

**T  TIME
TO SHOW
WE CARE**

A manifesto for care-experienced
children & young people

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‘Would this be appropriate for my child?’ should be the litmus test. It’s about making decisions in our best interests.

- Care-experienced young person, aged 21

The next Government needs to deliver change for care-experienced children and young people.

With record numbers of children in care and decades of under-investment children's social care in our country is at crisis point. There are 84,000 children in care in England right now, and far too many of them are being let down by a care system that is not meeting their needs.

Not enough safe, stable and suitable homes means too many children are forced to live apart from brothers and sisters and face daily instability as they're moved miles away from everything they know, sometimes multiple times a year, and often without warning.

Decisions on where children live are being driven by financial pressures and what is available rather than by a child's wishes and feelings and what is in their best interests.

Young people are made to leave care before they are ready, often on their 18th birthday - and for many even younger. They face a care cliff of support, expected to become independent overnight without a safety

net to fall back on, leaving a disproportionate number facing homelessness.

Children coming into care have experienced trauma, but our health, education, welfare, justice and immigration systems aren't responding effectively to their needs.

Far too many young people tell us that the care system is disrupting their education, impacting their mental health, breaking their connections and leaving them isolated and without a voice.



What we are calling on party leaders to do:

1. Urgently reform the care system so every child has the love, care and stability they need
2. Make children's relationships a key consideration in all decisions
3. End the care cliff so young people can make a positive start to adulthood
4. Improve the support provided to children and young people by other public services
5. Put young people's voices at the heart of the care system



1. Urgently reform the care system so every child has the love, care and stability they need

The number of children in care has been steadily rising over the last decade and right now there are 84,000 children in care in England, a 23% increase since 2013.

Rising poverty, children with more complex needs and older teenagers entering a care system that was never designed for them, is leaving local authorities struggling.

Budget cuts, workforce challenges, a shortage of foster carers and more homes being provided by profit-driven companies are leaving children's needs at the bottom of the pile.

We need to see significant reform, sustainable investment and stronger accountability so that children in care can live in stable homes that meet their needs.



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If we want to see the best outcomes for all care-experienced children and young people then we have to keep them within their local area, keep those relationships intact, keep that sense of community, so they become the best person they can be.

- Kevin, a young care-experienced campaigner

The next Government must:

- Invest in and develop a national strategy to increase the supply of residential and foster care and address the issue of profiteering in the provision of children's social care
- Commit to stop children being placed miles from home (unless in their best interests)
- Strengthen accountability by reporting on and monitoring sufficiency locally and nationally

2. Make children's relationships a key consideration in all decisions

Many children in care face disruptions in the relationships that matter to them, with 37% separated from siblings, rising to 78% in residential care. They lack support to stay connected with their brothers and sisters and the care system itself can undermine their ability to form and sustain new and existing connections with the people that matter to them as they grow up.



Instability, inconsistent relationships, and a lack of control before, during and after their time in care can leave children and young people disconnected from their community and struggling with their identity.

We need to ensure that care-experienced children and young people have strong and stable relationships with the people that matter most to them.

“ I was thinking how will I see my mum, my sisters, keep in touch with my friends? All the emotions together made me burst out in tears.

- Jade, a young care-experienced campaigner

The next Government must:

- Make relationships a key consideration in decisions: including with birth families, former foster and other carers, friends and trusted adults
- Prevent children being separated from siblings (except in exceptional circumstances): give contact with siblings the same priority as with birth parents in law and guidance

3. End the care cliff so young people can make a positive start to adulthood

Every year thousands of 18-year-olds face a care cliff where important support and relationships disappear and they are expected to leave care and become independent overnight, often before they feel ready. For some this can start even earlier at age 16 or 17 when they move into 'supported accommodation'.

Trying to access housing, manage bills and the cost-of-living

crisis, whilst also continuing their education, sometimes in the middle of exams, or starting work without a safety net to fall back on is a massive challenge. Many of those leaving care will start their young adult life in poverty, and at greater risk of mental ill health and homelessness.

We need to end the care cliff so young people are supported into adulthood at a pace that is right for them.

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You're given a safety net in care, but at 18, you can suddenly be homeless.

- Matt, a young care-experienced campaigner



The next Government must:

- Guarantee that all children receive care up to 18
- Make Staying Put and Staying Close schemes fully funded, opt-out legal entitlements for all young people in care up to 25, so young people can stay in their homes or connected to support, with the option to return to care if they have left and things don't work out
- Tackle homelessness amongst young care leavers: amend legislation to make all care leavers up to 25 'priority need' under homelessness legislation, remove the local connection and homelessness intentionality rules for care leavers, and introduce tenancy deposit and guarantor schemes in all areas
- Improve financial support to young people leaving care: extend the over-25 rate of universal credit to care leavers, increase financial entitlements with inflation and exempt care leavers from council tax
- Strengthen the role of Personal Advisers to improve the support provided to young people, including by introducing standardised training, development & qualifications

4. Improve the support provided to children and young people by other public services

Care-experienced children and young people come into contact with a broad range of public services, from health, education and transport services to the welfare, criminal justice and immigration systems.

These services can provide crucial support, but can also be inconsistent, inadequate or even harmful. Those with care experience tend to face disproportionately negative outcomes, impacting their lives and opportunities, and inadequate support for care-experienced children and young people is estimated to cost the economy £9 billion annually.

“ I want to be able to feel safe and secure growing up and if it means giving different organisations that duty of care I would.
- A young person we work with



We need improved support for care-experienced children and young people across society to enable them to have happy and healthy lives.

The next Government must:

- Legislate to extend corporate parenting responsibilities across the public sector
- Improve access to and funding of high quality and trauma-informed Mental Health Services for all care-experienced young people
- Introduce mandatory training for health, education, immigration and law enforcement professionals around the needs of children in care, including an understanding of childhood trauma
- Ensure no care-experienced young people in or leaving custodial settings is forgotten by their home local authority – there must be regular contact with children’s services and early help with resettlement
- Guarantee all children in care receive full-time, quality education in a school most suited to their needs

5. Put young people's voices at the heart of the care system

We know from the brilliant children and young people we work with the issues that they want to see addressed – they want an end to the instability children in care experience, an end to the care cliff of support when they turn 18, and they want to feel safe and secure and supported by society.

We need to ensure the voices of children and young people affected by care are heard, so changes can be made.



The next Government must:

- Listen to care-experienced children and young people before, during and after making decisions about reform and ensure young people have ways to hold Government to account
- Guarantee the right to advocacy: roll-out independent 'opt-out' advocacy to all care-experienced children and young people to age 25

The next government must have higher aspirations for care-experienced children and young people and deliver meaningful change.

It's time to show we care.



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‘This isn’t just a charity saying ‘we think you can do better’. It is a young person saying things like ‘When I was moved over 100 miles away from my support network, this is the impact it had on my education, my mental health and my sense of loneliness and this is why the system needs to change.

- Jo, Campaigns & Participation Manager

Become is the national charity for care-experienced children and young people. We put young people at the heart of everything we do, supporting them to get the help they need now and empowering them to bring about change in their own lives, the care system and society.

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

This report was created in-house at Become.