

Coronavirus and its impact on care-experienced young people

Become is the national charity for children in care and young care leavers. Since the coronavirus outbreak, we have moved to delivering our advice and support over the phone and online. In the month following lockdown, we worked with more than double the number of young people compared to the same period last year.

The coronavirus outbreak has significantly impacted on the lives of children in care and young care leavers, creating new challenges and exacerbating existing ones. This briefing outlines our key concerns and offers recommendations for how the government, local authorities and others can support this group.

View Become's coronavirus advice for care-experienced young people: becomecharity.org.uk/coronavirus

Key issues

Loneliness and mental health

Social distancing is having a significant impact on care-experienced young people's well-being, particularly those with existing mental health difficulties. Almost half of children in care have an existing mental health condition.ⁱ

Care leavers are more likely to live alone with smaller social networks and have no or limited internet access - 1 in 5 care leavers report feeling lonely often or always and the same proportion report not having internet access at home.ⁱⁱ Therefore, we welcome the [government's announcement of technology support for care-experienced young people](#). Internet access is essential to continue education, access support and remain in touch with friends, family and professionals.

For children in care, disrupted contact with families will have a huge impact on their emotional wellbeing and create significant challenges for carers in terms of managing behaviour and mental health. Staying in touch with parents, siblings and other important people helps children develop a sense of identity and belonging and promotes healthy and stable relationships, but not all households or children's homes have the means to make this happen digitally.

Safeguarding and stability

With only about 10% of vulnerable children in schoolⁱⁱⁱ, safeguarding children and young people where they live is paramount.

We are concerned about the potential for the lockdown to increase the number of children and young people in care reported as missing. This is a particular risk for the 32,110 children in out-of-area placements^{iv}, who are especially isolated from their family and social networks^v. Going missing during the crisis poses additional risks around health and the potential for criminalisation under new law enforcement powers.

New [emergency regulations](#) which came into force on 24 April 2020 risk reducing the level of care and support children and young people receive. We are hugely concerned about the ambiguity of these changes which include relaxing requirements around regular contact with social workers and reviewing children's care plans. In addition, government [coronavirus guidance for local authorities on children's social care](#) is concerning as it

suggests that local authorities can deviate from other statutory duties, including regular support to care leavers from Personal Advisers. This puts young people's rights and entitlements at risk with the potential to further exacerbate local variations in support.

Whilst we welcome the Education Secretary's [request to local authorities that no child is asked to leave care during this period](#), it is crucial that sufficient funding is provided to enable this to happen and that this practice does not prevent others (including children entering care) from accessing safe and caring places to live. We would like to see this principle of stability extended to all care-experienced young people facing major transitions – including those approaching the end of Staying Put arrangements at age 21 and those due to have support cut off at 25. The additional £3.2 billion for local authorities is a vital lifeline, but we believe funding for children's social care must be ring-fenced if it is to reach vulnerable children.

Financial security

Many young care leavers who contact us are concerned about having enough money to pay for the basics, such as food, household supplies and utilities. Most are not in a financial position to purchase sufficient food supplies if they need to self-isolate for 7-14 days, leading to risks for their own health and that of others if they are forced to leave their home when symptomatic.

We are deeply concerned about the potential for the current crisis to push more care-experienced young people into debt and rent arrears, with homelessness a very real risk for many. Care leavers are more likely to be in precarious employment situations and are less likely to have family support networks to fall back on. Current demand for Universal Credit is creating significant challenges for those who need timely support, and whilst the [uplift in the standard allowance](#) is welcome, the five-week wait for initial payment is an unnecessary delay to immediate financial relief.

Education

The current crisis will have longer-term impacts on the futures of care-experienced young people. Many older children in care have found their plans for future education, training or employment derailed. Given that children in care typically attain and progress less well than their peers at school^{vi}, it is imperative that they are not further disadvantaged by the current situation.

The awarding of a calculated grade has the potential to negatively impact care-experienced children whose previous results are often poor indicators of their future potential, especially as teachers can sometimes have negative perceptions of children in care.^{vii} This risks further limiting progression to further and higher education for a group who are already under-represented.

Many care-experienced students in higher education are struggling with social isolation as their friends have returned home, and they have significant worries about finances and accommodation, particularly over the summer months. Our joint survey of students in higher education without family support found that 61% of care-experienced students were very concerned about their finances and 55% about loneliness and isolation.^{viii} At this critical time in their lives, it is imperative that they get the support they need from government and colleges and universities so that their futures are not blighted by this crisis.

Recommendations

The government should:

To uphold care-experienced young people's rights and entitlements:

- provide targeted ring-fenced funding for children's social care so local authorities can meet existing statutory duties and promote stability for children and young people during this period.
- require that all significant changes to children and young people's lives, such as where they live or the care they receive, are delayed where appropriate.
- revoke the emergency regulations on children's social care, or at the very minimum provide clear guidance around their exceptional use and make a commitment to assess and publish the impact of the regulations, immediately withdrawing them if they are found to put children at risk of harm.
- significantly amend its coronavirus guidance on children's social care to ensure statutory duties to care-experienced young people continue to be met.

To guarantee financial security for care leavers:

- establish a dedicated helpline for care leavers to accelerate Universal Credit and benefit applications and suspend the five-week delay in initial payments.

To ensure care-experienced learners are not disadvantaged in education:

- provide clear guidance to ensure no decisions on the grades awarded to children in care are made without dialogue between schools or colleges, social workers and Virtual School staff.
- explore diverting teaching staff not required at schools to support known care-experienced children learning at home with their education and wellbeing.
- establish an emergency support fund for care-experienced students, and work alongside sector bodies to promote contextual admissions policies for care-experienced applicants, including the selective use of unconditional offers.

Local authorities should:

To reduce loneliness and experiences of poor mental health:

- increase contact between care leavers and Personal Advisers, including offering support around how to manage loneliness and isolation.
- ensure timely provision of internet access and equipment to all care leavers who need it as well as foster families, children's homes and other places where children may live.
- guarantee the continuation of contact/family time in accordance with care plans and contact orders through non-face to face means .

To deliver consistent support for all children in care and care leavers:

- provide coronavirus advice and information tailored to the local area, including through Local Offers.
- prioritise young people placed outside of their local area and in unregulated settings for support where additional social work capacity has been sourced and continue to guarantee all young people who go missing a return home interview.
- proactively approach care leavers who are no longer in receipt of support but who may desperately need this now and don't know they are eligible or who to contact.
- relax restrictive policies around the use of Setting Up Home Allowances and other entitlements.

Contact

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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 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-the-health-and-wellbeing-of-looked-after-children--2>

ⁱⁱ <https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/OLBC-Snapshot-online-2018.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings>

^{iv} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2018-to-2019>

^v <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/no-place-at-home.pdf>

^{vi} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/outcomes-for-children-looked-after-by-las-31-march-2018>

^{vii} <https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/for-professionals/resources/teachers-who-care-2018/>

^{viii} <https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/for-professionals/resources/supporting-care-experienced-and-estranged-students-in-higher-education-responding-to-covid-19/>