

# BECOME.

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THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE  
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

## **Submission to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care 'Call for Ideas'**

December 2021

Become is the national charity for children in care and young care leavers. Our vision is that care-experienced people have the same chances as everyone else to live happy, fulfilled lives. Our mission is to help children in care and young care leavers to believe in themselves and to heal, grow and unleash their potential. We work alongside them to make the care system the best it can be.

# Housing

## What's your idea?

We propose a series of changes which would better support care leavers to access and maintain safe and suitable accommodation into adulthood:

1. Care leavers should be guaranteed same level of priority within social housing allocation policies and homeless legislation in the area they are living or are connected to as they do within their 'home' local authority.
2. There should be a nationally-consistent guarantor and deposit scheme for care leavers which enables access to the private rented sector.
3. The test of 'intentional homelessness' should be removed for all care leavers.
4. 'Priority need' within homelessness legislation should be extended to all care leavers, including those aged 21+.
5. Automatic council tax exemptions should be applied for all care leavers which follow them regardless of where they are living.
6. Care leavers moving away to attend university should be able to retain their priority status for social housing in their 'home' local authority after returning.
7. Every local authority should have a joint protocol between housing and leaving care teams linking with the Care Leaver Local Offer. This should clarify that care leavers should not be asked to present as homeless – housing should be secured through good Pathway Planning and working alongside housing teams.
8. The Setting Up Home Allowance should have a national minimum (not recommended) amount, regularly reviewed by care-experienced young people and increased in line with the cost of living, with statutory guidance specifying how this should be used and delivered by local authorities.

## What do you hope this will achieve?

Requests for support around issues of housing and homelessness represent approximately 20% of queries to our Care Advice Line. Poorly supported to sustain a tenancy after leaving care, this can often result in a series of short-term moves which do not provide a stable environment for young people to heal and grow. Too many are left facing homelessness and ongoing housing instability.

These changes would:

- reduce the need to rely on homelessness legislation by ensuring proper Pathway Planning delivers the stability young adults need and deserve;
- diversify the routes care leavers have to secure safe and suitable accommodation, given the acute shortage of social housing;
- align care leavers' rights and entitlements around housing and homelessness with wider legislation, recognising the particular challenges they face;
- promote decision-making in young people's best interests, allowing them to live, study and work where is most suitable for them and their ambitions;
- prevent care leavers falling into financial insecurity and offer 'second chances';
- encourage better joint working alongside housing teams as part of local authority's corporate parenting ; and
- ensure care leavers receive what they are entitled to without having to navigate complex bureaucracy.

## Rights and entitlements

### What's your idea?

We propose a series of changes to strengthen the awareness, content, and delivery of rights and entitlements arising primarily from what young people have told us, including during two engagement sessions with the Review team:

1. Professionals – particularly social workers and personal advisers – should receive training to ensure their knowledge of rights and entitlements is sufficient. This information should be shared in a timely and accessible way with young people as part of ongoing care and pathway planning, outlining the mechanisms available to have a say in the decisions made about their lives.
2. Advocacy must be fully independent from the local authority and available as an 'active offer' to all children in care and care leavers.
3. The existing 'hierarchy' in former relevant vs qualifying care leavers should be removed – all care leavers should be entitled to a common offer in law.
4. Key financial entitlements (e.g. Setting Up Home Allowance, HE Bursary etc) should be regularly reviewed and updated nationally with input from care-experienced young people and to reflect increases in costs of living.
5. IROs should be able to effectively challenge local authority decisions for all care leavers as well as children in care; this requires accountability chains separate from operational management.
6. Contact with siblings should be afforded the same priority as with birth parents in primary legislation.
7. The UNCRC should be enshrined in domestic legislation, including the introduction of a statutory duty for all levels of government to deliver a Child Rights Impact Assessment when proposing new policy changes.

### What do you hope this will achieve?

These changes would:

- improve awareness and understanding of rights and entitlements amongst professionals and young people so young people get the help and support they need;
- enable young people and those supporting them to better hold local authorities to account when they fail to deliver on their statutory duties to children in care and care leavers;
- give young people a stronger voice in the decisions made about their lives;
- better ensure the frequency and type of contact between brothers and sisters works for every child by focussing professional attention on this and ensuring young people's voices shape arrangements, creating stronger lasting relationships even when a sibling isn't also in care;
- encourage a culture of transparency and involvement which recognises both the rights and insights of children in care and care leavers;
- reduce the postcode lottery associated with leaving care entitlements particularly;
- deliver entitlements which provide more effective support for care-experienced young people, eliminating inefficiencies and reducing the need for young people to rely on support from non-statutory sources; and
- promote policymaking which considers and protects children's rights, using clear mechanisms to understand the likely positive and negative impacts of any new proposals.

## Welfare

### What's your idea?

We propose a series of changes which would ensure young care-experienced people moving into adulthood get the financial security they need and direct welfare support which recognises the unique challenges they face.

1. Care leavers under the age of 25 should be able to access the higher standard allowance within Universal Credit. There is already precedent in the system where care leavers have been given differential treatment (e.g. Shared Accommodation Rate exemption) and this would align with existing enhanced support to age 25.
2. 'Second chance learning', whereby people can continue receiving Universal Credit when studying non-advanced courses of education, should be extended to all care leavers.
3. National guidance on joint protocols for supporting care leavers should be produced by the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions, outlining how leaving care teams should work alongside job and benefit delivery centres and other partners.
4. Training should be provided for all job coaches and staff around relevant legislation, sensitive use of language and issues around disclosure.
5. A system marker should be added to ensure DWP staff are aware of a young person's care status where this would benefit them and where they consent.
6. There should be an option for Personal Advisers to be listed as designated individuals able to support with young people's claims. No care leaver should face a sanction without prior discussion with their leaving care team.
7. Grant advance payments should be provided centrally for care leavers instead of a loan.

### What do you hope this will achieve?

Many care leavers contact us as they are in rent arrears and feel trapped in unsustainable cycles of debt. There is a limit to the impact of financial management and budgeting skills; you cannot budget your way out of poverty.

These changes would:

- eliminate the age-based difference in UC entitlement which doesn't reflect care leavers' much earlier journeys into adulthood. This universal solution puts money directly into the pockets of care leavers to address common experiences of poverty; an 'off-system' solution administered by local authorities would inevitably be patchy and variable in delivery.
- support care leavers to access education and training opportunities which offer them long-term success and happiness, rather than feel forced into less suitable or precarious employment which provides what they might need to pay their bills;
- ensure better joined-up working which means care leavers access the welfare support they are entitled to;
- reduce incidences of ignorance and poor support from professionals outside of the care system;
- tailor the existing Universal Credit system so that it better recognises and supports the needs of care leavers and the roles of those around them, such as Personal Advisers; and
- facilitate local, regional and national-level monitoring to understand other changes needed.

# Education

## What's your idea?

We propose a series of changes to how children in care and care leavers are supported in education, directed at both the operation of the care system and educational providers, to improve experiences and outcomes.

1. All routes into teaching should include information about children in care, including the impact of trauma on learning, what being in care is like, and key concepts such as the Virtual School, Designated Teacher, and Personal Education Plan. This should apply to university and school-led training and qualifications.
2. Whole-school attachment and trauma-aware strategies should be encouraged which inform approaches to understanding behaviour. Ofsted should intervene where schools repeatedly use fixed-term exclusions with children in care.
3. The legal loophole which allows academies to refuse entry to children in care must be closed by amending the School Admissions Code.
4. Pupil Premium Plus funding should be extended to all those in post-16 options following the pilot.
5. The Government should top up the amount received by care leavers completing apprenticeships to a living wage, enabling them to take the training options they want to.
6. Statutory funding for other education, training and employment routes (e.g. , apprenticeships, traineeships) must be expanded and available to all until at least age 25.
7. Higher education institutions should use a wider 'care experience' definition when determining eligibility criteria for support – particularly in the adoption of contextual admissions policies which utilise variable offers. Widening participation teams should have good dialogue with leaving care teams to support transitions.

## What do you hope this will achieve?

These changes would:

- ensure teachers understand what it means to be in care so they and their schools can deliver institution-wide approaches which keep children safe and happy in school, promoting stability;
- reduce the need for fixed-term exclusions and the use of other non-mainstream provision when it is not in children's best interests, particularly low-quality on-site provision for children in residential settings;
- prevent children from being refused or delayed entry to the school that is right for them, giving stability in terms of educational support and relationships;
- generate additional funding which allows Virtual Schools to better support care-experienced young people at crucial stages in their educational journeys;
- facilitate the take-up of apprenticeships and other training routes which are typically not financially viable given the low wage;
- rebalance the level of financial and practical support available so care leavers have the freedom to choose the option that's right for them, and particularly not pressured into higher education before it's right; and
- increase access to and successful participation in higher education, recognising the unique challenges and strengths of care-experienced young people and improving retention.

## Where children live

### What's your idea?

We propose a series of changes to reduce experiences of instability for children in care and ensure they are able to live somewhere which is safe and suitable for them:

1. There should be a national duty on the Government to ensure there are sufficient places for children in care to live and to coordinate the delivery of specialist provision alongside local authorities and others, including secure care.
2. A national strategy for children's residential care should be developed which includes the provision of capital funding to boost regulated sufficiency of the right type in the areas it's needed most.
3. A national foster carer and children's social care workforce recruitment drive should be launched which addresses current shortages, particularly in foster carers for sibling groups and teenagers and children's home managers and staff.
4. Existing commissioning and procurement practices should be reformed to ensure all potential suitable options are considered in placement decisions. The 'Care Bank' idea proposed by Children England offers one possible solution.
5. All children in care must be guaranteed care where they live, including in 'supported accommodation' settings. Usage of such settings should be rare and only when it aligns with a young person's needs and wishes. One obvious way forward is for these settings to follow the children's homes regulations and quality standards which already apply to age 18 and allow providers to recognise young people's growing autonomy.

### What do you hope this will achieve?

These changes would:

- ensure national oversight in sufficiency and provision of the places children in care live, reducing the extreme geographical variation and the number of children who have to live outside of their local area and away from the relationships and communities which matter to them. No children should be separated from their brothers and sisters unless absolutely necessary;
- deliver urgent investment to grow capacity within secure children's homes in England, ensuring those children with high levels of need have somewhere safe to live and preventing the use of unregistered provision or secure homes in Scotland;
- grow capacity of the right type to better reflect the demographics and needs of those currently in the care system (i.e. predominantly older children and teenagers);
- support commissioners, placement officers and the professionals working around each child to identify the most appropriate placements suited to their needs, rather than a restricted selection determined by cost or hierarchical approach; and
- reduce reliance on the use of independent and semi-independent settings which cannot currently provide care, or establish a right for children living in these settings to receive care that reflects what young people have told us they want at age 16 and 17.

## Leaving care

### What's your idea?

We propose that the existing structure and operation of the care system which asks children to 'leave care' at the age of 18 or earlier is radically reimagined, ending the 'care cliff' experienced by thousands every year.

We see the principles of a new approach including:

- flexibility for young people to continue in their existing living arrangements beyond the age of 18 (i.e. guaranteeing a Staying Put or equivalent opportunity for everyone);
- a focus on strengthening key relationships with family, peers and other trusted adults which promote interdependence;
- priority access to tailored mental health support and suitable long-term accommodation;
- lifelong support beyond the age of 25 which reflects the changing needs and strengths of people as they move further into adulthood, including when having children of their own;
- continuity of relationships with key professionals who are suitably trained and empowered to support young adults;
- a common core offer of support regardless of location; and
- the right to return to access support previously declined as circumstances change.

At the time of writing (mid-December 2021), we are finalising a design brief detailing what a new system of support for care-experienced young adults could look and feel like, identifying key elements of support, the tools most needed at this stage, and what role professionals and 'the system' have in developing these. This has been developed to support policy development alongside a small design group of care-experienced young people aged 18-28 within our 'Sky's the Limit' project. We plan to publish very soon.

### What do you hope this will achieve?

This change would:

- provide stability for young people at a time of likely change in other areas of their life as they move into early adulthood, promoting better health and wellbeing;
- ensure the continuity of key relationships both within and outside of the care system, providing the networks and support which all young adults rely upon;
- end the abrupt 'cliff edge' of support which forces young people into independent ways of living before they are ready, instead adapting with every person as an individual;
- reduce the postcode lottery of provision across local authorities which creates poor experiences;
- deliver more tailored support for people as they move through different life stages (i.e. finding space to understand and heal from earlier life trauma as a young adult); and
- improve longer-term health, employment and other socioeconomic outcomes, reducing the societal cost of supporting more acute and significant needs later in life. Recent research by Sacker et al (2021) has highlighted the "enduring negative legacy" of care in later life and has similarly called for extended support during the transition to adulthood.

# Youth justice

## What's your idea?

We propose a series of changes to improve experiences and outcomes for care-experienced young people involved in the youth and criminal justice systems:

1. The children's secure estate should be managed nationally by the Department for Education as part of the wider care system with a restorative, therapeutic and trauma-informed approach using secure children's homes as a model. Children in the care system and those involved in the youth justice system have significant overlap, both in terms of recorded representation and in terms of needs, experiences and support approaches required. These children would benefit from a more coordinated approach which doesn't separate them into different 'systems' but recognises this overlap to deliver stability, welfare and safety.
2. Police, prison and probation, and other frontline roles across youth and criminal justice should receive training exploring the experiences, needs and strengths of children in care and care leavers, how to support them, and how to identify stigmatising or discriminatory policy and practice.
3. In the interim, Ofsted should work together with HM Inspectorate of Prisons to scrutinise where children and young adults in custodial settings are not receiving their rights and entitlements, including but not limited to visits from professionals, care or pathway planning, financial and practical support, and resettlement when leaving. Too many young people are 'forgotten' by their local authority when in secure training centres or YOIs.

## What do you hope this will achieve?

Child imprisonment and youth justice involvement has fallen considerably in recent years which is welcome, but the child welfare system has failed to adapt to the growing numbers of children who have instead found themselves referred through children's social care pathways. These children often share very similar experiences of poverty, family breakdown, adverse childhood experiences, trauma etc and display similar needs and vulnerabilities, but we continue to approach them differently through very separate systems.

These change would:

- deliver a single unified approach to supporting children and young people centred around care, meeting their needs and better supporting them to heal from the trauma they have experienced;
- ensure professionals have greater knowledge of what it means to be in or leaving care and the vulnerable situations young people can find themselves in as a result, leading to better understanding and practice;
- in the interim, provide stronger challenge where young people in custodial settings are not found to be receiving their rights and entitlements; and
- better support young people leaving custodial settings so they can (re)connect with communities and professionals able to support them, reducing reoffending and promoting better long-term outcomes across health, employment and further criminal justice involvement.

# Mental health

## What's your idea?

We propose a series of changes to improve the mental health support available to children in care and care leavers:

1. Children in care should be prioritised for mental health assessments by specialist practitioners and receive priority access to CAMHS or other emotional wellbeing services with professionals who can tailor support to recognise their particular experiences. This should be available locally regardless of where children are living.
2. Young people in care who are accessing CAMHS should be able to do so beyond the age of 18 rather than be forced into a difficult and abrupt transition to adult services. Young adults who have left care should also be eligible to receive dedicated mental health support, aligning with the movement in the NHS Long Term to deliver a comprehensive 0-25 offer for young people. Some of these roles may be better placed within children in care or leaving care teams.
3. All frontline health professionals who may support care-experienced young people should receive training to understand what it means to be in care, and the impact of childhood trauma on mental health and wellbeing.

## What do you hope this will achieve?

These changes would:

- recognise in policy and practice what we know about care-experienced children and young people's higher levels of identified mental health difficulties and lower wellbeing, prioritising them for general services or providing specialist services where required;
- ensure children are not forced to the bottom of waiting lists for support if they are moved elsewhere or disadvantaged by living outside of their local area;
- reduce disruptive experiences where support is abruptly withdrawn following the move to being a 'care leaver', exacerbating other difficulties experienced at this time;
- address the gap in mental health support for care leavers who often find earlier trauma 'catching up' to them at this age and when they may feel more able to understand and reflect on childhood experiences;
- promote better mental health and wellbeing which allows children in care and care leavers to thrive in education, employment, in pursuing friendships and interests, and boosting experiences and outcomes in other areas of their lives; and
- deliver stronger understanding and, where helpful, tailored support which addresses some of the specific experiences and needs of children in care and care leavers.

## **Identity, stigma, community, and corporate parenting**

### **What's your idea?**

As secretariat to the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, Become has acted to coordinate its Spotlight Inquiry and fully support the forthcoming recommendations included in its final report covering how the care system can deliver a stronger focus on relationships and community connections, identity and belonging, corporate parenting, addressing stigma and its impacts, and wider structural reform to the care system which underpins this. The APPG's final report will be released very soon.