

BECOME.

THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

Submission to the Education Committee's inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services.

May 2020

Become is the national charity for children in care and young care leavers. We provide help, support and advice to make sure care-experienced young people can unleash their potential and take control of their lives. We help make the care system work better by ensuring that young people's voices and perspectives shape policy and service provision.

Introduction

Become welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this call for evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services. Given our role, we have responded to the points in the terms of reference most relevant to children in care and young care leavers, drawing on what children, young people and young adults with experience of care have told us through our advice, support and participation activity.

Our services are youth-led, holistic and trauma informed, and we provide follow-up and ongoing support with both the practical and emotional needs of children in care and young care leavers. We are uniquely positioned as independent from statutory services – young people feel safe to share their challenges and feelings with us, with the reassurance that we will listen without judgement and take action to ensure they get the right support.

The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly impacted on the lives of the children in care and young care leavers we support. We have moved to delivering all of our advice and support services over the phone and online. Our coronavirus advice webpage¹ was published on Tuesday 17 March 2020 to answer key questions for care-experienced young people and offer tailored information on how the outbreak might impact on the care or support they receive. In the month following lockdown, we worked with more than double the number of young people compared to the same period last year, and the majority of enquiries to our advice services were related to the outbreak.

Executive summary

- Care-experienced young people are concerned about having enough money to feed themselves, homelessness and risk of homelessness, safety and health risks (e.g. for those in high-risk categories, travel risks) and isolation and loneliness exacerbating existing mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders and suicidal ideation.
- We are concerned about the impacts of COVID-19 on the delivery of statutory services to children and care and care leavers, and have identified through our support work ongoing issues around ensuring financial security, accessing entitlements, preventing homelessness, and getting consistent support from professionals at this time.
- Attainment and progression gaps in education between children in care and their non-care-experienced peers are at risk of widening due to the absence of school and the awarding of calculated grades. Schools and colleges, and their teachers and care-experienced pupils, will need additional help to ensure a safe and supported return to school.
- Care-experienced learners in higher education risk falling through the gaps in existing support offered to care leavers and students, and have told us about their struggles with finances, isolation, accommodation and completing their studies. Urgent action is required to ensure this group of underrepresented students are able to support themselves over the summer and complete their courses.

¹ <https://becomecharity.org.uk/coronavirus>

Our response

1. Delivery of statutory services to children in care and care leavers

1.1. The impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of statutory care and support to children in care and young care leavers appears to be mixed. Our direct work with care-experienced young people suggests that some local authorities and service providers have very quickly adapted to provide good and, in some cases, an enhanced level of support to young people, whereas others have failed to maintain their statutory duties. The outbreak has clearly exaggerated existing regional variations in practice and the 'postcode lottery' in service quality for children in care and care leavers.

1.2. Financial security

1.2.1. Young adults who have left care are more likely to be in precarious employment situations and are less likely to have family support networks to turn to in times of financial need. We have heard from many care leavers who are concerned about having enough money to pay for the basics, such as food, household supplies and utilities at this time, often due to a loss of employment income. Some have been worried about their ability to purchase enough food to last for 7-14 days if they need to self-isolate at home, leading to health risks for themselves and others if they are forced to leave home to shop.

1.2.2. In addition to our advice work which includes supporting with employment queries, accessing benefits or entitlements, and signposting to emergency funds, we have also responded by providing discretionary cash grants of up to £50 for care leavers in need of immediate financial assistance.

1.2.3. Department for Education guidance encourages local authorities to utilise additional COVID-19 response funding "to provide discretionary payments to care leavers to cover items such as food, utilities and rent during this period".² Following enquiries to our Care Advice Line from care leavers and the professionals supporting them, we are concerned that this advice is not being readily actioned local authorities, although we recognise the immense financial pressures facing them at this time.

1.2.4. We have supported a number of young adults to understand what they are entitled to through Universal Credit. However, the large volume of applications means getting through to an advisor on the helpline is extremely difficult, and poor joint working between job centres and leaving care teams can leave care leavers in serious financial difficulty.

1.2.5. **Services story 1: Care leaver not receiving statutory support**

A 20-year-old care leaver in her first year at university contacted our Care Advice Line as she was struggling financially. She didn't have a personal adviser and wasn't receiving any financial support from her local authority. We advised her of her rights, what financial support she was entitled to from her local authority and how to access this support.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-childrens-social-care-services/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-local-authorities-on-childrens-social-care> (Accessed 26 May 2020)

1.2.6. **Recommendation:** The government should provide targeted ring-fenced COVID-19 response funding for children’s social care so local authorities can confidently fulfil their statutory duties and provide discretionary payments to care leavers who need emergency funding.

1.3. **Reduced access to entitlements**

- 1.3.1. We are concerned that some local authorities are also failing to deliver on their existing duties to children in care and care leavers which may help to relieve some of the financial pressures for care leavers right now.
- 1.3.2. We have received contact from care-experienced young adults who have been refused access to entitlements on the basis of operational difficulties arising from COVID-19 which do not appear insurmountable. This has particularly been the case around provision of the Setting Up Home Allowance.
- 1.3.3. At the beginning of the outbreak, many young people leaving care will have moved into their first independent accommodation setting. If a council flat has been provided, these often come completely unfurnished without basic white goods, carpets, and other essential items. Care leavers are expected to furnish their new accommodation using their Setting Up Home Allowance.
- 1.3.4. Whilst the amount provided and processes around how care leavers access this essential entitlement have long been problematic, the COVID-19 outbreak has led to some young people experiencing a tightening of typical restrictions around access and use. Examples have included
- a policy of no purchases being authorised unless deemed essential or an emergency;
 - an absence of any flexibility around individual item budgets or location of purchase despite very limited stock and purchase options; and
 - no access to additional emergency funding if the relevant portion of the Setting Up Home Allowance had been previously spent.
- 1.3.5. This inflexibility and poor corporate parenting practice has led to some care leavers living without the appliances and furniture they need to live and work well at home. Living somewhere they can’t call ‘home’ is made worse when they are forced to stay inside and socially distance, exacerbating feelings of isolation, and many are unable to rely on the good will of friends and others to support practically as before they are not allowed to travel. This acts to displace the cost of essential items or furniture to young care leavers directly – money which they may need for other basic essentials.
- 1.3.6. ***Services story 2: Care leaver moved into council flat at the start of lockdown***
- Our advice team supported a care leaver who had just moved into a new council flat of their own without carpets or white goods, including a washing machine. They had previously been washing their clothes at a friend’s house, but because of the lockdown travel restrictions, they were no longer able to do this. As they had already used their Setting Up Home Allowance as part of a previous move, the young person’s personal adviser told them there was no money available to support with the purchase of a washing machine and the normal services that can support care leavers to obtain used furniture were not operational due to the outbreak. We*

spoke to the young person's personal adviser about our concerns who agreed to raise the issue immediately with the leaving care team manager.

1.3.7. **Recommendation:** The government should write to local authorities to remind them of their existing statutory duties to children in care and care leavers and take action when financial entitlements are withheld without good reason.

1.3.8. **Recommendation:** Local authorities should relax restrictive policies around the use of Setting Up Home Allowances and other entitlements.

1.4. Housing and stability

1.4.1. Housing difficulties are typically the most common issues we support care leavers with through our Care Advice Line. Often, young people leaving care can find themselves passed between children's and housing services teams within or across local authorities. They are particularly likely to experience 'hidden homelessness'; one survey found that 26% of care leavers had sofa-surfed and 14% had slept rough.³

1.4.2. We have recently supported with a number of queries which have arisen or have been further complicated as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Some recent examples have included:

- a care leaver who was struggling to access private rented accommodation due to COVID-19 as the guarantor service they were due to use stopped offering this service free to care leavers at this time;
- a care leaver on remand whose trial had been postponed due to COVID-19, but was unable to secure accommodation in a bail hostel and couldn't be bailed without an address provided by the local authority who refused to help; and
- a care leaver currently living in supported accommodation with shared facilities who was concerned about others not taking social distancing precautions and putting them at additional risk.

1.4.3. Given the loss of income many care leavers are facing and the extent of insecure housing situations, homelessness is a real risk for many. Existing measures put in place to prevent evictions for those in private rented accommodation are welcome, but more must be done to ensure care leavers are supported to maintain a stable and safe place to live once responsive support measures begin to be lifted.

1.4.4. **Services story 3: Homeless care leaver incorrectly advised by housing services**

Our advice team helped a personal adviser supporting young care leaver aged 20 who had very recently become homeless, having spent a night in a tent as well as a B&B. On asking for support from the local authority's housing team where they were, they were refused assistance and incorrectly told they would need to present as homeless to the local authority who held corporate parenting responsibility for them – located over an hour away by train. This wasn't possible as they feared for their safety in that area, and went against government advice to avoid travel at the time. We advised the personal adviser of the housing team's statutory duties to accept a homelessness application from the young person and to provide

³ <https://centrepoin.org.uk/media/2035/from-care-to-where-centrepoin-report.pdf>

interim accommodation because the young person is homeless and eligible and in priority need. We suggested that legal advice from a housing solicitor was sought if any further refusal was made.

1.4.5. **Recommendation:** The government should bring forward its plan to extend care leavers' exemption from the Shared Accommodation Rate, and invest in a national guarantor and deposit support scheme for care leavers accessing private rented accommodation.

1.4.6. The government's messaging around the principle that no child approaching age 18 should be asked to leave care at this time (unless in their best interests) is clear and helpful to reduce worries about significant transitions during a time of crisis.

1.4.7. However, we have heard from young adults who have already left care who are concerned about being moved and aren't aware if the same principle applies to them – if they are moving from a semi-independent to an independent setting for example. Children still in care and young people who have already left care can also face significant transitions in where they live and the level of care or support they receive; these often abrupt changes are not only reserved for those leaving care at age 18.

1.4.8. **Recommendation:** The government should amend its guidance to make clear that all significant changes to care-experienced children and young people's lives, such as where they live or the care they receive, are delayed where appropriate. This includes care leavers due to move between very different accommodation types and those due to have support from the local authority withdrawn at age 25.

1.5. Loneliness and support from professionals

1.5.1. We are concerned about how social distancing measures are impacting on care-experienced young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing, particularly those who have existing mental health difficulties. Young people have recently told us things like "*I'm afraid of my mental health deteriorating due to isolation*" and "*mentally I am so stressed about the virus that my brain is refusing to cope with reality*".

1.5.2. Care leavers are more likely to live alone with smaller social networks, have reduced access to the internet, and report feeling lonely often or always.⁴ The government's technology support scheme in the provision of 4G routers and devices to children in care and care leavers is therefore welcome, particularly at this time when internet access is essential to continue education, access support and remain in touch with friends, family and professionals.

1.5.3. It was extremely worrying that an earlier version of the Department for Education's guidance for children's social care services suggested that local authorities were able to relax their duties to care leavers, including providing regular support from personal advisers. We therefore welcome the changes made in the updated guidance, published on 6 May 2020, which reminds local authorities of the need to meet their responsibilities, albeit in adapted ways (e.g. personal adviser meetings taking place over the phone or by video call).⁵

1.5.4. We have heard from some children in care and care leavers who have received fantastic and in some cases enhanced support from their social workers or personal advisers during this

⁴ <https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/OLBC-Snapshot-online-2018.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-childrens-social-care-services/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-local-authorities-on-childrens-social-care#care-leavers>

time. However, we remain concerned that some young people are experiencing a reduced level of service beyond what may be expected given increased staff absence, and that too little attention is being paid by professionals to supporting the emotional health of care-experienced young people.

- 1.5.5. Our recent work suggests that some care-experienced young people have not experienced proactive contact from their social worker or personal adviser during this time. This was evidenced too in a recent survey which found that 1 in 10 children have had no contact with their social worker since the lockdown began and that care leavers were more likely to have met with their personal adviser less often than before lockdown.⁶ Some young care leavers are particularly worried about who will help them if they fall ill with coronavirus.
- 1.5.6. Our advice team have supported young people feeling low and alone, and advised professionals (including personal advisers) who are worried about the emotional wellbeing of the care leavers they are supporting. We know from our conversations with care-experienced young adults that they often don't feel as though the professionals supporting them understand what it means to be in or leaving care, and don't have the knowledge or skills to support with mental health challenges. Some care leavers have been forced to put themselves at risk and travel to see others due to intense feelings of social isolation.
- 1.5.7. **Services story 4: Care-experienced young person with mobility needs**

Our advice team recently heard from a young person with mobility needs who was struggling to attend her weekly physiotherapy appointments. Her social worker would typically drive her to each appointment, but was unable to continue doing this as they were self-isolating, and she couldn't afford to take a taxi. She approached her social worker about getting extra support from the leaving care team to help with transport costs, but nobody was available to help quickly enough, leading to missed appointments. She was eventually provided with a bus pass from her local authority.

1.5.8. **Recommendation:** Local authorities should ensure that care-experienced young people's contact with the professionals supporting them continues according to statutory timescales, with a particular focus on mental health and emotional wellbeing.

1.5.9. **Recommendation:** Leaving care teams should proactively reach out to care leavers aged 21+ who may not be in receipt of support but need this now and don't know they are eligible or who to contact.

- 1.5.10. In particular, we are worried about how support for children in care from key professionals may be reduced following the introduction of new emergency changes to regulations through Statutory Instrument 445.⁷ The instrument dilutes a number of key children's social care duties relating to statutory visits for children in care, care planning and fostering and adoption approval processes. These regulations were introduced without accompanying guidance to clarify they were to be used in exceptional circumstances only, and without appropriate parliamentary scrutiny and consultation.

⁶ <https://www.nyas.net/wp-content/uploads/NYAS-Coronavirus-Survey-Report-Young-Lives-in-Lockdown-May-2020.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukSI/2020/445/made>

1.5.11. Although guidance has since been published which outlines the circumstances and processes around their use⁸, this does not provide sufficient detail on how the use and impact of the new powers will be centrally collated and monitored by government or Ofsted – both to provide strong transparency and accountability, but more importantly, to ensure that timely learning around current pressures on the system and solutions reaches social care providers and others caring for and supporting care-experienced young people.

1.5.12. **Recommendation:** Statutory Instrument 445 should be immediately withdrawn. At the very least, the government should commit to centrally collecting and monitoring the use of new emergency regulations, holding local authorities to account for improper use and sharing information to improve accountability and learning.

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-childrens-social-care-services/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-local-authorities-on-childrens-social-care#care-leavers>

2. Care-experienced pupils at school or college

- 2.1. Current figures suggest that 15% of children classed as ‘vulnerable’ (which includes children in care) are attending school at the minute, but these figures do not include additional detail on the different pupil cohorts which make up that wider group.⁹ Given that most children in care live with foster carers or in a residential setting, we expect they are less likely to attend school at the moment than those children who live at home with their birth families and receive social work support.
- 2.2. We have heard mixed messages from children in care and the professionals supporting them about the impact of the absence of school or college. For some, school is a place of stability and helpful routine, whereas others find it adds additional anxiety, stigma and turbulence to their lives. Some children and young people report feeling happy to have had the opportunity to spend more time with the people caring for them without the added pressures of school and constant reminders of their care experience. Others say they are struggling with the social isolation their absence from school and friends brings, and are worried about the impact this might have on their educational futures.
- 2.3. Care-experienced children have typically experienced trauma and adversity which can have a significant impact on their learning and behaviour. Looked after children are almost four times more likely to have a special educational need (SEN) than all children, and are almost nine times more likely to have an education, health and care (EHC) plan than all children.¹⁰ This can present major challenges for families, carers and professionals supporting children in care with home-based learning.
- 2.4. A recent survey of parents and carers of care-experienced children (albeit mostly parents of adopted children) suggested that 63% think their child will need extra support during the transition back to school following lockdown.¹¹ It’s vital that schools and teachers have the capacity to support vulnerable pupils with the difficult transition back to a school learning environment.

2.5. **Recommendation:** To ensure the attainment gap does not widen further, the government should provide additional funding and resources to help schools support the learning and wellbeing of care-experienced children as they return to school, working closely with Virtual School teams to most effectively utilise existing Pupil Premium Plus funding and any additional ‘catch-up premium’ for this purpose.

- 2.6. We are particularly concerned around the potential for calculated grades to negatively impact care-experienced children whose previous results are often poor indicators of their future potential. Ofqual’s equality impact assessment and literature around teacher bias in the awarding of predicted grades for particular cohorts of pupils did not include care-experienced children.¹²
- 2.7. Our own research has highlighted the training gap for teachers around the needs and experiences of children in care, and found that 87% of teachers had heard at least one

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/outcomes-for-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-31-march-2019>

¹¹ <https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b3326f3b-4cdf-46fe-94e1-8724bbb75475>

¹²

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/879605/Equality_impact_assessment_literature_review_15_April_2020.pdf

colleague express a negative generalisation about care-experienced young people.¹³ These findings are reflected in other pieces of work, including a 2019 survey of designated teachers.¹⁴

- 2.8. Current Ofqual guidance currently only suggests that schools and colleges “might also contact the virtual school team(s) that work with looked after children” studying there.¹⁵ We believe it is essential that no grade is awarded to a child in care by a school or college without appropriate consultation with the Virtual School Head and any relevant input from carers and other educational and social care professionals.
- 2.9. Destination measures for looked after children after key stage 4 highlight the lower rates of progression for this group to any sustained education destination than for all children¹⁶, and annual figures tell us that only 6% care leavers aged 19-21 enter higher education¹⁷. It is therefore essential that care-experienced young people’s progression to further or higher education is not negatively impacted by the awarding of calculated grades given the additional biases which assessment of their academic ability and potential are often prone to.

2.10. **Recommendation:** The government should work with Ofqual to ensure that teachers, schools and colleges actively seek the expertise of Virtual School Heads and other relevant professionals (e.g. designated teacher, social worker, SENCo) when determining calculated grades for children in care.

2.11. **Recommendation:** To ensure progression to higher education is not limited, the government should work with the Office for Students and Universities UK to promote strong contextual admissions policies for care-experienced applicants to higher education, including selective and carefully managed use of unconditional offers.

¹³ <https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/for-professionals/resources/teachers-who-care-2018/>

¹⁴ <https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=fc250481-9981-4f85-9320-ca02a4a1c615>

¹⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/886978/6614-3_Summer_2020_grades_for_GCSE_AS_A_level_guidance_for_teachers_students_parents.pdf

¹⁶

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884758/CLA_Outcomes_Main_Text_2019.pdf

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2018-to-2019>

3. Care-experienced students in higher education

- 3.1. During the first week of the COVID-19 lockdown over 23 – 27 March, we carried out in collaboration with four other organisations a UK-wide survey of higher education students who identified as either care-experienced or estranged.¹⁸ This survey identified that students without family support at university faced a number of significant challenges.
- 3.2. 62% of students said that the ability to earn money was one of their main concerns, and 50% said they were worried about getting essential supplies and/or food. Many were concerned about the loss of income without the employment they rely upon to top up their student funding to pay for rent, bills and for basic food and supplies. Others feared becoming homeless through losing their accommodation due to their inability to pay rent.
- 3.3. 55% of respondents to the survey said they were particularly worried about feeling lonely and isolated, and reported increased stress and anxiety about their immediate and long-term futures. This was particularly apparent for those living alone in student accommodation after their friends had returned home to live with their families.
- 3.4. 62% of students said they were worried about their ability to complete their courses and many reported lacking access to equipment (e.g. a laptop) and software to facilitate online study. Whilst institutions will have since offered additional information on completing assignments, exams and progression to remaining years of their courses, many care leavers we hear from remain worried about their ability to complete work effectively at home and how this may impact on graduation and progression to employment or further study.
- 3.5. We are concerned that care-experienced students at university are falling through gaps in existing support provided by the government, local authorities or institutions. Many students do not work in formal employment where furloughing is an option (e.g. insecure temporary work, 'campus' jobs, cash-in-hand service roles etc), and they cannot now access other paid employment which is essential to cover their living costs.
- 3.6. Current advice for students suggests that individual institutions are expected to provide hardship grants where financial issues arise¹⁹, but our experience suggests these small pots are insufficient to cope with demand and often have restrictive eligibility requirements which do not recognise the financial situations of students without family support (e.g. students may appear to have sufficient personal savings but these constitute the entirety of a students' financial safety net and are required for accommodation deposits or similar).
- 3.7. We carried out a second joint survey of students without family support to investigate the financial implications of COVID-19 on this group further; this closed on Monday 25 May 2020 and received over 450 responses.²⁰
- 3.8. Of the care-experienced students who responded to this survey:
 - Only 18% said they were going to use help from university to pay for rent, utilities and food over the summer;

¹⁸ <https://becomecharity.org.uk/media/2279/supporting-care-experienced-and-estranged-students-in-higher-education-responding-to-covid-19.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://dfemedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/04/09/university-students-covid19-faq/>

²⁰ Forthcoming. Data available on request.

- 20% said they were going to rely at least partially on credit cards or other loans for these costs over the summer;
 - 9% said they were expecting to have to withdraw from university in order to claim Universal Credit or other benefits;
 - When asked how confident they were of fully covering their summer expenses on a scale of 1 (not at all confident) to 10 (very confident), the median response was 4.
- 3.9. Care-experienced students in higher education are already 38% more likely to withdraw from their courses and not return.²¹ The COVID-19 outbreak and ensuing financial instability and course disruption risks exacerbating this further. Given the transformational potential of higher education for some care-experienced people and the positive evidence of progression to graduate level employment²², urgent action must be taken to ensure care-experienced students can support themselves over the summer and complete their courses.

3.10. **Services story 5: Student care leaver struggling with money and fleeing a violent relationship**

Our advice team supported a student care leaver who was facing immediate financial difficulties and attempting to leave the city they were living in to find safety from a violent relationship. They were over the age of 24 and no longer in receipt of local authority support, despite a verbal agreement for this to continue whilst they were at university; this was not written into their pathway plan. They had applied to their university for financial support but were asked for evidence of hardship (including bank statements to be posted). They did not have access to a printer and could not visit a bank branch due to COVID-19. They were not able to work, and their employer was unable to use the furlough scheme due to the informal cash-in-hand nature of the job. They were also ineligible for Universal Credit as a full-time higher education student. We are continuing to advocate for this young person to receive financial support from their local authority.

3.11. **Recommendation:** The government should establish an emergency support fund for students in higher education without family support who are more likely to fall through existing support mechanisms (e.g. furloughing) and cannot claim Universal Credit.

3.12. We are aware of some confusion which remains at present around the existing duty for local authorities to provide vacation accommodation to care leavers in full-time higher education. We have previously supported care leavers battling with restrictive local authority policies which include specific vacation durations that do not align with their own institution's term times. Given some care leavers are currently facing financial difficulties and uncertainties around their student accommodation, providing clarification on this existing duty in the context of remote learning and disrupted term times would be beneficial.

3.13. **Recommendation:** The government should provide clear guidance to local authorities on their duty to provide vacation accommodation for care leavers during this time.

²¹ <https://www.nnecl.org/file/HERACLESFinalreport.pdf>

²² <https://www.unitefoundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Positive-Impact-Report.pdf>

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