

## Rights and entitlements session – Thurs 5 Aug 21

This session was delivered by Evie, George, Jasmine, Henri and Sam and welcomed 23 attendees in total, including Josh, Duncan and Dan from the Review team and care-experienced young people and young adults from areas including (but not limited to) London, the South East, the West Midlands, the East Midlands, Yorkshire, and the North East.

### 1. What does care mean to you?

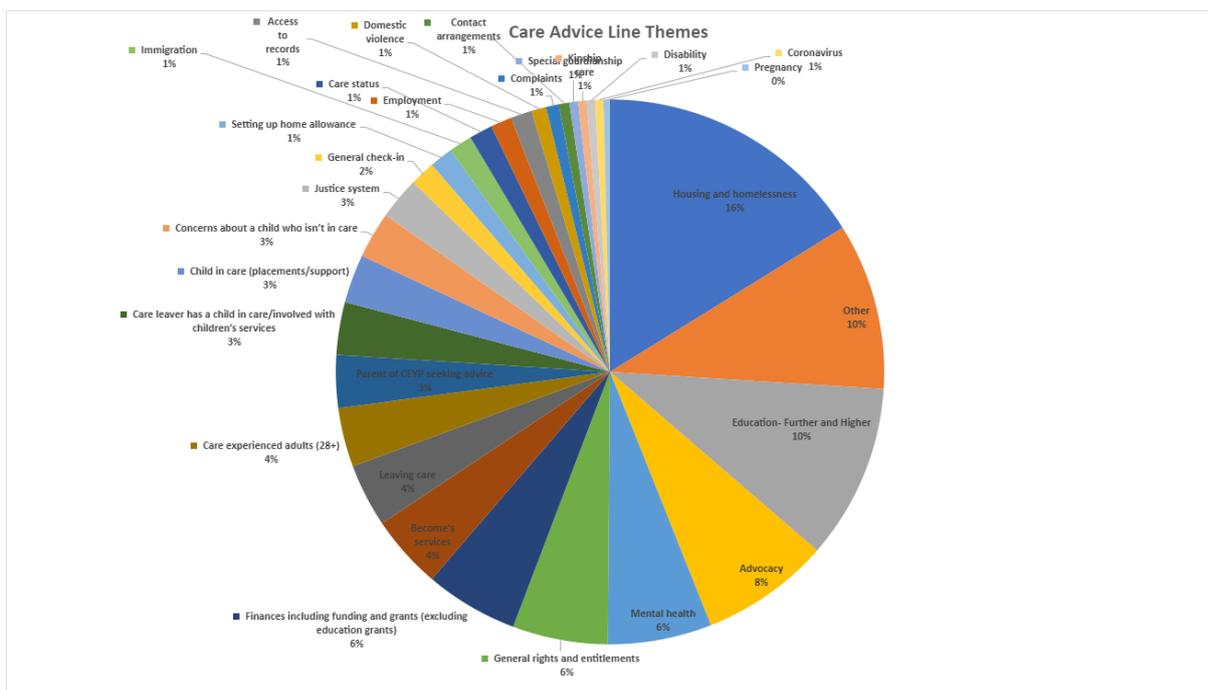
As an icebreaker activity, participants were asked to contribute to a Mentimeter word cloud about what care meant to them.

## What does care mean to you ?



### 2. Queries from Become’s Care Advice Line

Becca (Advice and Support Officer) shared the most common things she hears from children in care and care leavers (and those supporting them) around their rights and entitlements on Become’s Care Advice Line.



## Key points:

### Awareness of rights and entitlements

- Young people often don't know what they're entitled to: *"I often hear young people say about something that is a clear legal entitlement 'I didn't know about that', 'no one told me that' or 'you always have to find out for yourself'."* Information clearly isn't being shared with young people as it should be.
- The local offer is a clear example of this. The best local offers are those that are easily readable and accessible online, have been designed with the support of care-experienced young people, have detailed information on support, and are updated regularly.

### Personal Advisors

- Many care leavers who contact Become haven't had recent contact with their Personal Advisor, don't know who they are and have no contact information for them. Reaching out to the local authority to get a PA allocated can be a slow and complicated process despite the urgent need for support. In one example, a young person was fleeing domestic abuse and struggling with their mental health, and yet it took over a month of persistent referrals to get a PA allocated. Some young people are only given numbers for duty teams that never get answered or have no contact details for their leaving care teams.
- Good Personal Advisors are those who check in regularly, who are easily contactable, willing to advocate for the young people they support, and are well-informed on local and national support that care leavers can access.

### Pathway Plans

- Guidance is clear that young people should be at the heart of Pathway Planning, and Plans should be reviewed at least every six months or when the young person requests a review to reflect how individuals' circumstances evolve and change. However, many care leavers who contact Become haven't heard of this document, or haven't seen it for some time, with Plans created without their knowledge and consent. This is not only a breach of their rights but then prevents other support from being considered to help them fulfil their goals in work, study etc. In one situation, a young person had their Pathway Plan written entirely in English and never translated, despite having very limited understanding of English.
- Good Pathway Planning involves early planning long before a young person approaches leaving care age, and where young people are involved in discussing and writing what goes in the plan, and where they're regularly reviewed to recognise changes in care leavers' lives.

### Housing

- Issues around housing and homelessness represent 16% of all initial enquiries to the Care Advice Line; one of the most common questions is 'where will I live when I turn 18?'. Become hears from young people who are homeless or worried they may become homeless, who have spent years sofa-surfing with friends, or who have spent time living in parks or on the streets. Some live in housing that isn't safe or suitable, with abusive neighbours, or sharing with other individuals who may put them at risk.
- Often, young people have not received any advice on how to access housing after 18, with some told to present as homeless at 18, or forced to move back into the family home that, just weeks beforehand, they were not allowed to live in as it was deemed unsafe.



- It's important (and often necessary) to get things in writing to ensure you receive your rights and entitlements: *"When they say things verbally there's no way to hold them to account... The only way I've ever got anything is because I know I had a paper trail."* Ensuring that promises and commitments are written into the Pathway Plan is the only way to ensure the local authority follows through: *"Social services will promise some things to keep you sweet."*
- Although many were familiar with these rights and entitlements now, they weren't during their time in care or when they needed them the most: *"I didn't know about these until it was too late"*. Only once they've spoken with other care leavers years afterwards did they recognise how this awareness may have prevented issues from arising earlier: *"You can't access something if you don't know about it."*
- There's a postcode lottery not just in the breadth of entitlements, but also the amount or the content of these, and in how they're delivered. Differing practices between local authorities makes for unfair and seemingly random variations which aren't tailored towards the needs of each individual child or young person.
- The different legal statuses of care leavers (i.e. qualifying care leaver, former relevant child) makes for an additionally complex picture of support. The 'two-tier' system often denies valuable support to those who weren't in care for 'long enough' or at the 'right times', and there is too much discretion around what support is available from local authorities for those who aren't former relevant children but would benefit from some support.

#### 4. Where do you get information from?

Participants were asked to consider all of the different sources they use for getting information – both on the care system and more broadly – and to add these on a spectrum of warm sources (i.e. informal, personal etc) to cold sources (i.e. formal, professional etc). They were asked to reflect on where they prefer to get information from and which warm or cold sources they trust the most, and if the care system was over-reliant on one end of the warm-cold spectrum to provide information.



Key points from participants:

- It's all about trust – you will take on board information from places and people that you trust and have a relationship with. Without that trust the information doesn't work, but trust can be found in different places (e.g. people and places both in and outside of the care system). *"I'd love to trust what my LA say but they've only ever provided evidence that they lie to save money."*
- The timing of the information is just as important as where it comes from. Many don't get the information they need at the time they need it, which means they don't know about it or can't remember it. It's important for this to be a process as much as it is a product – i.e. a local offer document is only really useful if there's someone who can sit down with you and go through it, rather than just sending a PDF to you by email.
- Often, care-experienced people are over-reliant on information sources they find themselves (e.g. by going through documents on gov.uk) or from other care-experienced people (e.g. through social media) or charities operating outside of the care system (e.g. Become or Coram Voice), typically because they don't get the information they need from formal sources 'in' care. It shouldn't be that you need to find 'external' organisations to get the information and support you need.

## **5. How can we improve awareness, content and delivery of key rights and entitlements?**

Participants went into smaller breakout rooms to look at 2-3 particular rights and entitlements and discuss their views and recommendations for how to improve these and ensure local authorities kept their promises to children in care and care leavers.

### **Key points and recommendations from participants:**

- Children in care and care leavers need to be told earlier in their care journeys about what options are available to them and what's to come, rather than expecting them to be 'involved' in decisions they've only just been asked about, and professionals need stronger knowledge of this: *"There's no blueprint... if they don't know what's happening, we don't know what's happening."* / *"Don't leave things until the last minute."*
- Too often, planning in the care system is about *what* the future might look like, but without the detail on *how* to actually get there. Pathway Plans especially must include what young people and their supporters must do to get from point A to point B, not simply describe what point B is.
- Housing is a crucial part of care leavers' lives; having a stable base and security is closely linked with your mental health. Council tax exemptions should be automatic, without the need to make contact with a different local authority team or fight for it.
- Children in care and care leavers won't know and understand their rights and entitlements if the professionals supporting them don't either. Social workers and personal advisors need better training on policy, legislation and what local authorities promise them.
- Like care leavers have the local offer, there should be a handbook or something similar when you enter care which details the rights and entitlements you have in that local authority, how to access them and who to contact – something to always go back to when you need it. This must be
- There shouldn't be different 'types' of care leaver with different eligibility for particular rights and entitlements. Local authorities shouldn't have different levels of discretionary support depending on the length of time or age you were in care.

- Advocacy is a really important tool in ensuring young people get what they're entitled to. This should be offered to all children and young people and properly independent from the local authority, so they are comfortable challenging them when needed.
- Local authorities must ensure that the right for care leavers to access their files is upheld, without missing pages or redacted information unless strictly necessary, and support available to help people understand what is included.