

IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S CORNER: HOW EFFECTIVE PERSONAL ADVISER SUPPORT CAN HELP **END THE CARE CLIFF**



September 2026

The first national picture of the
Personal Adviser workforce.

BECOME IN CARE.
LEAVING CARE.
WE CARE.

10. The following table shows the number of people who have been convicted of a crime in the United States since 1970, by race and sex. The data are from the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of the Census, and the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Education Statistics.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For young people leaving care, having the right person in their corner can make all the difference.

Leaving care is a huge transition. Young people are often expected to leave the place they call home and live independently at 18, sometimes even earlier – years before most young people leave the family home. They do this without the same financial, practical or emotional safety net that most young people can rely on.

This is the care cliff: when essential support and relationships can fall away just as young people face some of the biggest changes and challenges of their lives.

Personal Advisers (PAs) should be one of the most important safeguards against that cliff. Every eligible young person leaving care should have a PA to help them plan for adulthood, access their rights and entitlements, navigate services and provide practical and emotional support.

But the quality of this support depends on the quality of the relationship. At their best, PAs provide stability, trust and the reassurance that someone is in their corner. They help young people build confidence, overcome barriers and navigate some of life's most significant moments.

“ I’m actually thinking about lifelong linking her, because, you know, like, she’s had that much of an impact in my life that ... I don’t want that relationship to stop. So I think a PA who has positive support is someone who ends up becoming a key person in a young person’s life.

- Care-experienced young person

Our research shows that too many PAs are being asked to do this without the time, skills, knowledge, confidence or specialist support they need.

At Become, through our work with care-experienced young people and leaving care professionals, we know that young people experience different levels and quality of support when leaving care. It impacts their safety, self-confidence and broader outcomes. Through this research, we set out to better understand what works and what needs to change to improve support for care-experienced young people. This research has included:

- Freedom of information (FOI) requests to all tier-one local authorities in England and the Department for Education.
- Focus groups with care-experienced young people, PAs and Leaving Care Managers.

Key findings

Our research provides the first national picture of PAs. We can report that:

- The Department for Education does not collect, require or hold data about the leaving care workforce, including the total number of PAs employed, or the overall funding settlement for leaving care services.
- In 2025, there were around 2,500 full-time equivalent PAs employed across the country, an average of 18 per local authority.
- On average, in 2025, each PA was supporting 20 young people.
- There is wide variation in caseloads across the country: a fifth of all local authorities had an average caseload of more than 25 young people, whilst the average caseload across one local authority was as high as 36.
- The highest individual caseload reported was 46 young people for one PA.
- Two-thirds of local authorities (67%) did not require PAs to have any accredited training or qualifications.
- One in eight PAs left their role in the financial year of 2024-25, leading young people to lose a key trusted adult relationship.

These findings sit alongside what we heard from young people and professionals, and it's clear that the system is not providing PAs with the conditions they need to build and sustain the relationships that young people rely on.

Too often, systemic and structural barriers get in the way of good practice and the ability of PAs and Leaving Care teams to provide effective support to young people with a diverse range of needs. It creates significant variation in the quality, type and consistency of support that young people leaving care receive.

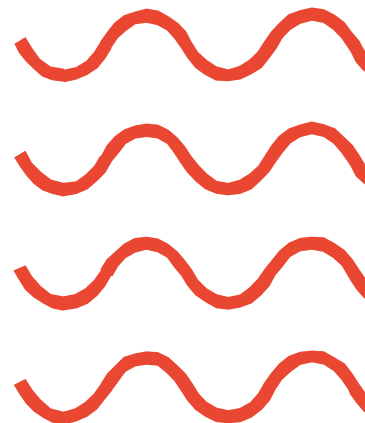
PAs don't have enough time

Unsustainable caseloads and rising complexity of needs mean that PAs don't have enough time to provide individual young people with the consistent, person-centred, relationship-based support they need.

On average, PAs were supporting 20 young people in 2025. A fifth of local authorities had an average caseload of more than 25, while the highest reported individual caseload was 46.

Time is what allows a PA to know a young person, build trust, respond when things go wrong and be there for the moments that matter. But PAs are also dealing with vacancies, sickness, long travel distances and growing administrative demands.

The result is a system where PAs can be forced to choose between supporting one young person through a crisis and having time for everyone else.



PAs don't have the tools they need

The lack of professional standards and consistent role-specific training or qualification requirements means PAs don't always have the skills, knowledge and confidence to support young people with diverse needs effectively.

Over half of local authorities (59%) did not provide PAs with any accredited training or qualifications.

PAs are expected to navigate a wide range of systems – including housing, benefits, education, employment, health, immigration and criminal justice – while building trusting relationships with young people. Yet there is no consistent national baseline for the knowledge, skills and training needed to do the job.

A lack of specialist knowledge or capacity can make it difficult to support young people with the most significant needs or challenges. This includes those in criminal justice settings, those subject to immigration controls, or those living far away from their home local authority.

The workforce is too often treated as an afterthought

The absence of clear pay and progression opportunities, alongside insufficient professional recognition and support, negatively impacts morale and motivation. This contributes to a high turnover of PAs, creating greater instability for young people.

One in eight PAs left their role in the financial year of 2024-25.

When a PA leaves, it's not simply a staffing change. For a young person, it can mean losing a trusted adult and starting again with someone new. For young people who may already have experienced repeated changes in the adults around them, this can deepen feelings of being let down or abandoned and make it harder to trust new professionals.

The system is creating a postcode lottery

Reduced service capacity can leave young people without appropriate support at important moments in their lives or key transition points. This includes young people not being allocated a PA until they're 18, or being inappropriately 'aged-out' of support at 21, going against local authority's statutory duties.

The pathway planning process can make this worse. When it becomes rigid, bureaucratic and focused on paperwork rather than what matters to a young person, it can undermine relationship-based practice and the relevance and quality of support.

Young people should have a pathway plan that helps them build a positive future - not a checklist they have to complete.

“[PAs] hold the same risk that was at 17 and 11 months. You know, there's not much difference in terms of the risk that they are dealing with, and like has already been said, with far less framework around a child you know, under 18.

– Leaving Care Manager

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Where a young person enters care should not determine the quality of support they receive when they leave it. Yet our research found significant variation in the quality, type and consistency of leaving care support across England.

This is a postcode lottery.

Young people are paying the price

When the system doesn't give PAs enough time, knowledge, skills or confidence, young people pay the price.

They can miss out on important opportunities, essential support and their legal rights and entitlements. This can:

- Negatively impact on care leavers' employment and career development, their housing or financial security, their mental health and well-being, their social connections and their safety.
- Lead to young people feeling alone, unsupported or isolated, compounding the care cliff they may have faced when leaving care.
- Lead to serious risks or needs escalating or not being identified, or leaving young people in danger of serious harm, as highlighted in the recent review on early deaths of care leavers.

The impact is also relationship-based. When PAs are unavailable, inconsistent or leave their roles, young people can lose trust in leaving care services and professionals. We've heard how young people have felt let down or abandoned, compounding trauma they may have experienced before or during care with a revolving door of trusted adults in their life. It makes them feel less safe to be vulnerable or form new trusting relationships.

The consequences are significant and can be lifelong. The adverse outcomes experienced by care-experienced young people are estimated to cost the Treasury £9 billion per year.

“ I have more chance at seeing the same person at my local maccies for the next 2 years than my PA.

- Care-experienced young person

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Investing in Personal Advisers is investing in young people

Over the past two years, the Government has introduced welcome investment and reforms to improve support for young people leaving care, as part of its mission to break down barriers to opportunity.

“ Relationships are everything. I mean, obviously policies and pathways matter but the stability of a committed adult could be quite significant in your life.

- Care-experienced young person

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But one crucial part of the system has received far less attention: the workforce delivering much of this support.

PAs are at the heart of leaving care support, yet they remain a largely forgotten workforce, with limited recognition, oversight and investment.

Reform to leaving care services is long overdue.

There is now a clear opportunity to strengthen the foundations of leaving care support.

If government wants to break down barriers to opportunity for care-experienced young people, it must invest in the people supporting them.

That means giving PAs the time, skills, confidence and specialist support to do their jobs well. It means giving Leaving Care teams the funding and capacity they need to recruit, develop and retain a strong workforce. And it means designing the system around what young people actually need: consistent, person-centred, relationship-based support.



OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

We're calling on the Department for Education to develop and implement a national strategy for the leaving care workforce, ensuring they have the skills, knowledge, confidence, and resources to provide all young people leaving care with the consistent, person-centred, relationship-based support they need.

We recommend that this includes measures to:

1. Provide an increased, sustainable and ringfenced funding settlement for Leaving Care teams to enable them to recruit, develop and retain a sufficient PA workforce.
2. Establish national professional standards and qualification requirements, with all PAs required to have or be working towards a PA role-specific Level 4 qualification within the first 12 months.
3. Introduce a maximum caseload of 20 young people, starting from aged 16, per PA, with reductions where they are supporting young people who require additional support or live far away from their home local authority.
4. Introduce national pay scales and progression routes for PAs, alongside a new professional membership body, to professionalise the role and strengthen retention.
5. Improve support for local authorities to increase specialist knowledge, resource and capacity to meet local needs, including by strengthening joint working with key professionals and services.
6. Strengthen statutory guidance on the PA role, including how statutory rights and entitlements should be provided to young people aged 16-17, and those over 21; and how PAs can better support young people to build and maintain trusting, enduring relationships.
7. Collect and publish national data on the leaving care workforce, including the number of PA changes that young people experience, caseloads, vacancies and turnover to monitor progress, and improve evidence-based policy-making.
8. Strengthen statutory guidance on pathway planning, making it more relevant and responsive to what matters most to young people – including their aspirations, relationships, well-being and security – rather than being seen as a rigid checklist.

Every young person leaving care needs a trusted person in their corner. The system needs to give PAs the support to be that person.



INTRODUCTION

Every year, thousands of young people aged 18 or younger face a care cliff when leaving the care system. Essential support and relationships fall away and they're expected to become 'independent' overnight.

Most young people can continue to rely on family for practical, emotional and financial support well into adulthood, whereas care-experienced young people are expected to live independently much earlier and with fewer people to turn to when things go wrong.

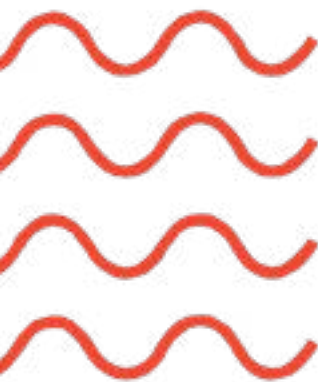
In our previous *End the Care Cliff* report,¹ we highlighted some of the impacts that this cliff edge has for young people, including the disproportionately high levels of homelessness and housing insecurity they experience.

Since the publication of that report in 2024, the Government has introduced several welcome reforms aimed at reducing housing insecurity and improving overall support for care leavers, as part of its mission to break down barriers to opportunity. These include:

- Introducing legislation to extend Staying Close support to care leavers across the country.
- Introducing new corporate parenting responsibilities for all Government Departments and a range of public sector bodies to improve support and services for care-experienced young people.
- And the removal of the local area connection test and homelessness intentionality rules for care leavers.

We've been working closely with officials in the Department for Education and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in the development and introduction of these reforms.

These changes have the potential to make a real difference to the lives of care-experienced children and young people. However, one crucial part of the system has been largely absent from national policy efforts: the Personal Advisers (PAs) and leaving care workforce who provide much of the day-to-day support that young people rely on.



For many care-experienced young people, their PA is the person they turn to for help with housing, education, employment, benefits, health services and other parts of adult life. PAs are the face of leaving care support, and, for some young people, one of the few trusted adults who remains alongside them after they leave care.

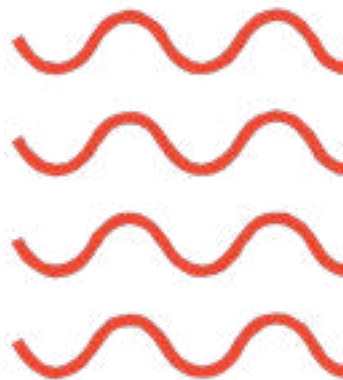
At Become, through our direct work with care-experienced young people and leaving care professionals, we've long been aware of systemic, cultural and deep-rooted barriers that impact on Personal Advisers' capacity to provide the support young people need. This includes working with high numbers of young people, workforce instability, inconsistent training, limited specialist support and wider pressures facing leaving care services.

¹ Become (2024), [End the Care Cliff: Support Every Step of the Way](#).

This report explores those challenges in more detail. Drawing on the experiences of care-experienced young people, Personal Advisers and Leaving Care Managers, it examines what's helping PAs support young people effectively, where the current system is falling short and what needs to change.

This research comes at an important time. The rollout of Staying Close and the introduction of new corporate parenting responsibilities across the public sector creates a significant opportunity to strengthen support for care leavers. But these reforms will only achieve their full potential if they're matched by investment in the workforce responsible for delivering much of that support.

If we want to ensure that every care-experienced young person can access consistent, high-quality support as they move into adulthood, we need a stronger and more sustainable leaving care system. That means investing in PAs, strengthening leaving care services and ensuring that young people receive relationship-based, person-centred support, wherever they live, and whatever challenges they face.



PERSONAL ADVISERS ARE CRITICAL

Personal Advisers and Leaving Care teams provide an essential role in supporting care leavers.

While most young people in England now leave the family home at around 24, young people leaving care are expected to live independently from 18, sometimes even earlier². They have to take on significant responsibilities at a much younger age and without the same family safety net to fall back on when things go wrong.

PAs are there to help young people navigate this huge change. They support young people to find and maintain suitable housing, access their rights and entitlements, pursue education and employment, manage their finances and look after their health and well-being. They're a key adult in care leavers lives, provide emotional support, and help young people build relationships and connections in their communities.

All eligible care leavers aged 16 to 25 are legally entitled to PA support and should know who their PA is and how to contact them³.

A key part of a PAs role is helping young people develop and review their pathway plan. This should set out their aspirations, needs, and the support they need to build the foundations for adult life and a positive future. This personalised plan should be developed with the young person from 16 onwards, and one of the most important roles of pathway planning is working with the young person and housing services to identify and secure appropriate housing, prior to them leaving care. This is intended to ensure that no young person faces a "cliff edge" of support at 18, or leaves care without a safe and suitable place to live. PAs are responsible for continuously monitoring, reviewing and implementing pathway plans to ensure support keeps pace with a young person's changing life⁴.

The PAs role should adapt as a young person's circumstances change. Good PA support is not simply about completing tasks or coordinating services. It's about understanding the young person, helping them navigate challenges, and supporting them across a range of areas to build the skills, relationships and confidence they need to thrive⁵.

2 Office for National Statistics (2022), [Milestones: Journeying Through Modern Life](#).

3 To be eligible for support from a Personal Adviser a young person must be between the ages of 16-25, have been in care at some point after their 16th birthday, and have been in care for at least 13 weeks since they were 14 (this does not have to have been for a continuous period). For care-experienced young people over the age of 21, they are entitled to support from a personal adviser when they request this. For a more detailed summary of care leaver entitlements, see Foley, N, House of Commons Library (2025), [Support for Care Leavers](#)

4 Department for Education (2015), [The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers](#).

5 Statutory guidance states that the role of the PA is to: "Act as a focal point for the young person, ensuring that they are provided with the practical and emotional support they need to make a successful transition to adulthood, either directly or through helping the young person to build a positive social network around them. Throughout their transition to adulthood and independent life, care leavers should be able to rely on consistent support from their PA, who is the designated professional responsible providing and/or co-ordinating the support that the young person needs. This includes taking responsibility for monitoring, reviewing and implementing the young person's pathway plan." [Extending Personal Adviser support to all care leavers to age 25](#).

Young people need Personal Advisers they can trust

We've heard from young people that when they have a trusted PA and the right support, it can be life changing.

Throughout our conversations with care-experienced young people, we heard that the way support is provided matters just as much as the support itself. Specific themes of trust, consistency, being treated with respect, and having shared experiences, showed how these qualities can make young people more comfortable with the transition out of care. Trust was particularly important. Young people valued PAs who were honest about what they could and couldn't do, explained things clearly and didn't make promises they couldn't keep.



“ If something doesn't go well be honest with me. Don't give me an illusion or fake hope just be clear with me, even if it's going to be really bad just say it. I can take it ”

– Care-experienced young person

For many young people having this transparency meant that they could communicate openly with their PA and trust that the PA wasn't making false promises. Young people are very familiar with the challenges of navigating systems and services and understood that PAs couldn't always solve a problem. But they wanted to be able to trust that their PA would help them work through it, even if they didn't have all the answers.

Consistency was as important. Children in care face great instability and many young people have experienced changes in the professionals supporting them while they were in care. Around a quarter (24%) of children in care will have three or more social workers during the year⁶. This makes having a consistent professional while leaving care even more important for young people.

Young people spoke positively about the benefits of consistency in communication too. They valued PAs who remembered important details about their lives and were easy to reach out to. But also, who let them know when they were unavailable and who they should contact instead.

A consistent relationship can become much more than a professional service. For some young people, their PA becomes a trusted and important adult in their life.

“ When I first moved into my own place. She got me a little card, you know, and she wrote, like, a really nice thing in my card. And yeah....I'm actually thinking about lifelong linking her, because, you know, like, she's had that much of an impact in my life that, like she's now, a valuable adult in my life, I don't know if that makes sense, but like, she's a person in my life now, like, I don't want that relationship to stop. So I think a PA who has positive support is someone who ends up becoming a key person in a young person's life

- **Care-experienced young person**

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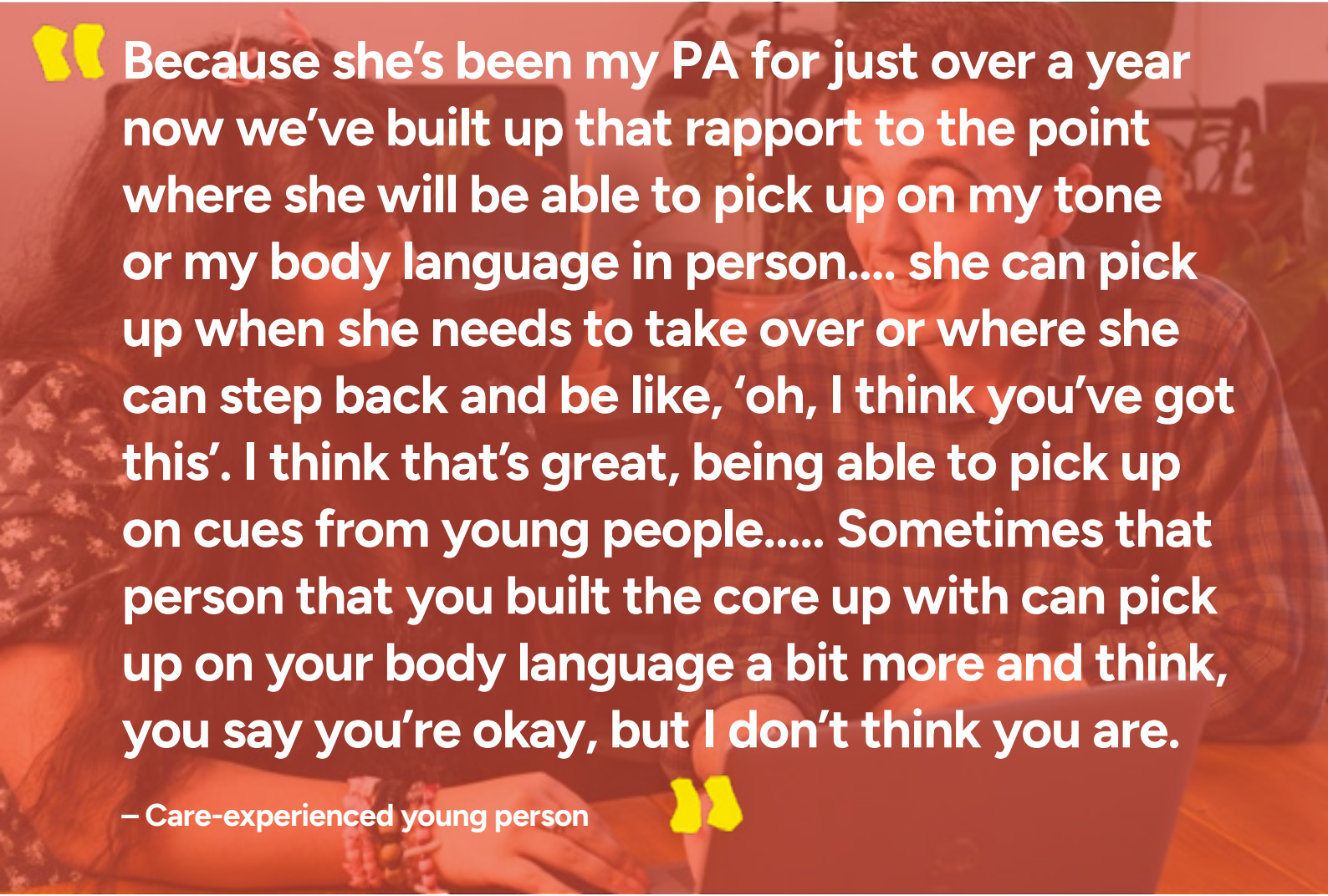
Supporting young people as adults

Young people also told us that good PA support means finding the right balance between offering help and respecting and listening to them as adults.

PAs need to give young people space to make their own decisions while being there to provide guidance, practical support and advocacy when needed. Young people valued having space to identify what type of support they needed and to understand what they were entitled to without feeling monitored or judged.

⁶ Department for Education (2025), [Stability Measures for Children Looked After in England: Reporting Year 2025](#)

This requires PAs knowing when to step in and to step back. Over time, a strong relationship can help a PA understand a young person's communication, behaviour and individual ways of showing when they need support.



“ Because she’s been my PA for just over a year now we’ve built up that rapport to the point where she will be able to pick up on my tone or my body language in person.... she can pick up when she needs to take over or where she can step back and be like, ‘oh, I think you’ve got this’. I think that’s great, being able to pick up on cues from young people..... Sometimes that person that you built the core up with can pick up on your body language a bit more and think, you say you’re okay, but I don’t think you are.

– Care-experienced young person

Young people also spoke positively about having PAs who understood their experiences. Some valued working with PAs who had personal experience of care, residential care, or who had previous experience working closely with care-experienced young people. This could help young people feel better understood and reduce the need to repeatedly explain their experiences.

We also heard examples of good practice where PAs were doing a brilliant job in helping young people thrive in adult life. For example, some PAs were critical in helping young people search for jobs, education, or training opportunities. They would consistently share opportunities to expand young people's social and professional networks and even travel with them to relevant opportunities. A well-rounded approach made a big difference as well. Some PAs took the time to support every part of the young person's life, enabling them to cook meals or learn a new language, set up their home, or sitting with them to go over budgeting tools.

Ultimately, young people want PAs who are approachable, trustworthy and dependable. Who communicate clearly and honestly, and who see them as individuals with their own strengths, ambitions and experiences.

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She was very supportive. I got to travel a lot, because she encouraged a lot of extracurricular stuff. She was like, you want to learn a new language? Let's do it. Like, what can I do? How can we help you? And I think that is also really positive, because it kind of showed me that I don't need to keep myself in this box. And it opened doors for me to see other things that I wouldn't necessarily... see, like, theatre trips and stuff like that. She was always looking for opportunities [...] I got to meet all the other young people that she was working with on these things too, so I think that was really good.

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– Care-experienced young person

We recommend that local authorities consider factors that may support a young person to form a positive relationship when allocating a PA, including shared protected characteristics, lived experiences, hobbies or interests, or the young person's own wishes and preferences.

We recommend that the Department for Education updates statutory guidance about the role of Personal Advisers to require that core elements of PAs' roles should include:

- **Relational practice to develop and maintain positive trusting relationships with young people;**
- **Supporting young people to identify, strengthen and maintain their network of important relationships.**

Having time to build relationships

Time is essential. PAs told us that having enough capacity to build and maintain relationships allows them to be there for important moments in a young person's life- from attending a graduation, to taking them to a job interview, or helping them settle into a new home.

Good support can also involve helping young people build confidence and connections beyond the PA relationship. PAs described organising group activities, events and shared experiences that helped young people meet others, develop friendships and discover new interests.

These activities don't have to be complicated. Small things, such as remembering a birthday and sending a card, can help show that the PA knows and values them.

Some PAs also described the benefits of starting to build relationships before they leave care. Working alongside social workers from 16 can help create a sense of continuity and make the transition to leaving care less abrupt.



A couple of years ago, I started taking a few young lads to car racing events around the country after finding out they shared my interest in cars. At first there were three or four young people who were quite isolated, didn't have many friends and didn't really have hobbies or interests. What started as a bit of an experiment has grown into a really positive group. We have days out together – we get breakfast, go to the racing, spend time together and sometimes stop for food on the way home. The young people now keep in touch with each other and have formed their own friendships. They're always asking when we can go again. It's been really positive for them; the challenge is simply having enough time to do more of it.

– Personal Adviser



Advocating for young people

Advocacy was another important aspect of support. While PAs often work within systems and constraints that are outside of their control, young people valued PAs who advocated for them to get the support they needed.

This could mean escalating an issue, challenging a decision or finding a practical solution when the usual process didn't meet a young person's needs.

This kind of advocacy really works when PAs are given the freedom to problem-solve and focus on achieving positive outcomes for young people, rather than being restricted by processes that don't work for an individual young person.

A strong culture within local authorities can make this easier by giving PAs the confidence and flexibility to act in the best interests of young people.

“When I went to an open day for uni, she brought my train ticket and a hotel room for me so that I could stay overnight. And you know, when I need to go to interviews she sort of goes the extra mile because in [my area] we have a free bus pass, but my interview, if I took the bus would have been like an hour and 20, but she brought me a train ticket and you know initially I called the duty team and duty team said to just use my bus pass, but obviously, like I told her, I was like, I'm not sitting on the bus for, like, an hour and then she just did it, no questions asked.”

– Care-experienced young person

Supporting young people through major life decisions

“Relationships are everything. I mean, obviously policies and pathways matter but the stability of a committed adult could be quite significant in your life.”

– Care-experienced young person

Children in the care system experience significant instability in their homes, education and relationships. Research shows that having at least one consistent, enduring relationship can improve educational and health outcomes, strengthen resilience and reduce feelings of loneliness⁷. For many young people, their PA becomes that person.

Young people described how good PA support helped them manage challenges that might otherwise have felt overwhelming. This is really important when young people are making decisions

about education or employment. PAs can help them identify opportunities, support with applications, interviews, and overcoming practical barriers. It can make the difference between getting a job or getting into university.

Housing is another clear example of the difference that effective PA support can make. Last year, 4,610 care leavers aged 18 to 20 faced homelessness, with most already homeless by the time they received support from their local authority. Young people tell us how stressful it can be to leave care and become responsible for securing and maintaining a home. Many described how their PA helped ease those fears, offering practical help and providing reassurance.

⁷ Coram Voice (2025), [From Surviving to Thriving: The seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers](#)

PAs highlighted the intensive work that often sits behind positive housing outcomes for young people – from helping a young person understand their income and manage their finances, to setting up their homes and developing the skills they need to maintain a tenancy.

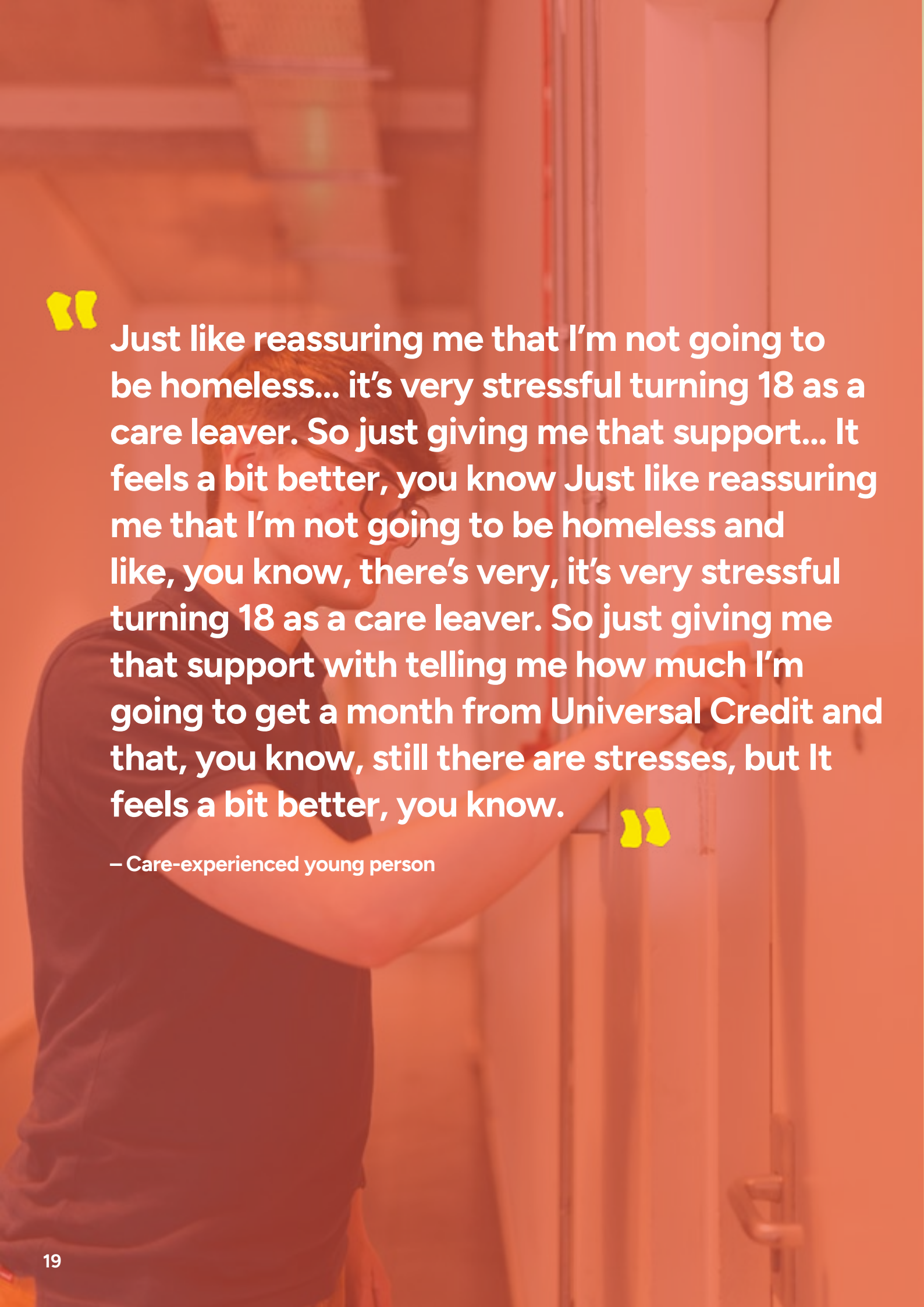
The time required to provide this kind of support can be significant. But they also highlighted the difficult trade-off of providing intensive support to one young person which means less time available for others

“ I’ve got quite a few young people who are living independently by the time they get to 21, and certainly by 25. I think the success of them keeping their tenancies is down to the amount of time I put in. When someone is moving into their own place, there’s a lot of work involved – helping them set up home, budget and develop the skills they need. The continued support is really important in helping them maintain that tenancy. Fortunately, most of mine have managed to sustain their tenancies, but that’s a reflection of how much work goes into supporting them. The challenge is that if you’re putting that level of support into one young person, you’re inevitably sacrificing support for another, so it’s a real juggling act.

– Personal Adviser

PAs do far more than co-ordinate services or fulfil statutory responsibilities. At their best, they help young people build confidence, overcome barriers and navigate adulthood with greater security.

For many young people, their PA is the person who provides the most consistent professional relationship after leaving care and can be the key person holding the wider picture when other services step back.



“ Just like reassuring me that I’m not going to be homeless... it’s very stressful turning 18 as a care leaver. So just giving me that support... It feels a bit better, you know Just like reassuring me that I’m not going to be homeless and like, you know, there’s very, it’s very stressful turning 18 as a care leaver. So just giving me that support with telling me how much I’m going to get a month from Universal Credit and that, you know, still there are stresses, but It feels a bit better, you know. ”

— Care-experienced young person

PERSONAL ADVISERS DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT TOOLS

Despite the essential role that PAs can play for young people leaving or having left care, our research highlighted a number of structural or systemic barriers that prevent PAs and Leaving Care teams from being able to provide the consistent relationship-based support that young people want and need.

Supporting high numbers of young people, staff vacancies and sickness, long travel distances, administrative demands and a lack of specialist knowledge can all reduce the time PAs have to spend directly supporting young people.

The result is a postcode lottery of support, where the quality, consistency and availability can vary wildly depending on where a young person lives.

A revolving door when leaving care

Local authorities have a statutory duty to appoint a PA to eligible care-experienced young people from the age of 16⁸. But this doesn't always happen in reality.

“ No one has explained what happens when I turn 18 and sometimes I find that scary.

– Care-experienced young person

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Through our research, young people have reported not being allocated a PA, or not having a pathway plan in place, until close to their 18th birthday⁹. This can make the transition out of care feel sudden and unplanned. For young people this can also enhance the feeling of a cliff edge when leaving care, where support and relationships can fall away abruptly, with

the change in professionals feeling like a revolving door.

Late allocation of PAs also means there is less time for a PA and young person to get to know each other and build a positive trusting relationship.

It can make it harder for PAs to understand a young person's needs, aspirations, preferred communication style, relationships and previous experiences. It can also lead to PAs not being involved in the development of transition planning, despite being the person responsible for co-ordinating these plans. If plans are not delivered, or a young person's expectations are not met, this can lead to mistrust. Some young people may already feel disillusioned by children's social care and want to disengage from local authority involvement - poor, or late transition planning, or feeling as though you are being passed onto another professional that you don't have an existing relationship with can exacerbate this.

⁸ To qualify for care leaver support, a young person needs to have been in care for at least 13 weeks after the age of 14 (either continuously or in different periods) and have been in care for some time after their 16th birthday.

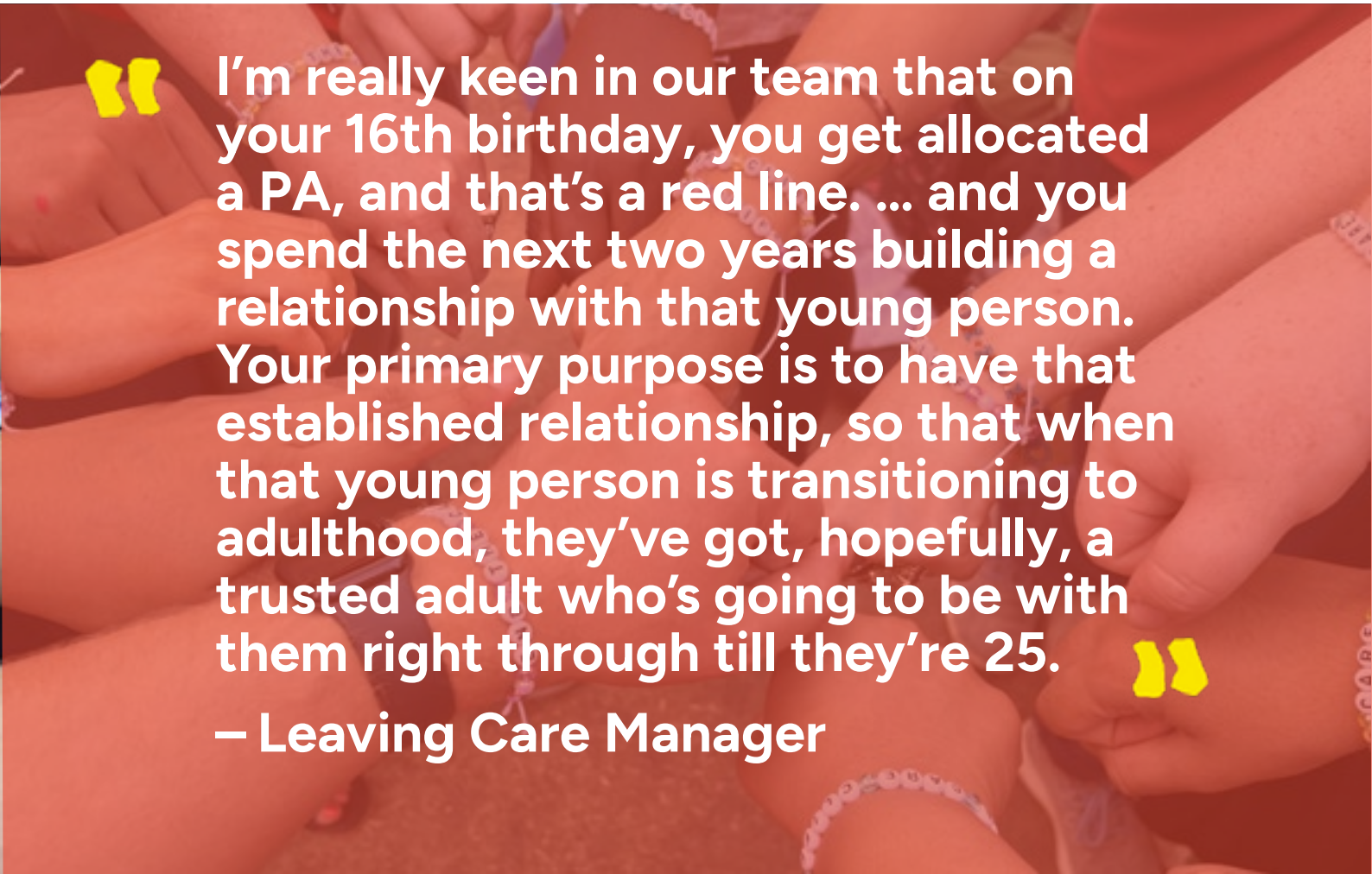
⁹ Become (2024), [End the Care Cliff: Support Every Step of the Way](#)

Through our research, we heard examples of better practice, where young people are allocated a PA from 16, and the PA works alongside the social worker for the following two years. This gives the PA time to get to know the young person, build trust and a relationship before the young person leaves care, creating greater continuity during the transition to adulthood.

It can also improve pathway planning, help identify needs earlier and make it more likely that a young person has a trusted adult alongside them when they leave care.

To provide more continuity for young people, local authorities should ensure eligible young people are allocated a PA as early as possible, with sufficient capacity for the PA to focus on building a strong relationship prior to leaving care.

We recommend that the Department for Education updates statutory guidance to require local authorities to allocate children in care a dedicated PA as early as possible after turning 16, to work alongside a social worker, with a main focus of the PAs role in the first 12-18 months being to develop a positive relationship with the young person.



I'm really keen in our team that on your 16th birthday, you get allocated a PA, and that's a red line. ... and you spend the next two years building a relationship with that young person. Your primary purpose is to have that established relationship, so that when that young person is transitioning to adulthood, they've got, hopefully, a trusted adult who's going to be with them right through till they're 25.

– Leaving Care Manager

Not enough time for consistent, relationship-based support

One of the clearest findings from our research was that PAs don't have enough time to spend with each of the young people they support.

Young people told us about struggling to contact their PA or not receiving responses when they needed urgent help. PAs and Leaving Care Managers described the same problem from the other side: supporting high numbers of young people and increasingly complex needs make it difficult to give each young person enough time and attention.



One of the biggest issues that I hear and experienced in the past is just lack of communication - so not responding to emails or calls, being really hard to get in contact with especially when it is an urgent situation, whether its housing or something that you need within a specific timeframe, and I think that's really hard to deal with when that happens.

– **Care-experienced young person**



Nationally, no data is available or held about the number of PAs there are in the country, the number of young people each PA supports, or how this varies across the country. Between February and March 2026, we submitted Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to all 154 tier one local authorities in England to request information about their leaving care workforce¹⁰.

Our FOI provides the first national picture of PA caseloads. On 31st March 2025¹¹:

- On average, each PA was supporting 20 young people.
- The highest reported caseload for an individual PA was 46, whilst the highest median caseload across a local authority was 36.
- There is significant variation in caseloads across different local authorities: more than a fifth of local authorities who responded had a median caseload of more than 25 young people per PA.

Our data only covers the financial year 2024-25, so we can't provide evidence about year-on-year trends or whether caseloads are increasing or decreasing nationally over time. However, several leaving care professionals told us that caseloads had increased or "spiralled" in their areas in the last few years, alongside growing complexity in the needs of the young people they support.

¹⁰ For full details of the questions we asked and the information we received from local authorities, please see our appendix.

¹¹ Ibid.

It's also not possible to provide a robust comparison between the number of young people each PA supports, on average, with the number of children being supported on average by each social worker in England. However, workforce statistics published by the Department for Education showed that on 30th September 2025, social workers in England had an average (mean) caseload of 15.2 children, much lower than the average (median) caseload for PAs¹².

We also heard from a number of PAs about their caseloads fluctuating on a regular basis, in part due to high staff turnover or sickness, or changes to the number of young people that the Leaving Care team was supporting.

The absence of any standardised data collection about the PA workforce is a barrier to evidence-based policy making. Nationally, the Department for Education is not aware of how the PA workforce is changing on a year-by-year basis or the impact this has on young people. At the same time, local authorities are unable to benchmark their approach in comparison to other local authorities, or to understand and learn from what is working well in other areas.

“My case load has just dropped down to 21... it was 40 for a while, which was stressful for me as I couldn't give that one to one time to my young people.

– Personal Adviser

It's essential that the Department for Education begins collecting and publishing data about the PA workforce, including caseloads, to monitor trends over time, inform policy-making, funding settlements, and track outcomes.

Complexity takes time

It's not only the number of young people that PAs are supporting that matters. The complexity and urgency of the support young people need can have a major impact on a PAs capacity.

A young person facing homelessness, a release from custody or a mental health crisis may need more intensive support over a period of time. This can involve coordinating several services, advocating for the young person and responding quickly when circumstances change.

“Young people living at distance is a barrier ... Having too many young people spread too far apart makes it hard to support them. I am in Kent and have to travel to Scotland to support my young person.

– Personal Adviser

When PAs don't have strong working relationships with other services or don't have the specialist knowledge they need, resolving these situations can take even longer. This creates a difficult trade-off. Providing intensive support to one young person in crisis can mean having less time to check in with other young people that PA is supporting. Travel can create another significant pressure. Many care leavers live outside the local authority where they were

in care, sometimes hundreds of miles away. PAs can spend significant amounts of time travelling to see young people, leaving less time for direct support. Staff vacancies and sickness can add further pressure, as remaining staff are asked to cover additional young people or responsibilities within the wider Leaving Care team.

¹² Department for Education (2025), [Children's Social Work Workforce: Reporting Year 2025](#)

Too much time is spent on systems, not relationships

PAs told us that administrative and bureaucratic demands take up a significant amount of their time. This includes recording pathway planning, completing risk assessments, preparing panel papers, and completing documentation for supervision. Several PAs reported that these demands have increased considerably in recent years.

Administration is necessary, but when it takes up too much of a PAs working day, it reduces the time available for what young people value most: talking, problem-solving, building trust and being there when they need support.

Technology, including AI tools for note-taking, and meeting records could potentially reduce some of this burden. However, young people raised important concerns about how AI is used to record their conversations with PAs.

These included concerns about privacy, content being recorded inaccurately and the risk that sensitive conversations could become less personal. Any use of AI in leaving care services therefore needs clear safeguards and guidance, with young people's privacy and trust at its centre.

We recommend that the Department for Education amends statutory guidance to provide clear guidance on when and how it is appropriate for PAs to use artificial intelligence, reflecting the broader concerns raised by care-experienced children and young people.

If they don't want something to be recorded they'll just pause the AI machine anyway and then they will say to you 'oh don't worry it's being recorded but it won't have your name' but it will be logged for data and all that. And I'm just thinking why would I tell you personal information about myself that AI has because we all know what sort of data AI sells or AI uses, and we can't fully trust AI yet, we're not at that point.

– Care-experienced young person

The impact on young people

When PAs don't have enough time, the impact is felt directly by young people. It can mean:

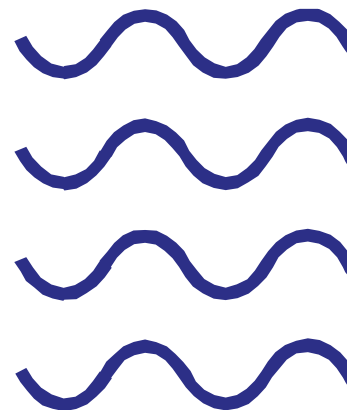
- Less regular contact and less time to build a trusting relationship, undermining the trust that is the cornerstone of these relationships;
- Young people are left feeling alone or unsupported, further emphasising the reduction in the support infrastructure around them after leaving care;
- Important or escalating needs, risks, or warning signs can be missed;
- Young people miss out on opportunities or vital support because their PA can't respond in time;
- A postcode lottery of support across the country, where the level, type and frequency of support that a young person receives varies depending on where they live.

Ultimately, good PA support takes time. PAs cannot provide consistent, relationship-based and personalised support if they're carrying unsustainable caseloads and spending large amounts of their time covering vacancies, travelling or completing paperwork.

This means investing in Leaving Care teams, setting clear expectations around manageable numbers of young people a PA can support, and ensuring local authorities have enough staff to provide consistent support.

There's currently no consistent national picture of how the PA workforce is changing or how many young people PAs are supporting. Collecting and publishing national data on the PA workforce, including caseloads, vacancies and turnover would allow local authorities to understand how their workforce compares with others, identify pressures earlier and learn from areas that are delivering effective support. Its essential caseloads are managed in a way that protects time for relationship-based practice. Young people need PAs who have the capacity to know them, respond when they need help and remain alongside them through the challenges of early adulthood.

That requires a leaving care system designed around relationships, not just workloads and processes.



Personal Advisers need the knowledge, skills and confidence to support young people effectively

PAs support young people through a complex transition into adulthood. They need to understand a wide range of systems, services and rights, and be able to build trusting relationships with young people who may have very different needs and experiences.

Yet, unlike social workers, there are currently no standardised qualifications, entry requirements or professional standards for PAs.

Social workers supporting children in care are required to have a degree (level 6) or postgraduate qualification (level 7) and to register with Social Work England¹³. They must also demonstrate that they meet a series of professional standards within their practice¹⁴.

For PAs, the requirements are much less clear. Statutory guidance states that “a PA should normally possess or be working towards a professional qualification”¹⁵, but ultimately, it’s the responsibility of the local authority to assess whether an individual has the right knowledge and skills to be an effective PA.

Our research suggests that this has created a significant and inconsistent training gap across the country.

Our FOI research found that:

- Over half of local authorities (59%) did not provide PAs with any accredited training or qualifications.
- Two-thirds, 67% of local authorities did not require PAs to undertake any accredited training or qualifications.
- 45% of local authorities neither required or provided accredited training or qualifications for PAs¹⁶.



Figure 1: Training Requirements for Personal Advisers

¹³ Department for Education (2026), [Ways to Qualify as a Social Worker](#)

¹⁴ Social Work England (2026), [Professional Standards Guidance](#)

¹⁵ Department for Education (2025), [The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations. Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers](#)

¹⁶ For required training, we received responses from 130 local authorities. For training provided data, we received responses from 123 local authorities. Full details of the questions we asked and the information we received from local authorities are provided in the appendix.

As highlighted in Figure 1, this lack of training stands out against other professions that work closely with children or young people.

Profession	National Qualification Standard
Social Worker	✓
Teacher	✓
Qualified Youth Worker	✓
Careers Adviser	✓
Personal Adviser	✗

Figure 2: National Qualification Standards for Professionals across England¹⁷

Where local authorities did require or provide accredited training or qualifications, there was considerable variation in the standard and type of qualification offered, as well as who delivered it. The most common accredited training or qualification was a Level 3 qualification.

Other approaches included funding youth work qualifications, health and social care qualifications, and training courses delivered directly by the local authority or by regional partnerships. There are currently relatively few externally provided qualifications specifically designed around the PA role. By far the most common, was Become’s own Personal Adviser Development Programme (see text box): in total, 20 local authorities, reported that they funded PAs to participate in Become’s Level-4 PA training course¹⁸.

The absence of any consistent training or qualification requirements means that there’s no consistent baseline of knowledge, skills or training for PAs across England.

Become Level-4 Personal Adviser Development Programme

Since 2022, Become has delivered a customised Level-4 Advanced Award for Personal Advisers, which was developed in collaboration with PAs, care leavers and Leaving Care Managers and is accredited by the awarding organisation NCFE/CACHE

The training programme is a 10-unit customised course, which is co-delivered alongside care-experienced young people. The course covers topics including reflective practice, trauma-informed approaches, understanding legislation, promoting quality relationships, and supporting care leavers’ mental health.

To date, 143 PAs have completed the course. Successive external evaluations of the development programme demonstrated that the course clearly leads to the upskilling of PAs and improvements in their practice by increasing their knowledge, confidence, and understanding of care leavers’ past experiences and needs.

17 National Careers Service (2026) [Youth Worker](#); [Careers Adviser](#); [Teacher](#); [Social Worker](#)

18 Become (2026) [Personal Adviser Development Programme](#)

A young person can therefore have a very different experience depending on the training their PA has received, and the approach taken by their local authority.

Outside of accredited training or qualifications, local authorities reported providing various forms of induction or training across a range of topics for PAs. This was often enabling PAs to attend training initially designed or procured for children and family social workers, or other parts of the local authority¹⁹. Throughout our research, PAs and Leaving Care Managers consistently told us that they lacked role-specific training on the challenges and experiences of young people leaving care.

The role requires specialist knowledge

The breadth of the PA role makes this lack of consistency particularly concerning.

PAs may need to support young people with housing and homelessness, benefits, education, employment, physical and mental health, immigration, the criminal justice system and many other areas. They also need to understand how these systems interact and know how to advocate for young people when services don't work as they should.

No PA can be expected to be an expert in every area. But they do need a strong foundation of knowledge, the confidence to identify when a young person needs specialist help, and the relationships and networks to connect them with the right service.

Professionalising the role would raise standards

The absence of consistent, role-specific induction, training or professional standards is not a reflection on the commitment or ability of individual PAs. Many PAs told us about the importance they place on supporting young people and the lengths they go to.

The problem is that the system doesn't consistently give them the tools, training or professional infrastructure they need to do the job well.

For young people, gaps in PAs knowledge or training can have a real impact. They may miss out on opportunities that could build their confidence, strengthen their social connections, support their career development, or help them engage with their community. They may also miss out on important support because their needs are not identified or understood.

Some young people told us that their PAs lack of knowledge or understanding had made it harder for them to open up about what they were experiencing. This can mean that important needs go unnoticed or unmet.



A lot of the time ... it was me telling him what was what because when I was struggling to get a passport I was having to tell him what he needed to do. I think there needs to be a qualification or a training course that they [PAs] need to go on.

– Care-experienced young person



¹⁹ More information about the different types of training provided or required by local authorities can be found in Appendix.

There needs to be more consistent, role-specific training for PAs so that they have the knowledge, skills and confidence to provide the right support and advice to care-experienced young people.

“ I think training is so important but also sensitivity training as well because I think whenever you meet like a social worker or your PA, or any professional you always want to feel respected when you're in a meeting with them and there are so many cases where that's not the case.

– Care-experienced young person

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We recommend that the Department for Education establishes professional standards for Personal Advisers, to be regulated by Social Work England; and a national training and qualifications pathway that includes guidance on induction training, and requirement for PAs to complete, or be working towards, a Level 4 Personal Adviser-specific qualification within 12 months of starting their role.

We recommend this is based on Become's currently accredited Level-4 Personal Adviser Development Programme.



Personal Advisers need more support to meet the needs of different groups of young people

Where local authorities did require or provide accredited training or qualifications, there was considerable variation in the standard and type of qualification offered, as well as who delivered it.

PAs support young people with a wide range of circumstances, needs and experiences. To do this well, they need to understand a wide range of systems and services including health, housing, benefits, education, employment, immigration, criminal justice, and other areas.

Our research found that PAs don't always have the time, training, experience or connections they need to develop this specialist knowledge. This can make it harder for them to support some young people effectively, particularly those facing additional challenges or more complex needs. In some cases, young people risk falling between the cracks of different services.

The introduction of new corporate parenting responsibilities across the public sector creates an opportunity to improve how PAs and other public services work together. Better collaboration with key services and professionals could make it easier for PAs to co-ordinate support and ensure that young people's needs are understood across different services.

We recommend that the Department for Education develops clear guidance for Government Departments and public bodies as part of the implementation of new corporate parenting responsibilities, which explicitly encourages key professionals and services to strengthen collaboration, communication and joint working processes with Personal Advisers and Leaving Care teams as part of efforts to improve support or address barriers for care leavers.

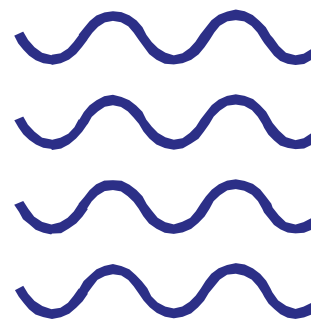
Some young people face particular gaps in support

Young people in the criminal justice system were highlighted as one group that can face significant gaps in support. Several leaving care professionals told us they didn't feel they had enough knowledge or understanding of young people's experiences in prison or youth justice settings, and how to support them effectively.

We heard examples of young people in custody being unable to contact their PA, difficulties in arranging visits, and poor communication between PAs and other agencies. In some cases, this made it harder for PAs to co-ordinate support or prepare for young people leaving custody. This could increase the risk of young people leaving custody without suitable housing or other support and potentially increase the risk of reoffending.

We also heard concerns about PAs not being informed of important information about young people they were supporting by other agencies or being informed too late. One PA shared the example of not being told by the police and probation services that a young person they were supporting had engaged in extreme risk-taking behaviour. It limited the opportunity for them to provide timely support to the young person or be involved in multi-agency responses about their behaviour.

PAs also shared concerns about supporting young people with unresolved immigration status or ongoing immigration applications. Some professionals didn't feel they had the knowledge, communication skills or confidence needed to provide the right support.



This could leave young people navigating complex immigration processes alone, or without the reassurance and clarity they need. Communication can be an additional challenge for young people who do not speak English fluently or use English as a second language.

Other groups of young people identified as potentially receiving less effective support included young people with high safeguarding needs, those receiving in-patient mental health services, those at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation, and those with complex health needs. This was particularly challenging where young people didn't meet the threshold for support from adult social care.

Care-experienced young parents, particularly those who don't have the same family support networks as other young people, may have specific support needs and may approach their PA for information, advice or reassurance. As well as experiencing the challenges that all new parents face, care-experienced young parents are often subject to greater scrutiny and stigma, including from public services. It's important that they're supported by a PA who is able to meet them where they are, who can understand and empathise with what they are going through, and who can provide them with the right type of practical and emotional support and advice.

We also heard about situations where different local authority services disagreed about what support a young person should receive or refused to provide support. This can leave PAs struggling to advocate for the young person and can put pressure on their relationship, given the PA is employed by the local authority. One particularly striking example of this is when care-experienced young people are subject to social care involvement from children's services.

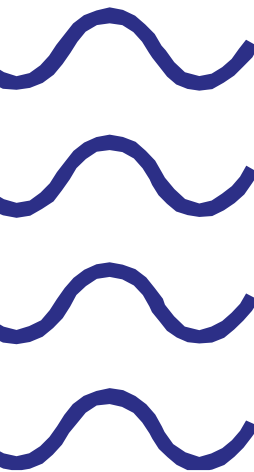


I think for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, there's a lot of stress involved, you know, with worrying about their status and worrying about finding a place to stay. So what they've been saying a lot is that it's so important for the PA to have a knowledge.

– Care-experienced young person



Young people living away from their local authority can face additional barriers



A high proportion of care leavers live outside the area of the local authority responsible for supporting them. Some are far from home because they were placed away from their home areas whilst in care. Others choose to move for university, work, or to be closer to people who are important to them.

Living far from their PA can make it harder to maintain regular contact and build a strong relationship. It can also make it harder for PAs to understand what support and opportunities are available locally, or to build relationships with services in the area where the young person lives now, such as health services.

Distance can therefore affect not only how often a PA sees a young person, but also their ability to co-ordinate the right local support.

Specialist Personal Advisers can help fill these gaps

Some Leaving Care teams have responded to these challenges by employing specialist PAs with expertise in particular areas, such as housing, employment, mental health or immigration. Our research found that this approach was highly valued by both PAs and young people.

Specialist PAs can provide direct support to young people who are experiencing a crisis or need specific advice and support. They also play a valuable role in supporting other PAs by sharing their knowledge, helping them manage complex situations and building relationships with key services. For example, specialist PAs can develop strong links with local job centres, or local health teams, making it easier to resolve problems quickly. This approach can improve the quality and speed of support for young people, while also reducing the pressure on other PAs.

Our FOI research found that 62 (47%) local authorities employed one or more specialist PAs. The most common areas of specialisms were housing or homelessness prevention; education, employment and training; and support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Other examples included local authorities employing dedicated specialists to support care-experienced young parents, young people in custody, young people with substance misuse problems, young people experiencing mental ill health, or those who were in Staying Put arrangements.

We also heard how several local authorities had used their Staying Close pilot funding to recruit or employ specialist PAs to meet local needs, with positive results. Figure 2 sets out the different types of specialist PA roles identified through our research.



Figure 3: Number of Local Authorities with Specialised Personal Advisers by Area of Specialism²⁰

Local authorities should be encouraged to fund and recruit dedicated roles to increase specialist knowledge, capacity and resource, as required to meet the needs of local young people or to reflect local circumstances. This could help to give PAs access to specialist advice when they need it, free up more time for them to focus on building relationships with young people, and crucially, improve the quality and consistency of support for young people who may be living in institutional settings, living far away, or who are experiencing additional challenges or complexity.

We recommend that local authorities fund and recruit dedicated roles to increase the specialist knowledge, capacity and resource within Leaving Care teams, as required to meet the needs of local young people. This could include working collaboratively with other neighbouring local authorities to co-fund or recruit specialist resource that is able to support multiple local authorities within a sub-regional footprint.

²⁰ Specialisms that were not reported by two or more local authorities were not included in Figure 2. For full details of the questions we asked and the information we received from local authorities, please see our appendix

Qualifying for support

Care-experienced young people who were in care at some point after their 16th birthday, but spent less than 13 weeks in care after their 14th birthday, legally called ‘qualifying care leavers’, are not entitled to the support of a PA, although they do have some legal entitlements for advice and assistance from their responsible local authority²¹. Leaving care professionals reported how financial and statutory restrictions prevented them from providing appropriate, or continuous support to qualifying care leavers, even when they have significant needs.

Being left without appropriate or consistent support - at a time when they may be experiencing significant transitions, adversity or complexity - can put young people at serious risk. We welcome the Government’s recent measures to better understand the causes of premature deaths amongst care leavers²². As part of this, there’s a need for the Department to examine the potential impact of extending PA support to qualifying care leavers when this is needed, and the ways in which this could be achieved.

“ [...] but I feel like qualifying young people have quite a few needs, especially ones that have maybe came in 3-4 weeks before they turned 18, and it’s just like, oh, here you go, bye.

– Leaving Care Manager”

We recommend that the Department for Education explore options for extending PA support to care-experienced young people who do not currently meet statutory eligibility criteria, when they request this and it is in their best interests.

A second cliff edge at 21

Local authorities have a legal duty to provide a PA and keep a young person’s pathway plan up to date for care leavers aged 18 – 21. Young people aged 21 to 24 can continue to receive support from a PA if they wish, even if they’ve previously declined support or stopped engaging with their leaving care service²³. When a young person over the age of 21 retains the support of a PA, their pathway plan should be reviewed and updated.

Through our research, and broader services, we’ve heard concerning examples of young people losing support when they turned 21, despite being legally entitled to continue receiving it. This includes young people being “aged out” of support at 21, or local authorities not having the resources or systems in place to provide effective ongoing support for young people over the age of 21.

Leaving care professionals described how a lack of resources meant their teams were not adequately equipped to provide ongoing or quality support to young people over the age of 21, particularly when local authority budgets were under pressure. We heard examples of services being encouraged to reduce or end support at 21, despite the legal entitlement to continue receiving it.

This creates a second cliff edge at 21. A young person can suddenly lose regular contact with a trusted adult and have to navigate services with less support, simply because they’ve reached a particular age.

²¹ See Foley, N, House of Commons Library (2025), [Support for Care Leavers](#)

²²

²³ Department for Education (2018), [Extending Personal Adviser Support to All Care Leavers to Age 25](#)



I always found with my PA that my case got closed when it shouldn't have done. And they back peddled.

– **Care-experienced young person**



Whilst statutory guidance states that the “level of support that care leavers receive will taper over time, in recognition of their growing maturity and independence”, we heard significant inconsistency in how support is provided after 21.

Some local authorities have dedicated teams or hubs for older care leavers, while others provide only basic advice and information, or limited support through general duty teams, leaving young people over the age of 21 without the support of an individual named PA.

This inconsistency matters because young people don't all reach independence at the same age. For care-experienced young people, turning 21 shouldn't mean an automatic reduction in support if they still need it.

There is also a third cliff edge at 25, when statutory support from leaving care services ends. Several young people told us that they were worried about this transition and about losing a trusted relationship with their PA. For many young people, support from parents and family continues well



Like some of us, when we reach that age of 25, it feels like a deadline. And some of us aren't even ready for that. Like, there's no preparation. Like, I know you will get prepared before you hit 25, but it's more that worry, anxiety. It's like with normal family or friends, you don't then just suddenly leave at that age. And because we do build that trust and relationship and bond with our PAs, it's like they're suddenly just left and it can be so difficult and overwhelming and like I just generally think there's no like genuine support around that, like that's how I feel anyway.



– **Care-experienced young person**

Leaving Care teams need to be better resourced to provide continuous support to young people after 21 when they need it, in line with existing statutory duties. They should also plan earlier for the transition at 25, so that young people know what will happen and have the support they need to move on from leaving care services with confidence.

“Corporate parenting should involve doing things and providing support that parents would, and this should include finance Post 21.

– Personal Adviser

”

We recommend that the Department for Education strengthens statutory guidance to provide clearer standards for supporting young people aged over 21 who want or require continuous support. At a minimum this should include ensuring that all care leavers are able to maintain the relationship with their existing PA, and that care leavers who re-engage should be supported by a consistent, named PA.

Personal Advisers are undervalued and under-supported

A consistent message throughout our research was that PAs are not given the recognition, support or resources they need to do their jobs well.

The PA role is not professionalised in the same way as social work. PAs don't receive comparative pay, career progression or development opportunities, training, support infrastructure, or professional status. This can make it harder to recruit and retain PAs with experienced staff leaving for other roles or career opportunities. This matters because stability is particularly important for young people leaving care. When a PA leaves, a young person can lose a trusted relationship and have to start again with someone new when they may already be dealing with significant change and uncertainty.

Personal Advisers are supporting young people with significant needs

Many of the protections and support systems around a child in care end when they turn 18. But the challenges a young person is facing, or the effects of the trauma they've experienced, don't suddenly disappear on their 18th birthday. In fact, leaving care can bring new pressures, including finding somewhere to live, managing money, accessing education or employment, and navigating adult services. PAs can therefore be supporting young people with significant and sometimes complex needs, but without the same professional and multi-agency infrastructure that exists around children in care.

This means PAs can carry significant responsibility without having the same level of support or access to other professionals.

Personal Advisers need better supervision and support

The demands of the role make high-quality, consistent clinical or reflective supervision particularly important. PAs can support large numbers of young people, many of whom may be experiencing trauma, safeguarding concerns, poor mental health, housing problems or other significant challenges.

Good reflective or clinical supervision gives PAs a safe space to talk through difficult situations, think about their practice and consider how they can better support a young person. It can also help PAs manage the emotional impact of the work.

Some local authorities have strong arrangements for regular reflective practice or clinical supervision, but our research found significant variation in how this is provided and what it looks like.

PAs told us that more consistent access to high-quality supervision would help them to manage complex situations and provide better relationship-based support to young people.

“Often they are the person who is holding everything for the young person. Whereas other services can step away due to disengagement ... I think a PA is the one person that stands there with that young person, which is huge, so I think the support around workers is absolutely critical and it needs to be really recognising the emotionally charged nature of what they do, the complexity of what they do, and how much they are holding for young people.

– Leaving Care Manager

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Pay and progression need to reflect the importance of the role

There is no national pay scale for the role of a PA, in the same way as there is for some recognised professions, such as teaching. This means pay varies between local authorities and there is no consistent approach to pay progression which can impact on retention.

There is no consistent publicly available data about PAs salary levels or financial progression opportunities. However, we heard from leaving care professionals that PAs often don't receive comparative pay to social workers and don't always receive the same financial benefits, rewards or incentives as other children's social care staff. These differences can send a clear message about how much the role is valued.

We heard several examples of how recent funding pressures had led Leaving Care teams to reduce PAs' expense allowances. In some cases, this meant PAs were unable to take young people out, or continue their usual routines and activities together, which could have a negative impact on their relationships. In other cases, PAs reported paying for activities themselves to ensure young people continued to receive support.

“ Our PAs used to be able to go out, have a coffee [together to] do their one-to-one, go through some pathway plan stuff, and now, they’ve recently been told they can pay for the young person’s coffee, and get that reimbursed, but not for their own. So actually, they’re like, ‘that makes it really awkward for me to sit there while they’re drinking their drink. Like, why are you not having a drink?’ [...] I think somewhere up there, somebody said, try and reduce that budget without really thinking about the impact that that will have on young people and relationships with their PAs.

– Leaving Care Manager



Pay and financial resources are only part of the issue. PAs also need clear opportunities to develop their careers, build their skills and progress within the profession. Without these opportunities, experienced PAs may leave for other roles, including training to become social workers.

This is a problem for both the workforce and young people. High turnover means experienced staff are lost, while vacancies and staff shortages put additional pressure on the PAs who remain.

Our FOI research provides the first national picture of PA vacancies and turnover:

- There were more than 220 FTE PA vacancies across England on 31st March 2025, a vacancy rate of 8%.
- 360 PAs left their role in the 2024/25 financial year, representing a turnover rate of 13% - around one in eight²⁴.

There is significant variation in the turnover of PAs across the country: some local authorities had significantly higher vacancy or turnover rates than the national average. For example, one in eight local authorities (17 in total) had a vacancy rate of over 20% on 31st March 2025, whilst ten local authorities had a turnover rate of over 20% for the year 2024/25.

“ If stable relationships are central to good corporate parenting, how can we ensure consistency when nearly one in seven Personal Advisers leaves their role and some are supporting up to 46 young people at once?

– Care-experienced young person



The data from our FOI request covers the financial year 2024/25. We don’t have enough national data to know whether PA vacancy and turnover rates are increasing or decreasing over time. This data is not currently collected, recorded or published by local authorities or the Department for Education.

²⁴ Responses were received from 135 local authorities on the number of Personal Advisers who left their role during the year, and from 134 local authorities on the number of personal adviser vacancies during the year. For full details of the questions we asked and how this number was calculated please see appendix.

When Personal Advisers leave, young people lose important support and relationships

High staff turnover isn't just a workforce issue. It directly affects young people.

When a PA leaves, young people may lose someone they trust and have to build a new relationship with another PA. They may have to explain their circumstances and start over with someone who doesn't yet know them, their history or what matters to them.

“I have more chance at seeing the same person at my local maccies for the next 2 years than my PA.

- Care-experienced young person

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This can impact on the continuity of support they receive or lead to them going without PA support for a period of time. It can also have a negative impact on young people's trust. Some young people we spoke to felt let down or abandoned by a PA, particularly when they had made and broken promises like “I'm not going anywhere, you can trust me”.

PAs leaving can reinforce previous experiences of adults letting them down. It can also reduce their trust in leaving care services, and in some cases lead young people to disengage from support altogether.

“ [They] don't say contact this person when I'm not here or have an out of office on to let them know where you should be contacting instead.

- Care-experienced young person

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High numbers of PAs leaving their roles, and high vacancy rates, impact on the whole Leaving Care team. When teams are short-staffed, PAs have to take on additional young people, leaving less time to build and maintain individual relationships.

Staff absence can have a similar effect. Several Leaving Care Managers reported a problem with a high or growing number of staff off work sick, sometimes for prolonged periods of time. Some attributed this to the pressure and

demands of the role, including the high number of young people that some PAs are supporting.

We also heard how this creates a challenge for young people, who aren't always told who to contact when their PA is away, off sick, or on leave. There should be clear arrangements so that young people know who will support them when their PA is unavailable.

We recommend that the Department for Education sets a required maximum caseload of 20 young people, starting from aged 16, for each PA. There should be clear guidance that caseloads must be reduced for PAs who are supporting young people who may need additional support or who are living far from their home local authority.

Compliance with this requirement should be monitored through Ofsted's inspections of local authority children's services.

Out of hours support

We heard from some young people that it can be difficult to access timely support or advice outside of standard working hours, when leaving care services and PAs are typically unavailable.



It would be good if [my PA] knew about referring to crisis lines etc. ... His issue is he isn't very good at knowing local and national services for different things, so like, Missing People, Samaritans ect, but I think that's a wider issue within my LA and not just him.

- Care-experienced young person



Young people would like to see improved out of hours support that they can rely on when experiencing a crisis or needing urgent advice, information or practical support. In particular, they highlighted the value of help outside of office hours from duty teams that can provide responsive support and effective signposting to relevant services and resources when their usual PA is unavailable.

We recommend that Local Authorities ensure that young people are proactively informed of who they can contact for support within the leaving care team when their PA is off sick or on leave.

We also recommend that Local Authorities strengthen out of hours support, including by ensuring that young people are signposted to relevant out-of-hours support services, or sources where they can access important information.

We need to build a stable, valued Personal Adviser workforce

PAs need to be treated as a skilled and important part of the leaving care workforce.

Alongside professional standards and qualification requirements, there needs to be a clear framework for pay, career development, supervision and progression. These are essential to making the PA role an attractive career choice, retaining experienced staff and giving young people the consistency they need.

We want to see a qualified, respected and well-supported PA workforce, with the time, resources and professional support to build strong relationships with young people.

We recommend that the Department for Education introduces a national pay scale and spine for PAs and the wider leaving care workforce, with clearer progression opportunities through Senior PA roles.

We also recommend that the Department for Education supports the development of a membership professional body for PAs, akin to BASW, to provide continuous professional development opportunities, share good practice, establish communities of practice, and advocate for the workforce.

A forgotten workforce

The challenges facing PAs sit within a wider problem: there is no clear national strategy or oversight for the provision of leaving care support.

This means there is limited national understanding of how leaving care services are delivered, how much they cost, how many PAs there are, or how consistently young people receive support across the country.

The Department for Education does not currently collect or hold any data on the size of the PA workforce²⁵, or how it's changed over time. There is also no consistent national data on how often young people experience a change of PA, how much contact they have with their PA, or how these factors affect their outcomes.

Our research provides some of the first available data on the PA workforce in England. On 31st March 2025, there were 2,664 PAs employed across 140 local authorities equivalent to 2,481 full time (FTE) PAs.

However, we still don't have a complete national picture of the workforce or the support it provides. To enable more effective, evidence-based policy making, robust and consistent data needs to be collected.

There is also no data or clear national picture on how much funding is allocated to local authorities to spend on leaving care services across the country. Through a Freedom of Information request we asked the Department for Education for information about how funding is allocated to Leaving Care teams, and what the total funding settlement was for leaving care services in England for each of the past five years. In response, the Department for Education stated that: "There is no dedicated funding settlement for Leaving Care teams. Funding for care leaver support is provided through a combination of local government funding settlements, grant funding and targeted programmes²⁶.

Much of the funding earmarked for leaving care is part of local authority's wider children and family budgets, meaning that local authorities have some flexibility in determining how much of their overall budget is spent on leaving care services. This can lead to variation in the amount spent on leaving care in different areas, worsening the postcode lottery for young people.

This is concerning at a time when local authorities budgets are being squeezed and the amount that local authorities are spending on children's social care is increasing rapidly. Without clear funding and national oversight, there's a risk that leaving care services become an area where spending is reduced to meet other pressures.

We recommend that the Department for Education collects, reports and publishes annual data about the leaving care workforce, with metrics including the number of PAs, average and maximum caseloads, average contact time with young people, turnover and vacancy rates, and data about the number and frequency of PA changes that young people experience.

²⁵ In response to our Freedom of Information request, which asked about the number of PAs in England, the Department for Education responded: "The Department does not hold information centrally on the number of Personal Advisers in England." Please see our appendix for the full FOI request and response.

²⁶ For more information about leaving care funding grants and allocations, and the full FOI response from the Department for Education, please see our appendix.

Leaving care needs sustained investment

There's both a moral and financial case for investing in leaving care services. Young people who've been in care should have the support they need to make a positive start to adulthood, and early, effective support can help prevent more serious problems later on.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care estimated that the adverse outcomes experienced by children in care and care leavers costs the Treasury £9 billion per year²⁷, and this figure is likely to have increased since the review as a result of inflation.

This makes a strong case for sustained investment in leaving care services, for funding to be ringfenced, with sufficient resources to recruit, develop and retain the PA workforce required to meet the needs of young people in each local area.

Ringfenced funding would help ensure that any new investment in leaving care support is used for its intended purpose. This will be particularly important as Staying Close is rolled out nationally, helping to ensure that additional funding strengthens leaving care services rather than being absorbed into other local authority priorities.

We recommend that the Government provides a sustainable and ringfenced funding settlement for local authority Leaving Care teams, which is sufficient to fund the recruitment, retention and development of the PA workforce that each area needs.

Recent Government reforms to improve outcomes for care leavers as part of the Government mission to break down barriers to opportunity are welcome. These include the extension of Staying Close support across the country, legislating to introduce new corporate parenting responsibilities for all Government Departments and a range of public bodies, new entitlements to free healthcare and medicines, and reforms aimed at reducing the risk of homelessness and insecure housing for care leavers.

However, these reforms will only go so far if the workforce responsible for delivering much of this support is not properly equipped or resourced.

If we want to break down barriers to opportunity for care-experienced young people, we also need to invest in the people supporting them.

There needs to be a strategy for the PA workforce, alongside ringfenced funding for leaving care services. This should provide local authorities with the resources they need to recruit, train and retain PAs, increase specialist knowledge, capacity and resource where needed, and provide consistent, high-quality relationship-based support to all young people leaving care.

We recommend that the Department for Education develops and implements a national strategy to equip the leaving care workforce with the skills, knowledge, confidence, and resources to provide all young people leaving care with the support they need.

²⁷ MacAlister, J, (2022), [The Independent Review of Children's Social Care: Final Report](#)

Pathway planning isn't working well enough for young people

Statutory guidance makes clear that PAs should be in regular face-to-face contact with every care leaver that they support and ensure they have an up-to-date pathway plan based on a current assessment of their needs²⁸. The plan should set out the support they need as they move into adulthood, as well as how they will stay in regular contact with their PA.

Our research found that many young people do not understand what a pathway plan is or what it's for. Others had seen their plan but felt it was inaccurate, did not reflect their views, or has been completed without their involvement.

Young people should have a pathway plan from the age of 16, to help plan and prepare for the transition to adulthood, but we heard that several young people didn't have a pathway plan in place until they were 18, or almost 18.

Some young people described positive experiences where PAs had adapted the process to make it work better for them. For example, some appreciated that their PA completed the formal pathway plan separately from their meeting, as they felt that making the meeting formal would make it harder for them to open up and engage with the conversation. Overall, young people told us that pathway planning needs to be clearer, more meaningful and more involving.

“When I was in care, I was very aware that everything was written down and we could not do anything without it being written down. So, it sort of makes it less like by the way you're going to be written about as if [it's your biography] I think there would be no relationship there if he talked to me as if I was the case file, as if I was the Pathway Plan.

– Care-experienced young person”

Pathway plans can become more about paperwork than people

PAs and Leaving Care Managers raised similar concerns. They told us that pathway planning can be bureaucratic, time-consuming, and difficult to use in a way that feels meaningful to young people. The current process can feel more like an organisational requirement than a tool to help a young person plan for their future.

²⁸ Department for Education (2015), [The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers](#)

“ A consistent message from practitioners and young people is that pathway plans often become focused on paperwork rather than people. The forms themselves are frequently seen as unhelpful and not young person-friendly.

– Leaving Care Manager

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This can be especially challenging when PAs are already working with high numbers young people, and may have limited time complete paperwork alongside building relationships and responding to young people’s immediate needs.

PAs told us they would benefit from more flexible systems that allow them to respond to individual circumstances rather than working through a standard process.

Despite the pathway planning process being a central part of leaving care support for more than 25 years, there is limited evidence about what good practice looks like or how effective it is. PAs reported receiving little training on how to use pathway plans well or make them meaningful for young people.

Without better training, guidance and opportunities to share good practice, there’s a risk that approaches will continue to vary between local authorities and that young people will have very different experiences of pathway planning depending on where they live.

Pathway plans should help young people thrive, not just survive

Young people shared these views. They told us that pathway plans didn’t feel representative of their own personal goals and aspirations, often focusing on practical tasks without capturing what matters most to them.

A pathway plan should be about more than housing, education, employment and finances. These things are important, but young people also told us that their plans should reflect their relationships and community, their sense of belonging, emotional well-being, stability, ambitions, and what a successful adulthood looks like for them.

The findings of research commissioned by Become, and carried out by the Rees Centre²⁹, highlighted the importance of not defining success through a one size fits all approach. The same principle should apply to pathway planning.

“ Moving beyond checklist style interactions [...] I feel like my pathway plan wasn’t personalised or ambitious enough and failed to equip me with the practical tools which I needed and had to navigate key transitions largely on my own.

- Care-experienced young person

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²⁹ Kelly, A, Luke, N et al (2025), [*Success – Whose Definition Counts? A Co-Designed Framework by and for Young People Leaving Care*](#)

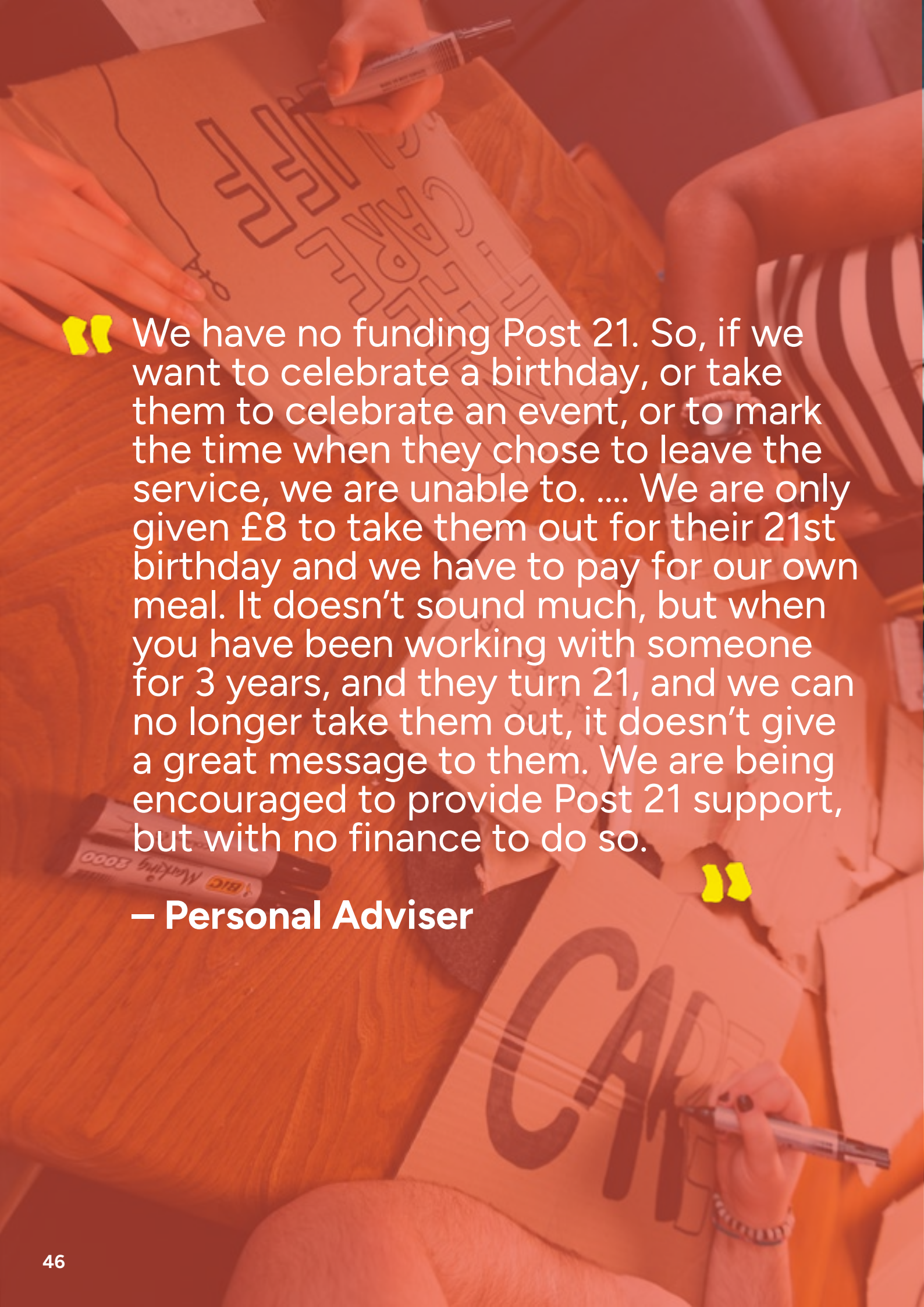
Young people should be supported to set their own goals and ambitions, rather than being given a standard checklist of things they need to achieve. It should be a useful tool for building a shared understanding between a young person and their PA, rather than simply a document that needs to be completed.



I think the focus of the planning becomes too much ... on the paperwork, rather than the actual process, that relationship, and what you're pulling out from that, really.

– Leaving Care Manager 

We recommend the Department for Education strengthens statutory guidance on pathway planning, making it more relevant and responsive to what matters most to young people – including their aspirations, relationships, wellbeing and security – rather than being seen as a rigid checklist.

The background of the slide is a photograph with an orange-red tint. It shows several hands using black markers to draw on pieces of cardboard. One hand is drawing a series of vertical lines, another is drawing a large 'C' and 'A', and another is drawing a series of horizontal lines. A BIC Marking 3000 marker is visible in the lower left. The text is overlaid on this image.

“ We have no funding Post 21. So, if we want to celebrate a birthday, or take them to celebrate an event, or to mark the time when they chose to leave the service, we are unable to. We are only given £8 to take them out for their 21st birthday and we have to pay for our own meal. It doesn't sound much, but when you have been working with someone for 3 years, and they turn 21, and we can no longer take them out, it doesn't give a great message to them. We are being encouraged to provide Post 21 support, but with no finance to do so.

– **Personal Adviser**”

WHEN SUPPORT FAILS, YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL THE IMPACT

The challenges facing PAs and Leaving Care teams ultimately have the greatest impact on care-experienced young people. Leaving care is a major transition. Turning 18 and leaving care can be very isolating – many of the adults and services around a young person disappear at the same time. Their social worker is no longer involved, support from children's services disappears, and relationships with foster carers or other adults may also change.

For young people who've already experienced instability in care, this can leave them with very little consistent support around them. In some cases, the only adult in their life that they can rely on might be their PA.

Trust takes time to build – and can be quickly lost

Young people consistently told us how important it is to have a PA they know, trust, and can rely on.

Building that relationship can take time, especially for young people who have experienced adults leaving them or letting them down in the past. When a PA leaves, when communication breaks down, or when a young person doesn't feel involved in decisions about their support, it can reinforce those experiences.

This can prevent young people from being able to open up to other professionals about what they're experiencing. Some young people may disengage from services altogether together. This creates a difficult cycle: when young people disengage, it can make it harder for services to understand what they need and provide the right support at the right time. Longer term, this can also impact on young people's wider relationships with friends, family, romantic partners, and more.



It takes me about six months to be able to get used to that new worker and to be able to feel comfortable with them and show them the real me basically.

- **Care-experienced young person**

Delays can make problems worse

Being able to easily contact your PA is particularly important when a young person is needing immediate support. When young people cannot reach their PAs or don't receive a response quickly enough, problems can escalate. A housing problem can become homelessness.

One of the biggest issues [...] is just lack of communication [...] being really hard to get in contact with especially when it is an urgent situation, whether its housing or something that you need within a specific timeframe, and I think that's really hard to deal with when that happens.

- **Care-experienced young person**

A financial problem can become debt. A mental health concern can become a crisis.

Part of the role of a PA is ensuring that care leavers receive their rights and entitlements. When PAs don't have enough time, knowledge or capacity, young people miss out on the support they are entitled to.

We heard examples of young people being unable to access their Leaving Care Allowance, as well as missing out on opportunities such as attending university, training or employment because they were not made aware of them or supported to take them up. Young people should not miss out on

opportunities due to their PA being uninformed or not having the time to support them.

The consequences can be serious

Without a trusted professional to help them navigate complex systems, young people may miss important appointments, struggle to access legal advice and financial support, face delays in resolving their immigration status, or be left without support to secure and maintain suitable accommodation.

For young people in contact with the criminal justice system, consistent PA support can be really important in helping them plan for release, and access education, employment and housing opportunities. Without this support, they may face greater instability and a higher risk of poor outcomes.

The same is true for young people experiencing mental health difficulties. We heard examples from young people of needs going unidentified, including neurodiversity and mental health difficulties. When these needs are not recognised or supported early enough, they can become more difficult to manage.

The impact of poor support can also be significant for young people's emotional well-being. Being left without support at a difficult time in their lives can increase feelings of isolation, stress and anxiety.

For some young people, the consequences of not receiving the right support at the right time can be life-changing. In the worst examples, this lack of support can lead to premature death.

A postcode lottery of support

Across our research, a consistent theme was the significant variation in leaving care support across England.

Where a young person lives can affect the quality of support they receive, the specialist help available to them, how often they see their PA and the opportunities they are able to access.

This is not simply a matter of different approaches. It means that two young people with similar needs can receive very different support and outcomes, partially dictated by the luck of where a young person entered care.

Care-experienced young people should not have to rely on luck on their postcode to get the support they need to thrive. The support a young person receives should be consistent, relationship-based and shaped around their individual needs and ambitions, wherever they live.

CONCLUSION

The support of a trusted adult can make a massive difference to a young person leaving care.

At their best, PAs provide far more than practical support. They offer the consistency, encouragement and relationship-based support that is so needed as young people navigate this challenging transition and build the foundations of a positive start to adulthood.

Many PAs provide life-changing support and continuity. But our research shows that too many PAs are being asked to do this without the time, training, resources, and professional support they need. The workforce is stretched thin and the system around it is not strong enough.

Recent reforms introduced by the Government to improve and expand support for care leavers through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act and beyond are welcome. However, PAs and Leaving Care teams have largely been missing from these reforms, despite being at the heart of the support that the state provides to care-experienced young people.

The PA workforce remains largely forgotten. There is limited national recognition, oversight and investment in this crucial role, inconsistent training and standards, significant variation in resourcing, and no clear national picture of the workforce itself.

The result is an entrenched postcode lottery where the quality, consistency, and availability of support a young person receives can depend on where they live.

If we want to break down barriers to opportunity for care-experienced young people, we need to invest in the people who support them every day.

There is both a moral and financial imperative to act. Poor outcomes for care-experienced young people have a profound impact on their lives and create significant costs for public services and society as a whole. Investing in Leaving Care teams and the PA workforce is an investment in better outcomes, stronger communities and improved life chances.

Real change will require a concerted national strategy to give Leaving Care teams the skills, funding, capacity and resources they need. This should include professional standards and qualifications for PAs, manageable caseloads, better specialist support, stronger career pathways, and sustainable funding for leaving care services.

Government has an opportunity to strengthen the workforce at the heart of leaving care support and ensure that every young person can rely on a PA who is properly equipped to support them.

Every young person leaving care should receive consistent, relationship-based and person-centred support that helps them to thrive in adulthood, regardless of where they live.

OUR FULL RECOMMENDATIONS

WE RECOMMEND THAT THE DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION:

1. Develops and implements a national strategy to equip the leaving care workforce with the skills, knowledge, confidence, and resources to provide all young people leaving care with the support they need.
2. Provides increased, sustained and ringfenced funding allocations for Leaving Care teams to invest in the development, expansion and retention of their PA workforce.
3. Introduces role-specific professional standards and training requirements for PAs across the country by:
 - Developing professional standards for PAs, to be regulated by Social Work England.
 - Requiring all PAs to have or be working towards a Level-4 Personal Adviser-specific training course and qualification within 12 months of starting their role as a PA.
 - Ensuring that the funding settlement for local authority Leaving Care teams is sufficient to fund PAs to undertake training course and qualifications to meet the professional standards.
4. Introduces a required maximum caseload of 20 young people, starting from aged 16, for each PA. There should be clear guidance that caseloads must be reduced for PAs who are supporting young people who may need additional support or who are living far from their home local authority.
5. Introduces a national pay scale and spine for PAs and the wider leaving care workforce, with clearer progression opportunities through Senior PA roles.
6. Provides clarity that local authorities have the autonomy to develop or recruit dedicated roles to increase the specialist knowledge, resource or capacity within Leaving Care teams, or Senior PA roles, as required to meet the needs of young people, or to reflect local circumstances.
7. Supports the development of a membership professional body for PAs, akin to BASW, to provide continuous professional development opportunities, share good practice, establish communities of practice, and advocate for the workforce.
8. Updates statutory guidance about the role of PAs to require that core elements of PAs roles should include:
 - Relationship-based practice to develop and maintain positive trusting relationship with young people.
 - Supporting young people to identify, strengthen and maintain their network of important relationships.
 - All children in care are allocated a dedicated PA as early as possible after they turn 16, to work alongside a social worker, with a main focus of the PAs role in the first 12-18 months being to develop a positive relationship with the young person.
 - Care leavers are not aged-out of support at the age of 21 if they require or want continuous support.
 - Any care leaver aged over 21 who wishes to re-engage with the Leaving Care team is supported by a consistent, named PA.
 - There is clear guidance on when and how it is appropriate for PAs to use artificial intelligence, reflecting the broader concerns raised by care-experienced young people.

9. Collects, reports and publishes annual data about the leaving care workforce, with metrics including the number of PAs, average and maximum caseloads, average contact time with young people, turnover and vacancy rates, and data about the number and frequency of PA changes that young people experience.
10. Provides clear guidance for Government Departments and public bodies as part of the implementation of new corporate parenting responsibilities, which explicitly encourages key professionals and services to strengthen collaboration, communication and joint working processes with PAs and Leaving Care teams as part of efforts to improve support or address barriers for care leavers.
11. Updates statutory guidance on the pathway planning process to ensure that it:
 - Provides a greater focus on what matters most to young people, including a greater emphasis on their relationships, networks, and community; the stability and security in their lives; their well-being, hopes and aspirations; and connection with identity, culture and heritage;
 - Is person-centred and more dynamic, with discussions focusing on what is important and relevant to young people: what has changed, what is coming up and young people's changing needs, aspirations, well-being and life context, rather than a repetitive checklist.
12. Explores options for extending PA support to care-experienced young people who do not currently meet statutory eligibility criteria, when they request this and it is in their best interests.

WE RECOMMEND THAT LOCAL AUTHORITIES:

1. Ensure that care-experienced young people are part of recruitment processes for PAs.
2. Consider factors that may support a young person to form a positive relationship when allocating a PA, including shared protected characteristics, lived experiences, hobbies or interests, or the young person's own wishes and preferences.
3. Fund or develop Senior PA roles within the Leaving Care teams, as required, to create progression opportunities and support retention.
4. Fund and recruit dedicated roles to increase the specialist knowledge, capacity and resource within Leaving Care teams, as required to meet the needs of local young people. This could include working collaboratively with other neighbouring local authorities to co-fund or recruit specialist resource that is able to support multiple local authorities within a sub-regional footprint.
5. Ensure that young people are proactively informed of who they can contact for support within the Leaving Care team when their PA is off sick or on leave.
6. Strengthen out of hours support, including by ensuring that young people are signposted to relevant out-of-hours support services, or sources where they can access important information.

WE RECOMMEND THAT OFSTED:

1. Amends its inspection framework for local authority children's services (ILACS) to ensure that inspections include a robust assessment of:
 - The capacity of Leaving Care teams to provide consistent, person-centred relationship-based support to care leavers, including the knowledge, skills and confidence of PAs, as well as the resources, culture and infrastructure within Leaving Care teams;
 - The quality and consistency of support that PAs and Leaving Care teams provide to care-experienced young people, particularly those who may be experiencing additional challenges or complexity.

Methodology

On 2 February 2026 we submitted Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to all 154 tier-one local authorities in England. We aimed to gather new information about the total number and Full-Time Equivalent of Personal Advisers (PAs), the caseloads of PAs, the number of specialist PAs, the qualifications required, and the training offered. We received responses from 140 of 154 local authorities, representing a 91% response rate.

We also submitted two FOI requests to the Department for Education. The first, submitted on 13 April 2026, asked for clarification on what data was held by the Department regarding the total number and FTE of the PA workforce. The second, submitted on 15 July, requested information about how funding for leaving care teams was allocated by the Department for Education.

This data was requested to build a clearer picture of the PA workforce to allow us to better understand the enablers, barriers and pressures facing the leaving care workforce.

Throughout April and June 2026, we also carried out semi-structured interviews with 46 care-experienced young people. We met with young people from our End the Care Cliff campaign group, the Step by Step Partnership, as well as with care leavers from both Norfolk and Dudley care leaver forums. All these interviews were self-selecting and explored both positive and negative experiences young people have had with PAs, as well as how the role could be improved to ensure all young people get access to appropriate support.

Lastly, we held two sessions with 19 Personal Advisers and 21 Leaving Care Managers from across the country. These sessions were promoted through the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum's professional network and were self-selecting. Sessions lasted an hour and a half and allowed us to hear first-hand about the PA role, and what PAs need to be able to support care-experienced young people as effectively as possible. We also discussed what works and what needs to change.

We are grateful to all the young people and local authority representatives who gave their time and shared their experience, expertise and insights to contribute to this research. We are also grateful to the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, Step by Step Partnership, and Dudley and Norfolk care leaver forums for their roles in supporting the sessions.

Local data questions

On 9 February 2026, Become submitted Freedom of Information requests to 154 local authorities in England relating to their leaving care workforces. The responses have been provided in the tables below. The following information was requested:

1. On 31 March 2025
 - a. What was the total number of Personal Advisers employed by the local authority?
 - b. What was the number of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) Personal Advisers employed by the local authority?
 - c. How many children in care (for whom the local authority was the corporate parent) were aged 16 or 17;
 - d. How many care leavers (former relevant child) were aged 18-20?

- e. How many care leavers (former relevant child) were aged 21-25?
- 2. On 31 March 2025, how many Personal Adviser FTE vacancies were there within the local authority?
- 3. How many Personal Advisers employed by the local authority left their role in the year to 31 March 2025?
- 4. On 31 March 2025
 - a. What was the highest caseload of any Personal Adviser employed by the local authority?
 - a. What was the lowest caseload of any Personal Adviser employed by the local authority?
 - a. What was the average (median) caseload of FTE Personal Advisers employed by the local authority?
- 5. On 31 March 2025, did the local authority employ any specialist Personal Advisers? If so, how many and what were their areas of specialism?
- 6. Does the local authority:
 - a. Require Personal Advisers to undertake accredited training or qualifications;
 - a. Provide Personal Advisers with any accredited training or qualifications?
 - a. If the answer to 6a) or b) is yes, please provide details of the accredited training or qualifications provided.

National data questions

National FOI - Personal Adviser workforce

On 13 April 2026 we submitted a Freedom of Information request to the Department for Education asking for national data about the Personal Adviser workforce in England and eligibility for PA support. The full list of questions asked is listed here:

- 1. On 31 March 2025, what was:
 - a. The total number of Personal Advisers employed in England?
 - a. The total number of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) Personal Advisers employed in England?
- 2. On 31 March 2025, in England, how many care-experienced children and young people were there with the status:
 - a. Eligible child – aged 16 or 17;
 - b. Relevant child – aged 16 or 17;
 - c. Former relevant child - aged 18-20;
 - d. Former relevant child – aged 21 or over;
 - e. Qualifying care leaver

3. What estimate does the Department have for the number of care-experienced children and young people in England who a) had and b) were eligible for a Personal Adviser on 31 March 2025.
4. What training or qualification requirements did the Department have for Personal Advisers on 31 March 2025.

The response to these questions is provided below:

1. The Department does not hold information centrally on the number of personal advisers in England.
2. The Department does not hold information centrally on the number of eligible children, relevant children or former relevant children.
 - a. Information on the number of qualifying care leavers aged 17-21 can be accessed at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/a0cc6be3-ef34-407f-543a-08de072d13df>.
 - b. Information on the number of qualifying care leavers aged 22-25 can be accessed at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/61b0c0fb-0270-4d46-5441-08de072d13df>.
 - c. The Department collects data and publishes statistics annually on the activity and accommodation of care leavers aged 17-21 and aged 22-25 at national level in our statistical release here: at <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2025>.
3. The Department does not hold centrally an estimate of the number of care experienced children and young people who had, or were eligible for, a Personal Adviser on 31 March 2025. Decisions about the allocation and ongoing role of Personal Advisers are made and recorded by local authorities.
 - a. Statutory eligibility for a Personal Adviser depends on age and legal status. Care leavers aged 17 to 21 are entitled to a Personal Adviser, regardless of whether they are recorded as being in active contact with their local authority. Care leavers aged 22 to 25 are entitled to a Personal Adviser only where they request advice or assistance from the local authority.
 - b. The Department publishes information on care leavers who are not in touch with their local authority, for example where they have refused contact or are assessed as no longer requiring services. However, these figures do not indicate whether a Personal Adviser remains allocated and cannot be used to estimate how many care leavers had, or were eligible for, a Personal Adviser at a given point in time. See above links for published statistics on care leavers.
4. As of 31 March 2025, the Department for Education did not set any mandatory training or qualification requirements for Personal Advisers. The Department's statutory guidance expects local authorities to ensure that Personal Advisers have the necessary skills, experience and support to fulfil their role, but decisions about training and qualifications are made locally. The Department does not collect centrally information on the training or qualifications held by Personal Advisers.

National FOI - Funding for leaving care teams

We submitted a second Freedom of Information request on 15 July 2025 for information about how funding for leaving care teams is allocated by the Department for Education. The response has been provided below. The full list of questions asked is listed here:

1. How is funding for Leaving Care teams allocated by the Department for Education?
2. What was the total funding settlement for Leaving Care teams in 2025-26 and for each of the preceding four years?

The response to these questions is provided below:

There is no dedicated funding settlement for Leaving Care teams. Funding for care leaver support is provided through a combination of local government funding settlements, grant funding and targeted programmes.

In 2025-26, several care leaver grants were consolidated into the Children and Families Grant within the Local Government Finance Settlement. In 2026-27, this consolidated care leaver funding moved into the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) within the Local Government Finance Settlement. The RSG is an unringfenced Section 31 grant, which allows local authorities flexibility to set budgets according to local need while continuing to fulfil their statutory duties to care leavers.

- They will be expected to deliver their statutory duties for care leavers by budgeting from their allocation of this grant. Please see [Final Local Government Finance Settlement: England, 2026-2027 to 2028-2029 - GOV.UK](#) for further detail, including information about distribution.
- The historic information for those relevant consolidated grants, including amounts in each year, can be found here:
 - [Staying Put grant: determination letter - GOV.UK](#)
 - [Leaving care allowance uplift: section 31 grant determination letter - GOV.UK](#)
 - [Funding for personal adviser support for care leavers to age 25 - GOV.UK](#)
- In 26/27, a further two grants for care leavers support were consolidated into the Local Government Finance Settlement:
 - Virtual School Head Extension to Children with a Social Worker and Children in Kinship Care into the [Revenue Support Grant](#)
 - Post-16 Pupil Premium Plus into the [Children, Families and Youth Grant](#).

Key findings and local authority data

Our key findings from the data collected from local authorities were as follows:

Total number of PAs	2664
Total FTE PAs	2481
Average (median) caseload of PAs	20.0
Highest reported caseload	46
Lowest reported caseload	0
Total vacancy FTE	216
Total Leavers	342
How many LAs have some sort of specialist PA	47%
How many LAs YES provided training	33%
How many LAs YES required training	41%
How many LAs NO training required or provided	45%

Note on calculations

To calculate the overall turnover rate, we divided the total number of leavers by the total number of PAs. To calculate the overall vacancy rate, we divided the total vacant FTE by the combined total of filled PA FTE and vacant FTE.

Some local authorities provided figures as 'fewer than 5' or 'fewer than 10', citing concerns that disclosing exact numbers could risk identifying individual children. For the purposes of analysis, these responses were interpreted as 2 and 5, although the actual figures may have been higher or lower.

Raw local data

Notes on data table below: The table below sets out data received from local authorities up to and including 7 July 2026- any data received after that date has not been included.

[Tables \(PDF\)](#)

Interviews with Personal Advisers and Leaving Care Managers

We held two sessions with 19 Personal Advisers and 21 Leaving Care Managers in children's social care teams from across the country. The interviews included discussion prompts about the following areas:

- What are the key enablers that would allow you to provide the best support to young people leaving care?
- What are the barriers that prevent you from being able to provide the best support for young people leaving care?
- Are there any young people who you particularly struggle to support (and why?)
- What would help you do your job better within your local authority? What needs to change nationally (e.g. policy, funding, guidance or other)?

We spoke to the following Local Authorities:

Personal Adviser Session	Leaving Care Manager Session
Cambridge	Bristol
Darlington	Bromley
East Sussex	Camden
Hampshire	Coventry
Herefordshire	Darlington
Hull	Harrow
Kent	Hartlepool
Knowsley	Kent
Leeds	Medway
Peterborough	North Yorkshire
Portsmouth	Sandwell
St Helens	Sheffield
Suffolk	St Helens
Wokingham	Stockport
	Warrington
	West Berkshire
	Wokingham

Interviews with care-experienced young people

Throughout April and June 2026, we carried out semi-structured interviews with 46 care experienced young people. The interviews included discussion prompts about the following areas:

- Did anybody receive positive support from their Personal Adviser? What did this support look like? What difference did this make for you?
- Did anybody have a positive relationship with their PA? What made this relationship positive? What was the impact of this relationship for you?
- How much contact have people had with their PAs? Is this enough? Are there ways in which you would have liked the contact with your PA to be different?
- Did you feel as though PAs had enough knowledge about what support and services are available to be able to support you effectively?
- How could the support provided by a PA be improved?
- What are your reflections on pathway planning? Was this helpful? If so, how? How could pathway planning be improved?

We're the national charity that's here to support every child and young person with experience of the care system.

They tell us what's not working.

Together, we fight to make change happen.



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