Perceptions of Care, Become (2017)

Young people's experiences and voices are not always listened to or acted upon as they should be. Unfortunately, some professionals who make decisions about care-experienced young people's lives lack sufficient understanding of what it's like to be in care. They may not always speak to and learn directly from those they support. Effective listening requires empathy and positive relationship-building.

Leaving care

The care system is currently designed with too many cliff-edges. This is particularly true for young people leaving care. At age 18, most young people aren't expected to leave their family homes as part of a 'transition to independence', but we demand this of thousands of care leavers each year at a time when many are only just coming to terms with their childhood experiences, and often at a crucial time in their education.

"We don't just become adults immediately at age 18."

Young person at a meeting of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, 2019

Young people leaving care face a number of challenges including accessing education, training or employment, transitioning to adult health services, adapting to a significant reduction in personal support from the local authority, and maintaining financial security. The care system currently doesn't prepare young people for adult life in the way it should, and young people tell us

they're missing the skills and trusted people they need to help them navigate this new chapter in their lives.

The statistics around poor life outcomes for adults with experience of care are well known – adults who have spent time in care are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system, and to experience poor mental health or homelessness. But we also know that this isn't an inevitability. Success – however defined by each individual – must become the expectation for all young people leaving the care system. To do this, we must focus not on a phase of 'transition' or a checklist to achieving 'independence' but help young people to build and nurture the communities around them that will support them into their adult lives. The impacts of care experience don't simply disappear at age 18, 21 or 25.

Beyond the care system.

Health

Care-experienced young people tell us that they want better access to mental health and wellbeing support. Almost half of children in care have a diagnosable mental health disorder^{xi}, compared to 11.2% of all 5 to 15-year-olds^{xii}. The adverse emotional impacts of pre-care experiences are often not addressed during a young person's time in care, which prevents them healing from trauma and affects them into adulthood.

"Discuss with young people what extracurricular things they used to do at home. Acknowledge these things as important parts of their lives and if they can't continue, find ways to maintain relationships if possible and/or suitable alternatives alongside them."

Young person's advice for professionals, from APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers meeting, 2019

Our current Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) consistently fail to provide the level of support those with care experience need. The thresholds for accessing clinical support are far too high and many young people find themselves pushed from waiting list to waiting list as they are forced to move to a new area and start again. We must ensure that young people can access effective support before problems get worse and deliver a smooth and managed transition to adult services when they are older.

Young people tell us that they have difficulty accessing health services, including GP or dental appointments, in addition to community activities which promote healthy lifestyles and good wellbeing. Every child should feel

confident that their health plan is accessible, and that professionals around them understand their needs and can support them to develop healthy relationships with food and exercise.

Education

Care-experienced young people studying at school, college or university might find it to be a place of stability and support within their turbulent lives. For others however, education can be yet another arena where they feel stigmatised and face additional challenges as a result of their experiences.

"87% of respondents received no training about looked after children before they qualified as a teacher."

Teachers Who Care, Become (2018)

We are concerned about the use of 'zero-tolerance' behaviour policies within schools for children who have experienced childhood adversity, as well as reports which highlight how children in care are disproportionately impacted by unfair admissions procedures, fixed-term exclusions and hidden practices of off-rolling – where students are discreetly removed

from the school roll in the best interests of the school rather than the pupil, often to boost examination results.

All young people in care deserve a place in an inclusive school which welcomes them, addresses their needs and works closely with the children's services and Virtual School teams so they are well supported to pursue education and realise their aspirations. Further and higher education institutions should promote fair and contextualised admissions policies and deliver a learning

experience which supports those with care experience to complete their studies and progress successfully.

Justice

Care-experienced people are overrepresented in the youth and criminal justice systems. Too often, young people in and leaving care can find themselves unfairly criminalised in a way which does not happen with their peers. This is often due to ignorance or stigma from professionals, as well as poor practices which bring young people into contact with the police at an early age, such as when they run away from where they're living.

"Police were around quite a lot when I went to my first foster placement. They asked me if I was taking drugs – I'd never touched a drug in my life. They treated me like a criminal."

Young person, aged 20

Care-experienced young people in custodial settings often fall between the gaps in support from youth offending teams, probation services and children's services or adult services. They can feel abandoned by the local authority who promised to act as their corporate parent. One recent report found that, of a sample of 50 children released from custody, 37 needed input from children's social care services but only 6 had received adequate help with their

resettlement needs.^{xiii} These are children and young people who have had a difficult start in life and need rehabilitation, support and professional guidance to help them lead the lives they want.

Immigration

As of 31 March 2018, there were 4,480 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in England^{xiv}, in addition to an estimated 5,000 EU children in care^{xv}, all of whom face an uncertain future in our country. There's an inherent paradox in bringing a child into care to provide them with a sense of stability and belonging and then failing to guarantee their long-term future. It is our duty to ensure that the promise made to every child when they are brought into care is not one reserved only for those born in this country but extends to all children.

What we want to see

Changing the system

1. **A comprehensive independent review of the care system** which listens to children and adults with lived experience of care to address culture, policy and practice.
2. **A commitment to closing the funding gap for children's and family services.** They must have sufficient funding to deliver outstanding social care services, restart the crucial early support work which helps children to remain safely with or return to their birth families, and provide support to care-experienced young parents and their children.
3. **Urgent action to increase capacity across foster, residential and all other places where children in care live.** All young people should have somewhere to call home which is suited to their needs and within their local area.
4. **Regulation and inspection for all places where children in care might live,** with no child under 16 living in semi-independent or unregistered accommodation.
5. **Extended duties for local authorities to collect and publish data,** including on the separation of siblings, the nationality of children in their care, and the outcomes for care leavers up until the age of 25.

Stability, relationships and voice

6. **Long-term stability as the goal for every child in care,** delivered by increased capacity across foster and residential care and better support for kinship carers and children returning to their families. There should be independent scrutiny in cases where a child experiences repeated home moves.
7. **Relationships as a key consideration in all decisions.** The system must focus on the continuity of relationships through childhood to adulthood, including with birth families, friends and other trusted adults, through processes like family group conferences and by ensuring all young people can access an Independent Visitor. Ofsted should look at how local authorities as corporate parents are supporting loving, nurturing relationships for the children in their care.
8. **No young person separated from their siblings apart from in exceptional circumstances.** 'Contact' with brothers and sisters should be afforded the same importance within legislation and guidance as with birth parents.
9. **All children supported to understand their identity and heritage** through life story work, and to have their cultural background, religion, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation and other aspects of who they are recognised in decisions made about their lives.
10. **A strengthened role for Independent Reviewing Officers,** with new guidance to support them to challenge poor decisions for all children in care as well as care leavers.

Leaving care

11. **An end to uncertainty about where young people leaving care will live** – no one should be forced to move home on their 18th birthday. This includes guaranteeing Staying Put or Staying Close options for young people living across all different accommodation types – including semi-independent or supported housing – until age 25 if desired, with the option to return to care if they have left and things don't work out.
12. **Alignment in legislation to provide consistency in support to age 25**, including guaranteeing exemption from council tax and the Shared Accommodation Rate, and being a priority need for housing.
13. **An expansion of the Care Leaver Covenant which recognises the lifelong impact of care** and supports opportunities for care-experienced people until and beyond the age of 25, including access to contextualised admissions and funding for higher education.
14. **Expanded statutory funding for other training, employment and education routes** beyond higher education, recognising and supporting the unique ambitions of every individual.
15. **A review of the Personal Adviser role** which considers skills and qualifications, training and development, and local authority support which enables them to provide the highest-quality support to young people leaving care.

Beyond the care system

16. **Additional funding for expanded Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services** to deliver trauma-informed support to all care-experienced young people until the age of 25. This includes providing dedicated staff responsible for helping children in care and care leavers no matter their home local authority, full emotional and mental health assessments for all children entering care, and health plan commitments which facilitate healthy lifestyles and improved wellbeing.
17. **Mandatory training for all health, education and law enforcement professionals** (such as nurses, teachers, and the police and probation service) around the needs of children in care, including a compassionate understanding of childhood trauma and attachment issues and the impacts of care on learning, health and behaviour.
18. **A revised School Admissions Code** which guarantees a school place most suited to the needs of each individual child in care, and new initiatives to bring together local authority and school staff to prevent the use of fixed-term exclusions.
19. **No care-experienced young people in or leaving custodial settings forgotten by their home local authority** – children's services must be held to account for failing to deliver the support young care-experienced people are entitled to, including regular contact with a named professional and early help with resettlement.
20. **The long-term immigration status of all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and EU national children in care secured**, in addition to a guarantee of free identity documentation and citizenship applications for all children in care and care leavers.

We would like to offer our thanks to the members of Become's advisory group for their expert help and support in putting together this manifesto.

Become is the national charity for children in care and young care leavers. For further information about Become, the support we offer to care-experienced young people and how we improve the care system, please visit becomecharity.org.uk.

ⁱ Department for Education, 2018. Children looked after in England including adoption: 2017 to 2018.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2017-to-2018>

ⁱⁱ Local Government Association. *Children's services funding – facts and figures*. <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/bright-futures/bright-futures-childrens-services/childrens-services-funding-facts>. Accessed October 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Children's Commissioner, 2019. *Stability Index 2019*. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/stability-index-2019/>

^{iv} Local Government Association. *Children's services funding – facts and figures*.

^v BBC Newsnight, 2019. *Teens in care 'abandoned to crime gangs'*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48300157>

^{vi} Children's Rights Alliance for England, March 2019. *State of Children's Rights*. <http://www.crae.org.uk/publications-resources/state-of-childrens-rights-2018/>

^{vii} APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, 2019. *No Place at Home: Risks facing children and young people who go missing from out of area placements*. <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/appg-inquiry-into-children-missing-from-out-of-area-placements>

^{viii} Children's Commissioner, 2019. *Stability Index 2019*.

^{ix} Coram Voice, April 2019. *Our Lives Beyond Care: Care leavers' views on their wellbeing in 2018*. <https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/OLBC-Snapshot-online-2018.pdf>

^x The Care Inquiry, 2013. <https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/for-professionals/resources/the-care-inquiry-2013/>

^{xi} Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, March 2015. *Promoting the health and wellbeing of looked after children*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-the-health-and-wellbeing-of-looked-after-children-2>

^{xii} NHS Digital, November 2018. *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017*. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017>

^{xiii} HM Inspectorate of Probation and HM Inspectorate of Prisons, October 2019. *Youth resettlement – final report into work in the community*. <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2019/10/Youth-resettlement-%E2%80%93-final-report-into-work-in-the-community-4.pdf>

^{xiv} Department for Education, 2018. Children looked after in England including adoption: 2017 to 2018.

^{xv} Home Office estimate, taken from *Immigration: EU Nationals: Written question – 222791*.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2019-02-18/222791>