

# DESTINATION UNKNOWN:

Improving transitions for care leavers and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.



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## FOREWORD

Every young person has the right to lead a happy and fulfilling life. Yet the transition to official adulthood can be a difficult and daunting journey, often characterised by uncertainty, vulnerability and instability.

For young people who have spent time within the care system or have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), this can be a particularly challenging time. Many have experienced disruption, loneliness and insecurity in their lives. Even with high quality care and support before they turn 18, too many young people fall through the cracks because the right services are not in place to support them as they enter adulthood.

In recent years the Department for Education has, quite rightly, elevated transitions support to the forefront of its agenda; with consecutive ministers announcing policy measures to improve the support available to care leavers in particular.

Despite this increased political focus, care leavers and young people with SEND are still struggling to achieve positive longer-term outcomes post-18.

It is a fact that care leavers remain disproportionately overrepresented in the prison and homeless populations, are more likely to suffer from mental health difficulties, and are less likely to be in education, employment or training than their peers.

Sufficient ongoing support for young people with SEND is also being limited post their 18th birthday, despite the reforms introduced by the Children and Families Act 2014 to extend support up to age 25.

There is so much more we can do to fix this.

The children's services sector, including local authority and independent providers, plays a critical role in supporting children from the day they enter care or specialist education to the day they leave. These services provide the specialist care and support these children require during the times when they need it most.

Given the steadily increasing demand for these services at a time of constrained funding, the children's services sector as a whole does an outstanding job in working together to provide high quality services within some very restricted budgets.

However, this dedicated investment – in the form of care, support and education throughout this time – too often results in the young person encountering a cliff edge at age 18 (and sometimes earlier), with support unjustly changed or removed at a fundamentally crucial time in a young person's life.

In this report we seek to identify and highlight the gaps in transitions support and how we genuinely believe these can be best addressed to deliver positive, long-term outcomes for vulnerable young people.

All our young people deserve to reach their full potential – and together we can ensure that happens.



**Andrew Isaac**, Chair, Children's Services Development Group (CSDG)

# INTRODUCTION

Children's services across the country are regularly confronting increased pressure. More children and young people than ever before are entering care or being identified as having complex special educational needs and disabilities.

As a coalition of providers working across children's services (fostering, residential care and special schools), CSDG's members are dedicated to ensuring the young people in our care receive the very best possible support to meet their individual needs. Quality is always, and will always be, at the heart of our provision.

The independent sector plays an essential role in helping local authorities meet demand for children's services, particularly for young people with the most complex needs who local authorities themselves cannot always support directly.

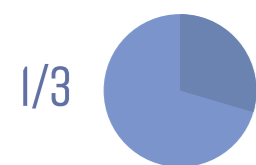
We categorically believe all young people with SEND and those children that are looked after should be prepared for adulthood from the day they enter care or specialist education.

Considerable investment is consistently made by both local authorities and independent providers in ensuring the best possible care and support is provided and positive outcomes are achieved for each individual vulnerable young person. However, in our members' experience, this is not always translated into a successful transition to adulthood. In fact, the longer-term outcomes for many vulnerable young people are anything but positive.

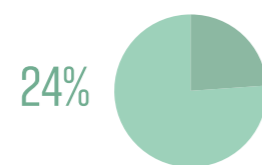
This is an issue of huge concern to CSDG's members. We provide very limited adult services directly and have seen a growing number of examples where young people who have to move out of our care at age 18 are not subsequently provided with the level of support they need to live positive adult lives.

This is incredibly frustrating. All of those involved in their earlier care and education only want the best for these young people. Instead they are finding funding is cut-off or greatly reduced, young people are moved into inappropriate accommodation, or they are simply left to fend for themselves.

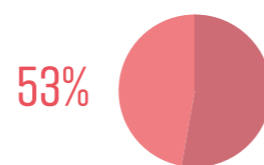
Given these circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that:



- **One third** of care leavers experience homelessness in the first two years of leaving care;<sup>1</sup>



- An estimated **24%** of the prison population have spent some time in care;<sup>2</sup>



- **53%** of care leavers aged 19-21 are not in education, employment or training (NEET) or their destination is unknown by local authorities.<sup>3</sup>

These outcomes are unacceptable and come with a significant impact on these vulnerable young people. They also present a huge and unnecessary cost to the public purse, wasting the earlier investment made in putting these young people in the best possible position before they turn 18.

It does not have to be this way. That is why CSDG has developed this report, with invaluable input from local authority commissioners, charities and campaign groups working with care leavers and young adults with SEND. We have sought to assess current transitions provision and its outcomes, identify the gaps in support, and make recommendations we believe will address these issues and ensure positive outcomes for all vulnerable young people transitioning into adulthood.

# METHODOLOGY

This report has been informed and developed through:

- Desk-based research on the transitions support and funding available for young people leaving care and with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).
- Analysis of Department for Education data on the characteristics and outcomes of looked after children, children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and care leavers.
- Interviews and discussions with representatives from the local government, looked after children and SEND sector. This includes:
  - Abigail Gill, Policy and Research Manager, Centre Point
  - Local Authority Service Director (Early Help and Safeguarding)
  - Andrew Neilson, Director of Campaigns, Howard League for Penal Reform
  - Brenda Farrell, Head of Business Fostering & Adoption, Barnardo's
  - Charlotte Goulding, Social Care Policy and Practice Support Manager, NICE
  - Claire Dorer, Chief Executive, NASS
  - Dr Laura Janes, Legal Director, Howard League for Penal Reform
  - Edward Nixon, Every Child Leaving Care Matters Campaign (ECLCM)
  - Local Authority Care Leavers Strategy Lead
  - Lucy Butler, Oxfordshire County Council
  - Matt Utley, Commissioning Manager, West London Alliance, Ealing Council
  - Natalie Latham, Senior Engagement Officer, Care Leaver Covenant
  - Professor Julie Selwyn CBE, Professor of Education and Adoption, University of Oxford
  - Robert Cann, Policy and Research Officer, The Fostering Network
  - Cllr Roy Perry, Former Chair of Children and Young People Board, Local Government Association
  - Steve Crocker, Director of Children's Services, Hampshire County Council
- A survey of local authority commissioners, which took place between July-August 2019.
- Case study contributions from CSDG members and interviewees (please note all case studies have been anonymised).

We would like to thank everyone who has offered input and support to this report.

# ABOUT CSDG

The Children's Services Development Group (CSDG) is a coalition of leading independent providers of care and specialist education services for children and young people with complex needs.

We have worked and campaigned together since 2006, championing child-centred, outcomes-focused care for looked after children and young people and those with special educational needs that ensures their stable and successful transition into adulthood.

Our members are: Core Assets Group, Compass Community, Outcomes First Group, SENAD Group and Witherslack Group.

To get in touch with us, please contact us at [info@csdg.org.uk](mailto:info@csdg.org.uk).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All providers (local authority and independent sector) must prepare all children in care and young people with SEND for adulthood from the day they enter care or specialist education.
  - This should be a specific focus for Ofsted's Social Care Common Inspection Framework and the Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework, with providers held to account on achieving specific outcomes for care leavers and young people with SEND.



## LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

2. There should be effective duties placed on local authorities, supported by appropriate funding, to mandate service provision focused on improving the everyday life chances of care leavers and young people with SEND once they reach the age of 18.
  - All looked after children should be legally classified as 'looked after children', and entitled to remain in their existing accommodation (e.g. a children's home, foster care or special guardianship placement), with the same level of placement funding provided, until at least the end of the academic year in which they reach 18, with a fully funded Staying Put or continuing fostering option available to all looked after children up to age 21.<sup>4</sup>
  - Every local authority's care leaver local offer must be as clear, detailed and consistent as possible, with regular input and assessment by the Department for Education to ensure care leavers are accessing the support they need and are entitled to. To assist this, the Department for Education must prescribe a format for the local offer that clearly outlines entitlement and how that is locally accessed/delivered.
- The Children and Social Work Act 2017 must be updated to be clear that all care leavers must be provided, where possible, with continuity of access to care and support teams and at the very least a personal adviser, needs assessment and advice and support from the day they leave care. This must be offered proactively by the local authority until the age of 25. This should not be contingent on the care leaver informing the local authority that they wish to receive this support, or not be provided because they are working rather than in education or training.
- The SEND Code of Practice should be updated to state that:
  - "For a young person with an EHC plan, the local authority **must** ensure that the transition to adult care and support is well planned, is integrated with the annual reviews of the EHC plans, and reflects existing special educational and health provision that is in place." – rather than, as it currently states, "should ensure".
  - "19- to 25-year-olds with EHC plans **must** have free access to further education in the same way as 16- to 18-year-olds." – rather than, as it currently states, "should ensure".
  - "Very few moves from children's to adult services will or should take place on the day of someone's 18th birthday **and this should never happen if a young person has not yet completed the academic year in which they turn 18.**"
  - "Support should never cease before the end of the academic year, to allow young people to complete their programme of study. In the case of a young person who reaches their 25th birthday before their course has ended, the EHC plan must be maintained until the end of the academic year in which they turn 25." – rather than, as it currently states, "should generally cease at the end of the academic year" and "can" be maintained.



## FINANCIAL SUPPORT

3. Every looked after child and each young person with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan should be allocated a personal budget to fund all care, education (separate to those covered by the national funding formula for schools) and health needs. This will address the provision gaps created by the involvement of multiple agencies in a young person's support.
4. All local authorities should develop additional initiatives to support care leavers, such as offering funding for driving lessons, subsidised public transport, or membership to a gym, sports or other club membership. All care leavers, by default, should be exempt from paying council tax up to age 25 where they live independently.
5. A 'Transitions Support Bank' should be set up and run by central government which all care leavers and young people with EHC plans can use until they reach age 25 to request funding to support them into independence. This could include support with living costs, paying for training or upskilling programmes, or contributing to a house or flat deposit or tenancy fees.



## EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

6. The Department for Education should work with universities to provide greater assistance to care leavers in gaining access to, and remaining in, higher education. This should include reserving places for applicants, specific outreach and application support, providing access to free non-term-time accommodation, and peer mentor programmes to provide wrap-around support.
7. The Department for Education should expand its data on care leavers in higher education, capturing those in higher education after age 21 and tracking overall retention rates together with outcomes.
8. Further education and training establishments should review their SEND accessibility policies and procedures to ensure young people with SEND are afforded the same opportunities as their peers.



## UNREGULATED PROVISION

**9.** Ofsted must inspect all provision for care leavers aged 16 and above and regulation must be introduced to end the practice of these young people living in unregulated accommodation.

The government's recent proposal to ban the use of independent and semi-independent placements for children and young people under the age of 16 is very welcome but it does not go far enough to protect vulnerable young people.



## CRIMINALISATION OF CHILDREN IN CARE

**10.** The Department for Education and Ministry of Justice should develop mandatory guidance and protocols, in conjunction with local authorities, providers, police, schools and social workers, to promote more efficient and joined-up multi-agency working to stop the excessive criminalisation of children in care and care leavers and prevent longer-term contact with the criminal justice system.

**11.** Local authorities must fulfil their statutory duties in relation to supporting young people on release from detention if they qualify for support under Section 21 of the Children Act 1989.

## MENTAL HEALTH

**12.** Local authorities should be obliged to provide care leavers and young people with SEND who are leaving specialist education settings with free access to mental health support services, in line with their assessed health and emotional wellbeing needs, up to five years after leaving care or specialist education. Mental health and social care services must collaborate to ensure there is not a cliff edge of support in access to mental health services.



## THE CURRENT CONTEXT

The children's services sector provides an essential lifeline to the most vulnerable children and young people in our society. However, over the last five years, local authorities have been under significant financial pressure whilst demand for essential services has continued to increase.

These funding constraints have caused many local authorities to strip back their services to a basic 'core offer', at the expense of non-statutory services which they are not legally obliged to deliver. Cuts to early intervention services, such as the Sure Start programme, have taken away vital forms of support for families.

- The Local Government Association estimates that local authorities face an overall funding gap of £8 billion by 2025.<sup>5</sup>
- There were over 10,000 more looked after children in England in 2018/19 than in 2010/11.<sup>6</sup>
- The number of pupils with SEND increased for a third consecutive year to 1,318,330 in January 2019, representing a total of 14.9% of the total pupil population.<sup>7</sup>

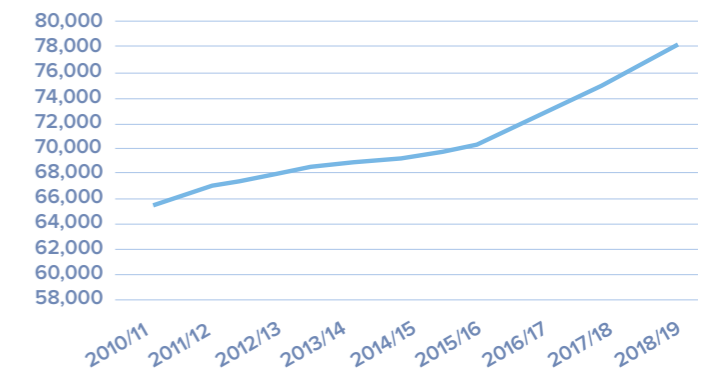
As well as increasing overall service demand, the complexity of young people's needs is rising.

- The number of older looked after children aged 16 and above entering care rose by over 29% between 2014/15 and 2018/19, from 4,930 children to 6,370.<sup>8</sup>
- The number of children 0-19 given a Statement of SEN or an EHC plan increased by 32% between 2010 to 2019, from around 230,000 children to nearly 300,000.<sup>9</sup>

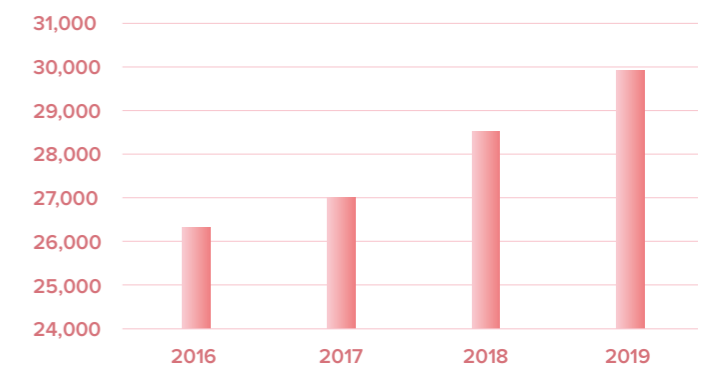
All combined, local authorities are having to find more placements for more children.

The increase in demand also results in local authorities having to support increasing numbers of care leavers. Between 2016 and 2019 the number of care leavers aged 19-21 increased by 14%, from over 26,000 care leavers to nearly 30,000.<sup>10</sup> Given the restrictive funding environment for local authorities, coupled with a decade of reduction in staff numbers, this is becoming an increasing challenge.

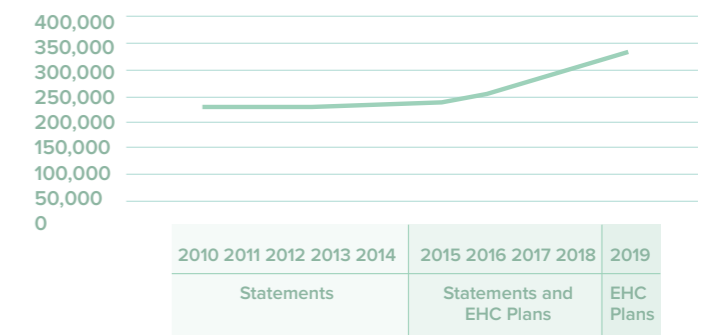
Number of looked after children in England 2010/11 – 2018/19



Number of care leavers aged 19 – 21 by year



Number of children and young people with Statements of SEN/EHC plans 0-19



2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Statements					Statements and EHC Plans		EHC Plans		

# INVESTMENT IN YOUNG PEOPLE

*“Not having a network of support can be one of the biggest struggles of young people leaving care. Realising you’re not equipped for adulthood – such as finding a job or stable accommodation – is a particularly difficult period of life.”*

*Lucy Butler, Oxfordshire Council*

## CASE STUDIES

In the short-term, high quality care for vulnerable children and young people is about giving them the support they need to live happy, safe and fulfilling lives.

Viewed in the longer-term, it is about investing in young people to prepare them for a successful and seamless transition to adulthood.

Turning 18 can be a significant milestone in any young person’s life. But for young people leaving care or specialist education, it means their relationship to everything that has supported them through their childhood – including social workers, carers, structures and processes – dramatically changes, regardless of how well they have been prepared for this during their time in care or specialist support.

The absence, and irregularity, of provision post-18 to facilitate the transition to adulthood can create a cliff edge for young people who are not necessarily being given the right support once they leave the responsibility of children’s services.

These case studies set out examples of where two local authorities withdrew funding for two young people living in CSDG members’ children’s homes when they reached 18 without offering appropriate alternative support. Both care leavers were financially supported by their former care provider, beyond their duty of care. One care leaver was able to flourish. However, external circumstances that could have been mitigated if their placement had been continued meant the other care leaver struggled and did not attend university as hoped.

## CRAIG’S STORY

Craig was a young person who had been in care and education for five years, living in an affluent village in the North West of England. He decided to leave school at the age of 16 to start working for a construction company.

When Craig turned 18, and he was due to leave the children’s home, the local authority only offered to provide him with a bedsit located in an undesirable town which was far from where he grew up and from where his children’s home had been. This would have meant leaving his current job and starting his adult life again from scratch.

CSDG’s member, who operated his provision, refused to let this happen. Determined to ensure that he lived nearby to his employer, they put down a deposit for him on a nearby flat and acted as a reference for him. His employer also increased his salary to make living more affordable. This meant that the local authority didn’t need to contribute any more funding towards his living costs and meant that Craig was able to carry on in his employment and secure a positive transition into adulthood. This was a positive outcome for Craig, but was only achieved thanks to the intervention of his former care provider and his employer.

## RORY’S STORY

Rory was a young person who had been in specialist care and education for five years. When he became 16, he moved to a mainstream sixth form college to continue his studies, but remained in the children’s home. His former school stayed in close contact to make sure he was doing well in his new college.

However, on his 18th birthday, the local authority pulled their funding for his children’s home placement, causing significant disruption to his studies. The CSDG member that operated the children’s home and his former school supported him by renting a flat at their expense.

Whilst living in the flat, his father was released from prison and re-entered his son’s life. This had a big impact on Rory, and soon afterwards his behaviour started to deteriorate as he no longer had the full support of the care environment he needed. If the local authority had continued to fund his placement until after he had finished studying, Rory would have been safeguarded against the detrimental influence of his father and would most likely have gone to university.

## THE LEGAL AND POLICY CONTEXT – WHAT’S ON OFFER?

The Children Act 1989 mandates local authorities to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in need by making provisions for care and support to meet those needs. Children leaving care are also entitled to be given advice and assistance from their local authority.

More recent legislation has strengthened these requirements, particularly in relation to support for care leavers and young people with SEND post-18. The Children and Families Act 2014 and the Children and Social Work Act 2017 set out provisions in relation to:

- Maintaining an EHC plan for a young person until the end of the academic year during which the young person attains the age of 18.
- Publishing information about services available to care leavers to assist them in, or in preparing for, adulthood and independent living (the local offer for care leavers).
- Providing advice and support for a care leaver aged between 21 and 25 if the care leaver informs the LA they would like such support.
- Provision of a personal adviser for a care leaver up to the age of 25.

However, the wording of such legislation is not clear and provides leeway that leads to inconsistency in provision, the quality of local offers, access to personal advisers and continuity of care and support.

For example, the Children and Social Work Act states local authorities “may” continue to provide services post-18 to reflect needs set out in an EHC plan, but they are not mandated to do so. This lack of concrete, definitive language on what must be provided will, by default, leave some commitments open to interpretation. This in turn will create limitations in service delivery that are exacerbated by funding constraints.

*“While the change in legislation to extend support for young people leaving care from 20 to 25 is positive, the financial impact on local authorities has been huge. Policies have come about without the right financial support and there is a pressure on local authorities to deliver and provide the support anyway because it’s the right thing to do.”*

*Local authority Service Director*

### SEND Code of Practice

The SEND Code of Practice is clear on the importance of proper preparation for adulthood as part of local authorities and providers' work with young people with SEND – and that this should continue post-18. It states that:

- Preparing for adulthood is a core part of local authorities and providers' work: "The local authority should ensure that the transition to adult care and support is well planned, is integrated with the annual reviews of the EHC plans and reflects existing special educational and health provision that is in place."
- A local authority can continue to provide services to a young person with an EHC plan on the same basis after the age of 18. Additionally, "19-25-year olds with EHC plans should have free access to further education in the same way as 16-18-year olds."
- Transitions to adulthood should be carefully planned for, and built into, EHC plans – this should not happen immediately upon a young person's 18th birthday.



### Ofsted guidance

Ofsted's guidance states that inspectors should consider transition planning and the support provided to care leavers and young adults with SEND, including outcomes achieved, when inspecting local authority children's services.

Ofsted is clear that inspectors will "examine evidence on how needs are identified, the provision made to meet those needs and the outcomes of all children and young people from 0 to 25" and should "review information about the effectiveness of the local area's approaches to improving outcomes, including transition arrangements between services and providers".

*"Children don't stop being vulnerable overnight just because of their age. It is crucial that legislation is more flexible and creative to capture what works best for children and young people and to ensure ongoing support so they don't face a cliff edge."*

*Brenda Farrell, Barnardo's*

However, while this is the recommended approach, it is not legally binding. CSDG's own members have experienced instances where support is removed at inappropriate times, making it very difficult for a young person to complete their education or to be appropriately supported to live as independently as possible in an adult social care setting.

Ofsted also mandates inspectors to consider whether local authorities are ensuring that:

- Care leavers have "timely, effective pathway plans", including transition planning for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Care leavers "develop the skills and confidence they need to maximise their chances of successful maturity to adulthood".
- Care leavers receive the right level or practical emotional and financial support until they are at least 21, and, where necessary, until they are 25.
- "Young people are encouraged to remain in care until their 18th birthday when this is in their best interest. They can remain living with their carers beyond their 18th birthday or, if more appropriate, receive ongoing support to live in permanent and affordable accommodation that fully meets their needs."
- Care leavers have good education and employment opportunities, including work experience and apprenticeships, and are progressing well through education or their chosen career.

While Ofsted's commitment to hold local authorities to account on these criteria is positive, too many young people still struggle to successfully transition to adulthood and live happy adult lives. Clearly, there is more that can be done to ensure a consistent and quality approach across all areas.

### Recent policy announcements

Over the past few years, the Department for Education has placed a considerable emphasis on improving care leaver support, with a number of recent policy initiatives announced, including:

- £19 million in funding to extend support for care leavers, including £10 million to expand Staying Put, £6 million to roll out Staying Close across the country, and £3 million to extend the Pupil Premium Plus to all 16-18 year old care leavers.
- The Care Leaver Covenant, which over 50 businesses, charities and government departments have signed up to, which provides paid work experience opportunities to young people leaving care.
- Asking universities to set out how they will support care leavers, such as offering 52-week accommodation.
- Social Impact Bond pilots to give care leavers "intensive support to engage in education, employment or training".

- £1,000 bursaries for care leavers to help them transition into work.
- Encouraging local authorities to "think creatively" about what they can do to support care leavers, such as introducing council tax exemptions.
- Considering ways to improve joint working between local authorities and Jobcentre Plus to ensure care leavers who are NEET receive the best support possible.

The government is clearly committed to tackling poor outcomes and providing additional support to vulnerable young people. However, despite greater policy attention, care leavers and young people with SEND are not achieving their potential, with considerable evidence of poor outcomes after they enter adulthood.

Beyond some welcome additional funding, none of the measures noted above create a legally binding duty or mandate specific actions from any organisation. Until that is the case, the changes these vulnerable young people need will not be realised.



### Recommendations

All providers (local authority and independent sector) must prepare all children in care and young people with SEND for adulthood from the day they enter care or specialist education. This should be a specific focus for Ofsted's Social Care Common Inspection Framework and the Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework, with providers held to account on achieving specific outcomes for care leavers and young people with SEND.

There should be effective duties placed on local authorities, supported by appropriate funding, to mandate service provision focused on improving the everyday life chances of care leavers and young people with SEND once they reach the age of 18.

## CASE STUDIES

These case studies tell the stories of two care leavers who experienced high quality care until the age of 18. One care leaver was advocated for and a successful Staying Put arrangement was secured to support her post-18. The other, despite the fantastic care she had experienced previously, was given no support by her local authority resulting in her nearly dropping out of college. She was only presented from doing so by the support of her former care provider and college.

We would like to thank the Howard League for providing the first case study.



### ZARA'S STORY

The Howard League has highlighted the story of Zara, who was in a specialist foster placement where her carers were able to effectively care for her complex needs. Throughout her teens, she was settled and doing very well with her carers. When she turned 18, the local authority pulled the placement at short notice as it no longer wanted to fund the placement even though Zara had made it clear she wanted to “stay put”.

The local authority identified a flat in a rough area of town, an unregulated provision which it said would assist Zara towards independent living. This was done in such a way that made Zara feel scared and unprepared for her transition beyond care.

Zara's foster parents wanted Zara to remain with them and felt as though they were put in a very awkward position. They wanted to advocate for Zara as all good parents would but were aware that there was a financial incentive for the placement to continue, just as there was an incentive for the local authority for the placement to end.

As such, it was paramount for Zara to receive independent legal advocacy to ensure her rights were respected and she was able to enter a Staying Put arrangement with her foster carers until she was ready to move into independent living in a gradual and planned way.

### MARIA'S STORY

Maria had been in foster care for a number of years, but when she became 18 her local authority stopped supporting her. The CSDG member that provided her foster care arranged for her to meet with her local authority aftercare advisor, but this advisor did not come to the initial meeting.

Maria and her foster care provider struggled to contact the aftercare advisor for a number of years, and when she reached 21 the local authority closed her case without informing her. She was visibly distressed when she found out, and so the CSDG member helped her to work through her options.

Eventually Maria decided to enrol in a local college and she asked the local authority to re-open her case until she was 25 as she was now in education. However, the local authority were not able to do this because they were understaffed. This news made Maria want to drop out of college as she was not sure how she would be able to complete her studies without the support of her local authority. Thankfully she was able to settle there with the support of her foster care provider and her college mentors.

## POST-18 OUTCOMES

Relative to their peers, care leavers and young people with SEND post-18 experience poorer, long-term life outcomes.

Through a combination of desk-based research and interviews with those working in and around transitions support, our findings show:

- Young people leaving care or with SEND are at greater risk of experiencing loneliness, isolation, and other mental health issues than their peers.
- They are also less likely to be in employment, education or training.
- Children in care are excessively criminalised and care leavers are overrepresented in the prison and probation population.
- Care leavers are also overrepresented amongst the homeless population.

These outcomes are impacted by pre-care experiences and instability and disruption while a young person is in care. Similarly, outcomes for young people with SEND are related to the quality of support they receive while in specialist education.

However, these outcomes are also due to the absence of regular and consistent support to facilitate a positive and seamless transition to adulthood. No matter how high quality their care and support is up until this point, if the right support is not in place post-18 then young people will struggle to successfully transition into adulthood.

Care leavers in particular are expected to become independent, self-sufficient adults much earlier than their non-care experienced peers. This accelerates the transition process for young people who have already faced significant life challenges and are without the support systems many of their peers take for granted.

For example, according to data from the European Union's statistical arm Eurostat, the average age of young people leaving home in the United Kingdom is around 25. In contrast, the majority of looked after children must leave their care setting at age 18.<sup>11</sup> Young people leaving home can also turn to their parents for financial support, and for advice and guidance on careers or education – something their care experienced peers rarely have regular access to.

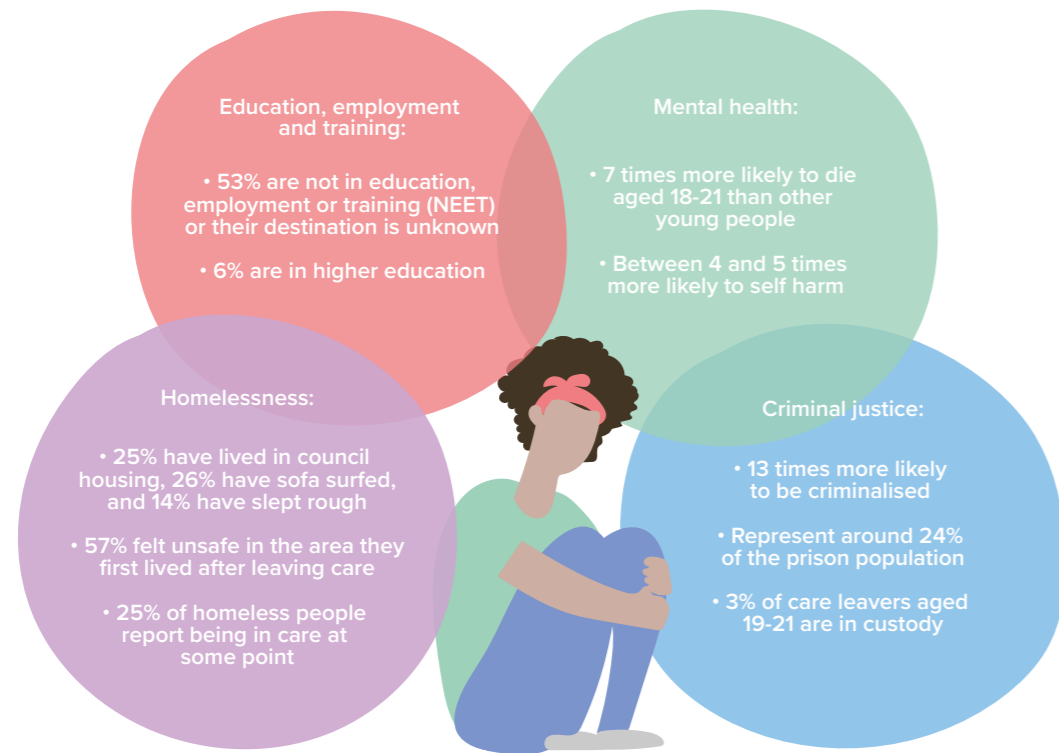
Many of our interviewees highlighted the fact that care leavers do not get the same type of support their peers might expect to receive. For example, advice on how to cook, pay bills, or find a suitable place to live is something many young people can ask for from their families. For many, this can extend to additional financial support where needed, whether that is helping pay for driving lessons, other forms of transport, or a place to live.

Some care leavers have a successful transition into adulthood. There is much evidence of good practice and positive outcomes. However, many vulnerable young people are still not getting the support they need. This can have highly detrimental consequences for each young person personally, but also to society as a whole.





## CARE LEAVER OUTCOMES



## MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

Young people with SEND and looked after children experience many of the same health risks as their peers. However, with 62% of looked after children in care due to abuse, neglect, or other adverse childhood experiences, there can be considerable long-lasting impacts on their mental health and emotional wellbeing. This can impact them throughout their time as a young adult and in later life as well.<sup>12</sup>

NICE data shows the rate of mental health disorders for looked after children aged 5-15 is a staggering 45%, jumping to 72% for children in residential care. For perspective, this compares to just 10% for the general population.<sup>13</sup>

Poor transitions from care only serve to exacerbate these issues. This was consistently highlighted during our interviews – children leaving care face significant emotional, behavioural and psychological challenges, particularly when having to make decisions for themselves for the first time.

Research from NICE has also highlighted looked after children and care leavers can be vulnerable to substance misuse, which can also contribute to mental health difficulties. A variety of risk factors were identified, including parental poverty, absence of support networks, parental substance misuse, poor maternal mental health, early family disruption, and, in the majority of cases, abuse and neglect.<sup>14</sup>

Edward Nixon from the ‘Every Child Leaving Care Matters’ campaign highlighted how children’s therapeutic needs are not met sufficiently. He added that almost every child who has been in care will have issues with attachment simply because they have not lived with their parents. This can lead to more developmental trauma later in life, increasing their risk of developing other mental health issues.

This can have considerably detrimental, and sometimes fatal, consequences. Care leavers are between four and five times more likely to self-harm in adulthood compared to their peers and are roughly seven times more likely to die aged 18-21 than other young people at a similar age.<sup>15</sup>

Care leavers are between **four and five times** more likely to **self-harm** in adulthood than their peers.

*“Mental health is a key issue for care leavers. Many are accessing support through CAMHS and when they reach the cliff edge and transition to adult services they aren’t getting the support they need.”*

*Abi Gill, Centrepoint*

The way mental health services are structured also plays into these poor outcomes. Young people treated by child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are transferred to adult mental health services once they turn 18.

For some, the transition is smooth, well-planned and well-managed, but in contrast others can be thrust into an unfamiliar system where they do not know when or if they will get help. Long waiting lists and variable support thresholds also limit access to treatment.

Centrepoint has highlighted how critical mental health support can be for young people transitioning out of care and how the jump to adult mental health services can leave many without any support at all. They can feel alone, vulnerable and can spiral into being homeless.

Access to continued mental health and therapeutic support is particularly important for young people who have SEND. All quality providers of specialist education will ensure they receive this as required during their time in education pre-18.

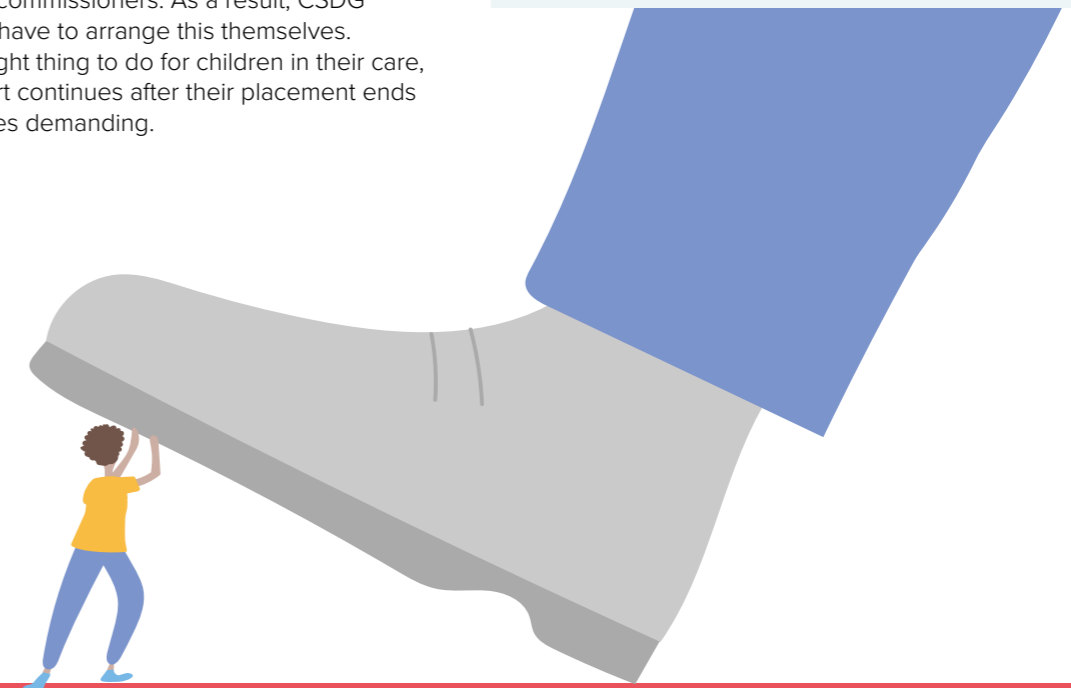
However, this can be challenging to secure directly from local NHS commissioners. As a result, CSDG members often have to arrange this themselves. Whilst it is the right thing to do for children in their care, ensuring support continues after their placement ends at 18 often proves demanding.

*“A third of people that Centrepoint supports are care leavers. The cliff edge from CAMHS to adult services is such a problem for them and leaves many feeling vulnerable and alone”.*

*Abi Gill, Centrepoint*

The rate of **mental health disorders** for looked after children aged 5-15 is **45%** and **72%** for children in residential care.

Care leavers are roughly **seven times more likely to die** aged 18-21 than other young people their age.



### Recommendation

Local authorities should be obliged to provide care leavers and young people with SEND who are leaving specialist education settings with free access to mental health support services, in line with their assessed health and emotional wellbeing needs, up to five years after leaving care or specialist education. Mental health and social care services must collaborate to ensure there is not a cliff edge of support in access to mental health services.

## EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

### Care leavers

Educational achievement as well as employment and training opportunities are significantly influenced by young people's experiences during care. A young person's stability at school, the number of absences and exclusions, the carers' educational experiences and wider support for education at home all play into achieving positive life outcomes.

Our analysis highlights looked after children generally experience poorer educational and employment outcomes than their peers. Of the looked after children in 2017-18 who took GCSEs, only 17.5% achieved a 4+ grade in English and Maths while 7.7% achieved a 5+ grade. This compares to 59.5% and 40.2% of non-care experienced children respectively.<sup>16</sup>

Inconsistent support post-18 was highlighted by interviewees as a key barrier in facilitating entry into education, employment and training.

According to our research, 53% of care leavers aged 19-21 are not in education, employment or training (NEET) or their destination was unknown by local authorities. This compares to around 12% of all young people in England.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, only 6% of care leavers aged 19-21 are in higher education.<sup>18</sup> This compares to the 34% of 18-year olds in the UK in 2019 who gained a place at university.<sup>19</sup>

*"One care leaver we've been in touch with was trying to find a job but was finding it hard because he'd been to so many schools during his time in care. One employer rejected him on the basis he was too 'disruptive', but the simple fact was he'd been moved around so much which wasn't his fault."*

*Edward Nixon, Every Child Leaving Care Matters*



Around **50% of care leavers** are not in education, employment or training, or their destination is unknown.

There can be many barriers preventing care leavers from attending university. One that was consistently highlighted during our interviews was the lack of non-term time accommodation. Unlike their peers, care leavers cannot go home to their families during university holidays. Unless they are given guaranteed 52-week accommodation, at an affordable rate, many care leavers will not be able to complete higher education.

A Service Director from a local authority told us that many universities had improved their offer to care leavers and wanted more to recognise the value and importance of providing additional support. This can include a care leaver bursary or support with paying for year-long accommodation.

She also noted that for many young people, full-time education is not the right option, or it can be a step too far from what they are used to. There has to be a greater range of more flexible opportunities for young people when they transition out of care.



### RACHEL'S STORY

One of our members was looking after Rachel, a young person who required specialist care and support. Throughout her care, they maintained a relationship with her adoptive family so that she could go home regularly, including on weekends.

Despite having an adoptive family, the local authority maintained her placement in the children's home because she had a higher level of need. They also paid for teaching staff to support Rachel with homework in

the evenings and to ensure she was developing in her new school. The funding continued right through until after her 18th birthday and she had finished sixth form, meaning she was effectively supported to apply for university.

Rachel went on to study Psychology at a red brick university, but if she hadn't had this level of support, her outcome would likely have been completely different.

It is crucial that greater assistance is given to care leavers both in accessing, and remaining, in higher education, further education, and training. One example of positive support is the Isle of Wight Council's 123 Programme which makes work experience, traineeships and apprenticeships within the council and with contracted services available to all care leavers.

The good practice examples noted above must be made more widespread and consistently available to care leavers, including reserving places for applications, specific outreach and application support, and universities guaranteeing affordable non-term time accommodation.

*"Children in care who are at university have nowhere to go at Christmas – they're essentially homeless. They're embarrassed by their corporate parents."*

*Edward Nixon, Every Child Leaving Care Matters*



### DEVID'S STORY

As an unaccompanied minor, he was granted leave to remain by the Home Office. He was an intelligent, articulate and driven young person and settled well into a foster family in Bristol, supported by a CSDG member.

After two years, Devid was excelling academically, achieving 10 GCSEs graded 8-6 and went on to study for his A levels. He was also selected for a City Leadership Programme, which identifies and invests in the lives of high-ability, aspirational students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

At the age of 18 when he was due to sit his A levels, he received the news that his Home Office application to remain in the UK was rejected and he was due to be deported. With only a few weeks to appeal, his head of year at his school set up an online petition which was signed by nearly 100,000 people, with his carers and other key figures in his community writing letters to the Home Office urging them to overturn their decision.

After beginning his journey as a vulnerable young person being trafficked across Europe, he was placed with a caring family in the UK who fought for his right to remain in the community where he belongs.

### Young people with SEND

Young people with SEND are much less likely to be in education, employment or training.

Our research found that as at 31 January 2019, there were 96,347 16-25 year olds with an EHC plan.<sup>20</sup> However, of these only 1,646 were in supported internships, 708 were undertaking apprenticeships, and 584 were enrolled in traineeships. All combined, this represents less than 5% of this group of young people. This figure should be significantly higher. By contrast, there were 742,400 people in apprenticeships in total in England in 2018/19,<sup>22</sup> while the most recent government estimate is that there are 70,000 interns in the UK at any one time.<sup>23</sup>

The introduction of supported internships in September 2013 was a positive step in encouraging young people with SEND to move into employment.<sup>24</sup> However, opportunities remain "patchy". As reinforced by the Education Select Committee's recent report on SEND, many post-16 options are "determined by what the market is prepared to offer, rather than by the needs of young people".<sup>25</sup> Overall, it found training and employment opportunities were poor, deriving from a fundamental lack of ambition for young people with SEND across the country.

This was reinforced in our interviews. Professor Julie Selwyn told us that disabled children are "often excluded" from the workforce, with insufficient appropriate opportunities that meet demand. There needs to be much greater focus on supporting young people with SEND into meaningful and supportive education, employment or training to ensure they are able to meet their full potential.

*"Unless there is a greater focus on supporting young people into meaningful and sustainable employment and independent living opportunities, we are letting down an entire generation of young people, putting greater pressure on the benefits and adult social care system, and creating long-term costs that are unnecessary and unpalatable."*

*Education Select Committee*

An estimated **24%** of the prison population have spent some time in care.



### Recommendations

The Department for Education should work with universities to provide greater assistance to care leavers in gaining access to, and remaining in, higher education. This should include reserving places for applicants, specific outreach and application support, providing access to free non-term-time accommodation, and peer mentor programmes to provide wrap-around support.

The Department for Education should expand its data on care leavers in higher education, capturing those in higher education after age 21 and tracking overall retention rates together with outcomes.

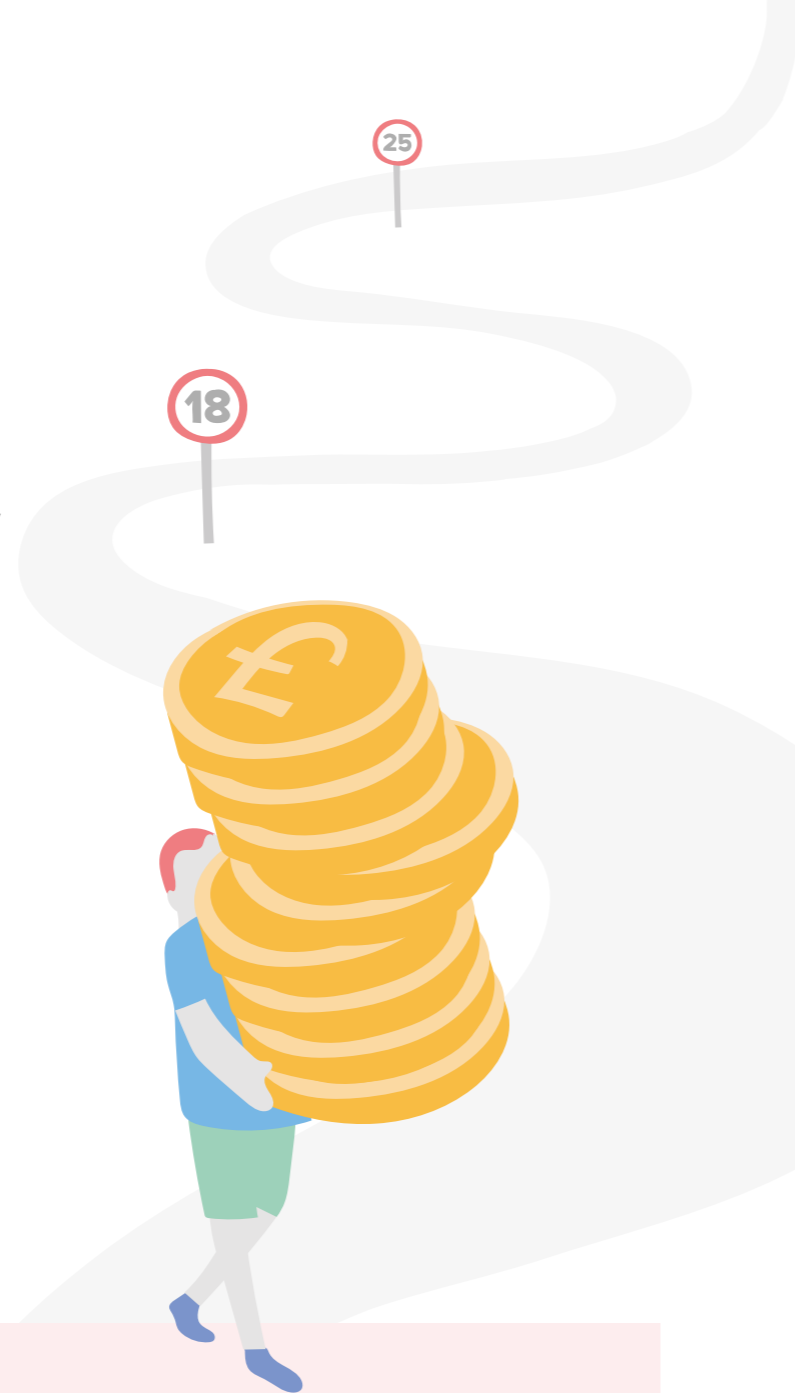
Further education and training establishments should review their SEND accessibility policies and procedures to ensure young people with SEND are afforded the same opportunities as their peers.

## JUSTICE SYSTEM

Care leavers are significantly overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Children in contact with the care system have been found to be more likely to offend and commit multiple offences between the ages of 10 and 17, and begin offending earlier than their peers.

For children in local authority care, placement type and instability link to higher offending rates, with the unnecessary criminalisation of children in care homes partly to blame.<sup>26</sup> Children in care are 13 times more likely to be criminalised than other young people.<sup>27</sup>

The Howard League for Penal Reform's research suggests there is a "systemic" problem that leads to care staff resorting to calling the police, often in relation to minor incidents that would never receive such a response if they had occurred in a family home. This exposes looked after children to the criminal justice system unnecessarily, and ultimately increases the likelihood of contact with the system later in life. Figures show that looked after children who have been in care for at least 12 months are three times more likely to offend than all children.<sup>28</sup>



### TOMMY'S STORY

Tommy had been in foster care from a young age. He had been receiving specialised support from a CSDG member to help him build up the skills and training he needed to find work, and was enrolled in a 20 week NEET programme in the run up to his 18th birthday. During this period, his girlfriend gave birth to his child.

Unfortunately, when he turned 18 the local authority withdrew funding support for him, and he was evicted from his accommodation the following week. Social services then removed the baby from him and his girlfriend.

The system ultimately let Tommy down; his entire support network was removed from him over the space of a couple of weeks. Shortly afterwards he became involved in a serious incident and he is now serving a custodial sentence in an adult prison.

Andrew Neilson from the Howard League highlighted that local authorities are not consistently meeting their obligations, under Section 21 of the Children Act 1989, to provide accommodation for children who have been in police detention. This exacerbates challenges for these young people and increases the likelihood of further criminalisation and a negative transition into adulthood.

In the current prison intake, an estimated 24% of the prison population is estimated to have experienced care at some point during their lives.

3% of care leavers aged 19-21 as of 31 March 2019, were in custody.

The proportion of care leavers in custody has remained fairly consistent throughout the last few decades; the 1991 National Prison Survey reported 26% of prisoners had been cared for by a local authority at some point in their childhood.

In addition, around one third of prisoners have a learning and/or other disability, demonstrating the detrimental impact poor support for young people with SEND can have.

Tackling the excessive criminalisation of children in care is key to preventing young people from entering the criminal justice system later on in life, perpetuating a cycle of poor life outcomes. Children's home staff must be able to work proactively and positively with the police, with clear guidance and protocols to support joined-up working and prevent longer-term contact with the criminal justice system.

*"The damage of a prison experience on a young person, even if it's a short sentence, is incredibly significant. This is made worse by the fact most of the children in secure training centres or in custody shouldn't be there."*

*Andrew Neilson, The Howard League*

*"Too many young people are in custody – some for serious offences, but some for tiny breaches of community orders. Reducing criminalisation of children in care is positive, but there's no similar process in place anywhere for care leavers."*

*Local authority Strategic Lead for Care Leavers*



### Recommendations

The Department for Education and Ministry of Justice should develop mandatory guidance and protocols, in conjunction with local authorities, providers, police, schools and social workers, to promote more efficient and joined-up multi-agency working to stop the excessive criminalisation of children in care and care leavers and prevent longer-term contact with the criminal justice system.

Local authorities must fulfil their statutory duties in relation to supporting young people on release from detention if they qualify for support under Section 21 of the Children Act 1989.



*“The black bin bag has unfortunately become the emblem of children leaving care. No child would ever leave their family home in a bin bag – we need to end this stigma.”*

*Brenda Farrell, Barnardo’s*

## HOMELESSNESS AND POOR HOUSING

Leaving care should not lead to unstable accommodation, sofa surfing, or in the worst-case scenario, homelessness. However, this can be a major issue facing young care leavers. Being unprepared to manage finances, not having enough support to pay rent, or even moving to a new area can all contribute to this instability that can have devastating consequences.

Centrepoint’s research has found:

- 25% of care leavers have lived in council housing at some point since leaving care.
- 26% have sofa surfed, while 14% have slept rough.
- Over half (57%) felt unsafe in the area they first lived after leaving care.

On top of this, one third of care leavers experience homelessness in the first two years of leaving care and 25% of all homeless people have been in care at some point.<sup>31</sup>

There are also increasing issues with the use of unregulated accommodation for 16-17 year olds and 18 year old care leavers. This seeks to provide support, rather than care, to young people transitioning out of care. For many, particularly for those who do not want to live with their foster parents or in a children’s home, high quality provision serves as an essential stepping stone to independence. With the right provider who puts the interests of these children first, it can be the right choice.

## ELISE’S STORY

*(with thanks to Centrepoint for providing this case study)*

Centrepoint raised the case of Elise, who entered care aged seven, alongside her five siblings, when she was taken away from her parents. Throughout her childhood, she was moved from pillar to post before finally being housed with a very supportive foster carer. When she turned 18, and with very little notice, the local authority signalled she would be removed from the placement as they were no longer willing to pay for it. This was against her own wishes and those of her foster parent.

She was moved into a hostel in the centre of London, surrounded by other young people who had had troubled upbringings. Everyone’s needs were complex, and the people she was surrounded by were very unwelcoming. Elise was coerced into committing crimes by some of the other young people in the hostel. When she didn’t comply with their wishes, she was abused and bullied.

Elise couldn’t afford food or other necessities and so started having to look for work straight away. This was even though she wanted to go on to study at university. She had no time to think about what she wanted to do.

Eventually, she sought the support of Centrepoint, who moved her into one of their hostels. There she was provided with space and time to think, and the mental health support she needed.

In her own words, she said that “it’s a shock – you wake up on your 18th birthday and everything’s changed!” She added: “If you want someone to feel different to the people around them, make them a young person in care on their 18th birthday.”

When we asked Elise what went wrong, she said: “There has to be a better system than what we have now. Putting every young person who’s had a troubled upbringing into the same building – it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy!”

However, much of this provision is not being properly run, offering unsupervised care rather than the right level of support to safeguard young people and help them develop the skills they need to live independently. In some instances, this is leaving these young people at significant risk of exploitation. To address this, it is essential such settings are regulated, have proper quality requirements, and be inspected by Ofsted.



## Recommendation

Ofsted must inspect all provision for care leavers aged 16 and above and regulation must be introduced to end the practice of these young people living in unregulated accommodation.

## COST IMPLICATIONS OF POOR OUTCOMES

Not only do poor outcomes have significantly detrimental consequences for young people, they come at a cost to society that could easily be prevented if the right support was put in place for all young people with SEND and care leavers post-18.

- As at 12 April 2019, there were 82,769 incarcerated adults in the UK.
- Around 24% had experienced care – 19,864.
- The average yearly cost of a prison place is £37,543 per prisoner.
- **Therefore, it is not unreasonable to estimate that the cost of incarcerating care leavers is approximately £746 million per year.**<sup>32</sup>

If we could prevent children in care, and subsequently care leavers, from being in contact with the criminal justice system, we could potentially save millions of pounds of public funding from being spent on prison and probation services that could be used elsewhere.

This is before we take account of the wider savings in terms of reduced rehabilitation costs, and the value derived from supporting care leavers to make a positive economic contribution to society by increasing their participation in the labour market. This would also serve to reduce costs related to unemployment benefits and other welfare needs.

Similarly, other areas of unnecessary cost to the public purse stem from demand for services relating to mental health problems, substance misuse, alcohol dependency, and other associated health services. These services are incredibly important to many people, but we can reduce long-term demand for them from care leavers if we invest in providing the right support up front instead of leaving looked after children to fend for themselves when they turn 18.

- Estimates of the annual costs of homelessness to the government range from £24,000 – £30,000 per person.<sup>33</sup>
- One third of care leavers experience homelessness in the first two years of leaving care.
- In the year ending 31 March 2018, 9,260 young people left care on or after their 18th birthday.
- Taking that statistic above, that means around 3,086 (a third) of them will be homeless at some point in the following two years.
- Lengths of homelessness will vary, but even taking just a third of those young people (1,028) and assuming they will be homeless for three months, the financial costs incurred would be around **£6.17 million.**



## GIVING CARE LEAVERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SEND THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT THEY NEED

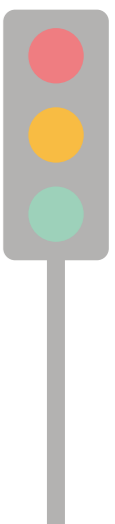
Too often care leavers and young people with SEND have problems accessing the financial support that they require – and should be entitled to – to provide for their own needs.

It can be particularly challenging to access the funding that they need to secure housing, to travel to job interviews or access education and training once they have left care or specialist education. Therefore, local authorities must also provide bespoke funding initiatives for these young people to ensure that they are able to get the best start in life. This could include funding for driving lessons, subsidised public transport and exempting all care leavers who live independently from paying council tax up to the age of 25. There are many local authorities that demonstrate good practice in this regard already, but this support is not consistent across the country.



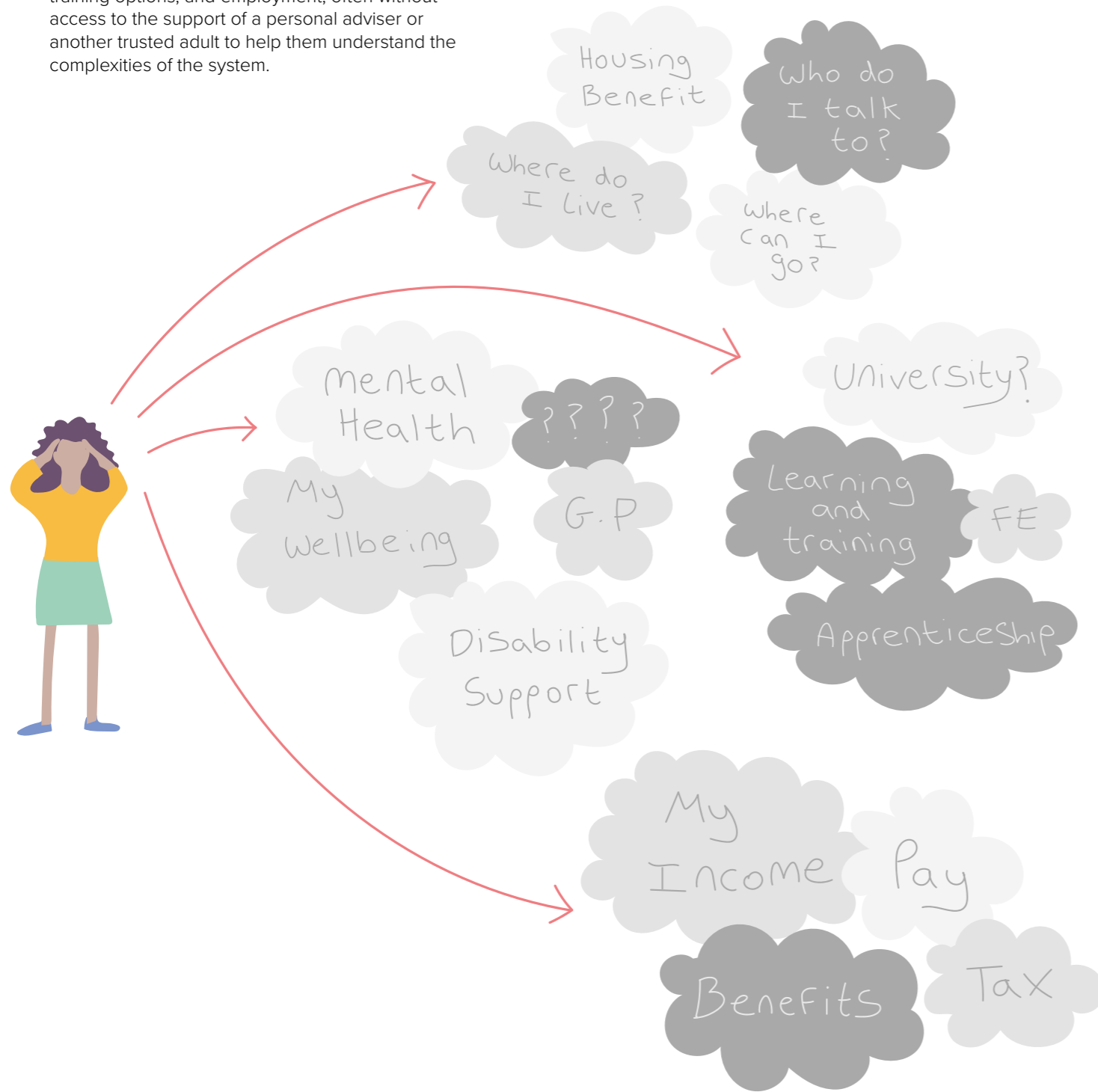
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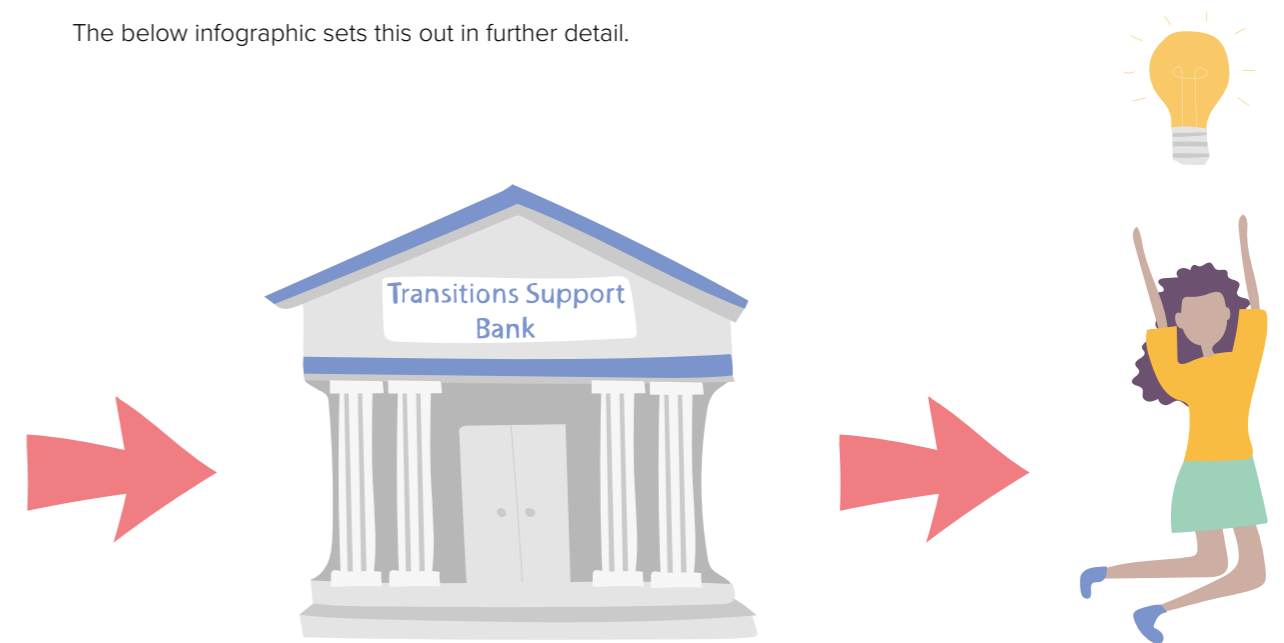
# TRANSITIONS SUPPORT BANK

National government has a role to play too in helping young people with SEND and care leavers to more easily navigate the complex system of support available to them. For example, when a young person leaves care aged 18 they have to grapple with issues such as housing, access to benefits, education and training options, and employment, often without access to the support of a personal adviser or another trusted adult to help them understand the complexities of the system.



To simplify this process, and provide support to vulnerable young people at a challenging time in their lives, the government should create a 'Transitions Support Bank'. This would centrally hold all funding available to care leavers and young people with EHC plans after they reach 18, making it easier to access support and helping them transition into independence before they are aged 25. This would also serve to remove the risk of postcode lotteries in funding and provision preventing some young people from accessing support that is available to others in different local authority areas.

The below infographic sets this out in further detail.



## Recommendations

Every looked after child and each young person with an EHC plan should be allocated a personal budget to fund all care, education (separate to those covered by the national funding formula for schools) and health needs. This will address the provision gaps created by the involvement of multiple agencies in a young person's support.

All local authorities should develop additional initiatives to support care leavers, such as offering funding for driving lessons, subsidised public transport, or membership to a gym, sports or other club membership. All care leavers, by default, should be exempt from paying council tax up to age 25 where they live independently.

A 'Transitions Support Bank' should be set up and run by central government which all care leavers and young people with EHC plans can use until they reach age 25 to request access to funding to support them into independence. This could include support with living costs, paying for training or upskilling programmes, or contributing to a house or flat deposit or tenancy fees.

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