



The All-Party Parliamentary Group  
for Looked After Children  
and Care Leavers

# **The Entitlements Inquiry**

## **Report for young people**

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Produced by The Who Cares? Trust

Secretariat to the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

## **THE ENTITLEMENTS INQUIRY – WHAT IS IT?**

A group of MPs and Peers (Peers are people from the House of Lords) meet regularly with young people in care in a group called the All Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers. The MPs and Peers set up this group because they want to understand how they can help make things better for young people who spend time in foster care or children's homes.

In 2013 this group decided to find out more about whether young people knew about things that had a right to (called 'entitlements') and whether they got these things.

So they ran an investigation called the Entitlements Inquiry and asked more than 1,000 children, young people and adults who are involved in the care system to answer some questions and give their opinions. The bits in red in this leaflet are some of the things that young people said in their answers.

This leaflet tells you the main things the inquiry found out. It also has some ideas about what should be done differently to make sure young people know what they have a right to and to make sure they are given those things.

## **WHAT WERE THE THINGS THAT YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS INVOLVED IN THE CARE SYSTEM WERE ASKED ABOUT?**

We chose five particular things children in care have a right to and five things young people who have left care have a right to. The inquiry wanted to find out whether young people knew about these important 'entitlements' and whether they were getting them. We also wanted to find out whether people working with young people in care knew about them. These are the entitlements we asked people about:

### **Five important things that children in care are entitled to:**

1. You must have a care plan. This is a document where it is written down what your needs are now, what people (like social workers and foster carers) will do to help you and what your plans are for the future.
2. The care plan must include your views, because your views about your own life are really important.
3. No important decisions (like a placement change) about you should be taken without being talked about at a review meeting unless it is an emergency.
4. Looked after young people aged 16-19 should be given £1,200 (it is called a 'bursary') if they stay in full-time education to help them pay for costs associated with being in college, like travel.
5. When a social worker visits you, they must speak to you on your own unless you refuse, or the social worker is unable to for some reason.

## Five important things that care leavers are entitled to:

1. When you leave care, you can ask your authority for £2,000 so you can buy things for the place where you will live on your own (like furniture or a fridge) – this money is called ‘the setting up home allowance’. The government thinks that £2,000 is the right amount of money although that amount is not the actual law (the law doesn’t say how much it should be, just that care leavers should be given some money to buy things for their flat). Many local authorities do give the £2,000 but some local authorities give less than that.
2. Your local authority must give you some money if you go to college or university or if you do training until you’re 21 (or up to 25 if you stay in education up to that age).
3. Your local authority must give you some money to help you try to get a job and keep it (up until the age of 21 if you are in education, or in a job or training).
4. You must be given a copy of your pathway plan (a document that says how your local authority will help you after you leave care) and a social worker must explain it to you.
5. If you go to university, your local authority must find you somewhere to stay in the holidays, or give you some money so you can pay for somewhere.

## SO WHAT DID THE INQUIRY FIND OUT?

- We found out that most children in care and care leavers don’t feel like they have all the information they need.
- We also found out that children and young people are not always told things in the way they want. They said that they want to be told about things they are entitled to by their social workers (or personal advisors if they have left care), in person, but they also want it written down (like in a leaflet) so that they can check what they have been told any time they like. They don’t want to have the responsibility of finding information out for themselves and many don’t think that is fair.
- Young people said they don’t just want information when they first come into care because that can be a confusing and upsetting time and you may not remember everything you are told. They want information in plenty of time for it to be useful, not when it is too late to make a difference.
- Young people who have special educational needs (extra help with learning) want information about their rights in a way that is straightforward and easy to understand. They said that sometimes information they are given by social workers is not clear enough.
- Children who don’t speak English very well need information in their own language or very simple English if this would be right for them.
- Some young people who have disabilities that affect their communication skills (like autism) need information given in a way that is best for them and social workers need to think carefully about how to do this.

- Another important thing the inquiry found out was that lots of foster carers, social workers and workers in children’s homes don’t have enough information about the rights and entitlements of looked after children and care leavers. A lot of them said they hadn’t had any training for quite a long time about all the things young people are entitled to, so it was sometimes hard to be sure who was entitled to what.
- And we also found that some children and young people – especially care leavers – aren’t getting important things that the law says they should. The inquiry thought this was really worrying and should be put right.

## Care plans

Most children knew they should have a care plan, but about one third of children didn’t know that people were supposed to ask their views about things and put what they said in the care plan.

*“I know I’ve got a care plan but I don’t know what is in it.”*

Some children said that they aren’t consulted about what goes into their care plan, that their plans have mistakes in them or aren’t clear enough about what will happen to them or what support they will get. We heard that some children have care plans and know what is in them, but they don’t get all the support that the plan says they will get. We also heard that some children don’t like getting involved with writing their care plans and that some children don’t know that it is called a care plan.

## Important decisions

Having a review meeting before something really important, like a placement move, gives children a chance to understand why the move is happening and ask questions. About half of young people knew that no important decision should be made without a review. However, lots of children said that they didn’t have a review meeting before a big change.

## Seeing your social worker

If children have good relationships with their social workers and see them often enough, it’s easier to make sure information about rights and entitlements is given and that children get what they’re entitled to. Lots of contact with their social worker makes it easier for children and young people to speak about how they are getting on and about the things that they need.

If they are unhappy or have concerns about the placement, children should feel safe and able to talk to their social worker in private without worrying that their foster carer or residential workers will hear.

Three quarters of young people knew about their right to be seen alone by their social worker. Lots of children said they think it's very important to spend time with their social worker and that they like having the choice to be seen alone or not. Many children said they don't see their social worker enough and would like to spend more time with them.

*"If I had been able to see my social worker one on one, I would have been able to say I wasn't happy in my foster placement."*

Social workers sometimes have to look after too many children (the children they are responsible for is called their 'caseload'). Having a lot of children on their caseload can make it hard for social workers to spend enough time with children to give them all the information they need.

We also heard that the number of care leavers that each personal advisor is responsible for has been increasing over the past two years, which means they have less time to spend with each young person and to think about how best to support them.

### **Financial support for college and getting a job**

Just over a third of children in care knew about the 16-19 bursary (which can help them with the costs of staying in college). If children don't know they will get help with the costs of going to college, they may choose not to go.

Two thirds of care leavers knew they should get help with the costs of being in education or training. But the one third who don't know about this might make decisions about their future without knowing all the facts.

*"They don't make this clear and change their stance depending on your course."*

Over half of care leavers didn't know their local authority has to help them to get (and keep) a job. It can be hard for care leavers to find a job so this support is really important. Some local authorities do provide lots of support for care leavers, but we also heard from lots of young people who had not had the help they need.

*"They just tell me to get a job, but no help to do it."*

## Getting £2,000 'setting up home allowance' when you leave care

Young people who do not receive the £2,000 that the government recommends local authorities give care leavers may find it hard to get the stuff they need for their flat and to be able to live on their own.

Only half of care leavers knew that the recommended amount for the 'setting up home allowance' is £2,000. A lot of care leavers said they had been given less than £2,000.

*"We only get £1,500 for our house stuff so we have to go to charity shops for lots of things."*

Young people had a lot to say about the setting up home allowance. Quite a lot of young people said they had moved into an empty flat and had to buy flooring, curtains, furniture and white goods (that's stuff like fridges, cookers, and washing machines) from their allowance. We also heard that many young people were very unhappy about some local authorities who restricted how they spend the allowance and made them buy things from a list or from certain shops. Some young people said that when they left care their social workers said some of the money from their setting up home allowance had already been spent on other stuff, which is also worrying – this shouldn't happen.

## Care leavers and pathway plans

A care leaver's pathway plan should have written down in it all the support the local authority will give them. They are very important documents because if a care leaver isn't getting something they're supposed to, they can show people what is says in their plan and make sure they get it.

Nearly three quarters of care leavers knew that they were entitled to be given a copy of their pathway plan but only half of care leavers said that they had received one.

*"I haven't seen my pathway plan since I was 18. I wanted it to be revisited so I can look at other options I can take with not being able to go to university."*

*"My pathway plan is a waste of paper, waste of a tree. They may as well let the tree live longer."*

Of the care leavers who told us that they did have a pathway plan, quite a lot of them felt it did not properly say what their opinions, plans and ambitions were. We also heard about plans that were not updated when things changed (which they are supposed to be).

## Care leavers at university – where do they stay in the holidays?

It is really important that young people in care are not put off from going to university because they are worried about where they will stay in the holidays. That's why your local authority must find you somewhere to stay in the holidays or give you some money so you can pay for somewhere.

Less than half of young people knew about this entitlement.

*"If I'd have known I could get this help I would have gone to university. I didn't know and it put me off."*

*"I am always fighting to have money for vacation accommodation, my local authority don't want to know and I ended up homeless for a month."*

We heard of young people having to pay for accommodation themselves and getting into debt, sofa-surfing, living unofficially with friends or foster families or forced to become homeless during their holidays. We heard that young people have to fight for this support and that some local authorities are reluctant to provide even though the law says they have to. We also heard that some local authorities are telling care leavers to go to university in their area so they can stay in their flat or to stay in university accommodation all year round – both of these are not fair on care leavers and should not happen.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAKING SURE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE KNOW WHAT THEIR RIGHTS AND ENTITLEMENTS ARE AND THAT THEY GET THEM**

The MPs and Peers who run the All-Party Parliamentary Group discussed ideas with young people about what might help and came up with these recommendations:

- All local authorities should consult the young people in care in their area about how they would like to get information about rights and entitlements. The Children in Care Council in each area should get involved with this. They should look at this every year to make sure children and young people are getting the information they need.
- There should be more help for social workers about how to communicate complicated information to children and young people with special educational needs, who don't speak English well or who have a disability that affects how they communicate.
- Independent reviewing officers (IROs for short – people who make sure social workers are doing the right things for each child in care) should check on whether young people know about their rights and entitlements.
- The government should make a law that says social workers have tell young people about rights and entitlements regularly – not just when the child first comes into care.
- The government must put information for people who work with children in care on their website, telling them all the things what children are entitled to.
- Every local authority should ask young people who are in care to help train social workers about how to make good relationships with young people, how to listen to young people properly and how to explain things in a way they will understand.
- Local authorities should do everything they can to make sure that social workers (and personal advisors for care leavers) aren't having to look after too many children. This is important because social workers should be able to spend regular and quality time with the children who they are responsible for and get to know them so they can make good decisions about their lives.
- Children in care should be given information about how to get an advocate (someone who can speak on your behalf and make sure you get your rights) if they need one at every review meeting.
- When Ofsted (the organisation that the government asks to make sure that services for children in care are good enough) does its inspections, it should check that young people are being told what they are entitled to and are getting those things.



## Want to find out more about YOU are entitled to?

Here are some websites and organisations that can help:

- Coram Children's Legal Centre: <http://www.childrenslegalcentre.com/>
- NCAS: [www.catch-22.org.uk/NCAS](http://www.catch-22.org.uk/NCAS) (for care leavers)
- NYAS: [www.nyas.net](http://www.nyas.net)
- Voice: [www.voiceyp.org](http://www.voiceyp.org)
- Who Cares? Town: <http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/who-cares-town/>

## And here are some people who can help:

- Your foster carer
- Your key worker if you are in a children's home
- Your social worker
- Your personal adviser if you have left care
- Your Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)
- An advocate (if you need someone to stand up for you and help you get your rights and entitlements)