

Policy report

# From care to where?

## Care leavers' access to accommodation



centre  
point

give homeless  
young people  
a future



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Thank you to the young people and practitioners who took part in this research either through interviews or taking part in the surveys. Their words and stories can be heard throughout this report.

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Conducted by Centrepoin, 2017

## Recommendations

Care leavers are the responsibility of the corporate parent. While other young people will continue to have the support of their parents well into adulthood, the government must ensure that care leavers receive the support they need too.

### The Government should:

- Exempt all care leavers under the age of 21 from council tax payments to ensure uniformity across local authorities
- Amend homelessness legislation to extend priority need to include all care leavers under the age of 25
- Remove homelessness intentionality for all care leavers under the age of 21
- Extend the exemption of care leavers from the Shared Accommodation Rate of Local Housing Allowance until the age of 25
- Establish a national care leaver rent deposit scheme to enable care leavers to access private rented accommodation
- Extend the entitlement of looked-after children to an Independent Visitor to care leavers aged 25
- Process all benefit claims from care leavers up to 8 weeks before their 18th birthday to ensure they receive their first payment as soon as they turn 18
- Bring children's legislation in line with homelessness legislation by enabling all care leavers, not just those assessed as homeless, to qualify for local connection if they have been resident in that area for at least two years

### Local authorities should:

- Formally review their Pathway Plan process in consultation with looked-after children and care leavers to ensure it is accessible and flexible
- Ensure all care leavers in their area have access to floating support at any point until the age of 25, including those in private rented accommodation
- Ensure all care leavers in their area know about and have access to an independent person at any point until the age of 25

## Introduction

**A safe and secure home is the foundation on which care leavers can build their lives after care. Having this base means that they can fulfil ambitions, gain qualifications or enter work, establish themselves within a community and put the difficulties of their childhoods behind them.**

However, something is still going wrong for some of the most vulnerable young people. Some care leavers face a journey to independence permeated by housing insecurity. Of the care leavers surveyed for this research, 26 per cent have sofa surfed and 14 per cent have slept rough since leaving care.

This report is based on the accounts of young people who have left the care system and have navigated their way through the complex systems and processes to find a place to call home. They have lost tenancies, been homeless, accessed benefits, lost college places, battled poor mental health and failed to manage their finances. However, they are also highly resilient young people. They have gone back to college, gained employment, made new friends, and learnt the skills needed to manage their own tenancy. They have persevered.

While there have been many positive policy changes aimed at improving outcomes for care leavers in recent years, accommodation remains an area fraught with problems. Local authority practitioners are struggling to balance increasing workloads. Some of the mechanisms designed to ease the transition to independence – pathway plans, joint protocols and reciprocal arrangements – are not working as effectively as they could. External factors are also increasing the pressure on local authorities, such as increasing demand for services and a challenging housing market.

There is cross-party backing for providing care leavers with the best possible support and for tackling and preventing homelessness. This report outlines the difficulties faced by care leavers which are placing them at greater risk of housing instability. We also outline the challenges facing local authorities in meeting the needs of their care leaver population. These challenges are not insurmountable.



## Methodology

The aim of this research was to explore care leavers' accommodation journeys since leaving care, the challenges to accessing accommodation and what would have made their journey easier. The following methods were used:

### 1. Care leaver survey

Between October 2016 and February 2017, 87 care leavers were surveyed about the challenges they had faced when moving from care to independence; particularly relating to accommodation. Participants were over 16 years of age, had left the care system and are from across England.

### 2. Case study interviews with care leavers

Case study interviews were conducted with 12 care leavers in January and February 2017. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted either by phone or face to face. The young people interviewed had turbulent journeys out of care. Their experiences represent some of the poorest cases of leaving care; this is not necessarily representative of all care leaver experiences.

### 3. Practitioner survey

Between January and March 2017, 99 leaving care practitioners from 43 local authorities across England participated in the survey. It investigated the services available to care leavers in the practitioners' local areas, gaps in these services and the availability of housing options.

### 4. Interviews with practitioners

Interviews with five leaving care practitioners were conducted in February 2017. All practitioners were working with care leavers across England at the time of the interview. Interviews were semi-structured, in-depth and conducted over the phone. Participants discussed their professional thoughts and experiences of providing services to care leavers.



## Preparing to leave care

Time spent under the care of the local authority influences how successfully a care leaver lives independently after care. The reasons for entering the care system also continue to have a long-lasting impact; the majority of children enter the care system due to abuse or neglect.<sup>1</sup> This section outlines the events within the years immediately preceding a young person's exit from care, which impact on their ability to live independently.

### Coming into care late at 16/17

Entering care at a later age has been linked to poorer long term outcomes.<sup>2</sup> One practitioner indicated that this is often because the young person has remained within a household facing difficulty for a longer period.

**“Children who come into the system earlier tend to do better. I would argue it's not that they do better in care, but the length of disadvantage prior to coming into care; it's the impact of that. It's not that coming into care late harms that, it's the fact that you didn't come into care earlier.”**

- Local authority practitioner

Young people who entered care at 16 or 17 described this period as a 'grey area' as they were entering care at the age when most young people are preparing to leave. There was little time to settle and receive appropriate support. This meant that some young people wanted to leave care as soon as possible.

**“At that age I wanted to be on my own. I didn't want to be with another family. So I was quite vulnerable in what I thought it [leaving care] was going to be like.”**

- Olivia



**20 per cent** of care leavers entered care aged 16 or 17

Care leavers who entered care late also described having very little time to understand the meanings and processes of being in care.

**“It wasn't until I was a care leaver that I actually understood the reasoning of being in care and the process of that because it was such a weird age to go into care.”**

- Emily

### A sudden or early exit from care

**“I would say that leaving care was thrust upon me. I didn't want to leave care; obviously you want all the support you need, all the support you can get.”**

- James

Some participants described a transition from care which was abrupt, poorly planned and not properly explained to them. As other studies have also found, the experiences of these young people 'falls short of the gradual, supported transition that is proven to be the most effective'.<sup>3</sup>

Some care leavers experienced a very quick turnaround between finding out that they would be leaving care and moving.

“I was turfed out on my 18th birthday. I got woken up at nine o’clock, and they said ‘you can’t stay past nine o’clock’. And then they just kicked me out. They went ‘here’s £10 travel money’... They gave me directions to my new place. In the lead up I hadn’t got a clue what was going to happen. They said ‘we think we’ve got a placement for you’, that’s literally as far as I got until then. So I thought I was getting turfed out to be homeless at the start. I felt a bit crap, but you get used to the unpredictability of moving and not knowing where you’re going. You deal with it.”

- Michael

In some cases, accommodation options were either not given or not fully explained.

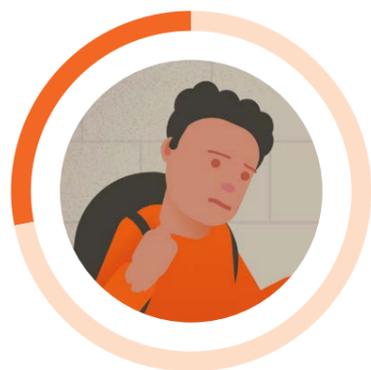
“It wasn’t really much, it was just the hostel and that was it. They were saying care or hostel. It didn’t give me much options, but because I wanted to leave care I went for the hostel. Being in care was quite painful; I was badly treated in my last but one placement.”

- Jessica

Like other studies, this research found that care leavers experienced ‘rapid and crowded transitions to adulthood’, whereby the key milestones which signify adult attainment such as gaining employment, setting up one’s home and managing domestic life occur at the same time.<sup>4</sup> We asked young people which key life events they had experienced during the year after leaving care and found that 28 per cent had experienced more than three.



**42 per cent** of care leavers left care aged 16 or 17



**28 per cent** of care leavers left care aged 18

**In the first year after leaving care:**

- **47 per cent** of care leavers made new friends
- **45 per cent** of care leavers started college or university
- **42 per cent** of care leavers got a new job
- **35 per cent** of care leavers moved house
- **33 per cent** of care leavers reconnected with their family and friends
- **18 per cent** of care leavers met a new partner
- **5 per cent** of care leavers became a parent

The contraction of these life events means that care leavers skip the phase where most young people experience freedom, exploration, reflection, risk taking and the formation of their own individual identity.<sup>5</sup> This can lead to poorer future outcomes in areas including education and wellbeing.<sup>6</sup>

**Unrealistic expectations about life after care**

Both care leavers and practitioners felt that unrealistic expectations about living independently were barriers to a successful transition. Some had no clear understanding of what it means to sustain a tenancy, pay rent or apply for benefits. Many care leavers were simply excited to have more independence and freedom away from foster carers or social workers. However, upon reflection, they acknowledged that they were not prepared and did not really understand what living independently involved.

“To be honest I didn’t really understand it. I probably thought it was quite exciting to live by myself and to finally have my own freedom. I do realise now, a lot later on in my life that it actually probably wasn’t the best decision for me. I hadn’t even taken my GCSEs at that point.”

- Sarah

As there is a level of option around engagement and support, some young people may disengage when they first live independently. Less structured accommodation options represent a big shift. It may be later on down the line if they’re struggling that a care leaver may seek extra support, which may not always be easily accessible at that point.

One practitioner described how changes to policies and housing availability can also lead to young people having misguided understandings about leaving care.

“I think they have unrealistic expectations sometimes in regards to housing. What’s been quite unfortunate for some care leavers that I’ve been working with, when they were younger it was a given that they would get a one bedroom flat once they turned 21. Then since that time that’s not happened because there’s the housing crisis, local policies have changed which means it’s unlikely that you’re going to get a one bedroom flat now.”

- Local authority practitioner

**Inadequate pathway planning**

**Pathway planning**

The Children Act 1989 requires that all eligible children, relevant and former relevant children have a pathway plan recorded in writing. The pathway plan identifies a young person’s needs and how these will be met until they turn 21. This includes the services, skills and actions needed for young people to successfully transition to living independently.

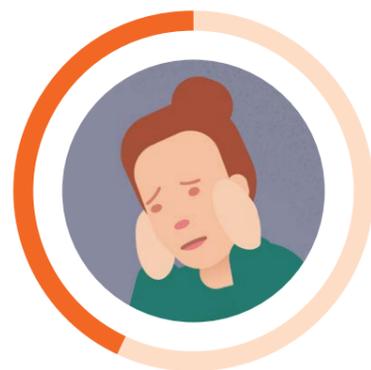
The pathway plan should contain explicit details of the suitability of accommodation, financial arrangements and practical skills for living independently. Contingencies and scope for change should be included. This is an ongoing document that is regularly reviewed so that moves can be planned between social workers, personal advisors and young people. Young people should have an active part in pathway planning.

Some care leavers did not feel actively involved in decisions about their accommodation. While practitioners reported that discussions about leaving care usually begin when the young person is 16, some young people had not engaged with or understood these discussions. Pathway plans document how a care leaver’s needs will be met. However, many of those interviewed had not been actively involved in creating their pathway plans, did not have one, were unsure about its contents or did not know how to access it.

“I didn’t really know what a pathway plan was or what it was supposed to do. I thought it was something that we just had to fill out in meetings. I didn’t really understand what impact this pathway plan had or could do. I realise now it’s actually quite a valuable piece of paper.”

- Stephanie

Some young people described how initial discussions about accommodation were not followed-up and decisions were made without them. Both practitioners and young people felt it was treated as a statutory tick-box exercise and was not a collaborative, active process. Care leavers thought that being more involved would have been beneficial. In hindsight, one care leaver thought that taking her plan home would have helped her remember what had been discussed and which actions to complete before her next appointment.



*43 per cent of care leavers felt the main professional supporting them had been unhelpful in helping them think about future housing needs*

## Key barriers to effective pathway planning:

### 1. Poor relationships with social workers

Young people talked about poor relationships with social workers around the time they were preparing to leave care. This was not conducive to positive discussions about their future and disengagement was common.

“I wasn’t really involved in my pathway plan because of the social worker that I had before... I wasn’t intrigued to go and be involved with what everyone was saying because I wasn’t speaking to her. I didn’t feel that I could speak to her.”

- Sarah

### 2. Inflexibility of pathway plans

None of the practitioners interviewed thought that pathway planning is as effective as it could be. They were described as too prescribed, lengthy, not service user friendly and requiring information that was not relevant to the young person at that time. There is also insufficient opportunity to include the things that are important to the young person.

“They want to talk about what’s important to them so I think if it was a bit more centred on them then they’d be more inclined to take part.”

- Local authority practitioner

### 3. Poor timing

Pathway planning often came at a stage when young people felt disillusioned and sometimes angry about being in care. They weren’t in the right headspace to engage in constructive conversations. Despite this, the pathway plan was completed as a tick box exercise and the priority was simply getting it done, rather than getting it done well.

Despite the problems, practitioners and young people agreed that the principles behind pathway planning are crucial. It is the final statutory tool and the last chance to get things right.

“Once the young person is 18 there is no other statutory assessment, that’s really our only chance to risk assess and to get that stuff out in writing.”

- Local authority practitioner

Many local authorities try to make the pathway planning process more effective. One practitioner described how his team endeavour to keep young

people engaged; tailoring the format of meetings to their needs. This might mean taking the young person out for lunch, completing the pathway plan in small sections and using email to encourage engagement.

## Recommendation

Local authorities should formally review their Pathway Plan process in consultation with looked-after children and care leavers to ensure it is accessible and flexible.

## Disruption to education

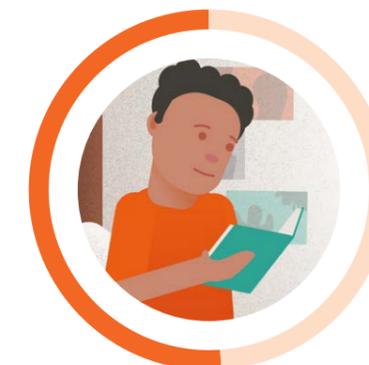
Care leavers are much less likely than their peers to be in education, employment or training. During 2015/16, 40 per cent of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were not in education, employment or training (NEET).<sup>7</sup> Though not directly comparable, the percentage of NEET 18 to 24 year olds averaged much lower at 16 per cent across 2015/16.<sup>8</sup>

Our research found that moving into independence often coincided with what one participant described as a ‘critical time’ in education, as both the leaving care and leaving school age are now 18. Worryingly, some care leavers had moved before completing their GCSEs and our survey revealed that 19 per cent of care leavers had fewer than five A\* to C GCSEs. The disruption was often due to being placed far away from the institution they were studying in, which impacted on their attendance.

“I was three or four buses away from it [college], so often it took a long time to get there... there was no local train station or local bus stops, and you had to walk quite far to get there. I was often going late to school and I missed sitting a few of my GCSEs.”

- Stephanie

The emotional upheaval of moving also impacted on engagement with education. This led to one care leaver losing her college place.



*51 per cent of care leavers were studying at college or other further education when they first left care*

“It more had an effect on my emotional wellbeing and my education. When I was in foster care I did my first year of A Levels and I got really good grades, I got like A’s, B’s, C’s. But then I moved (mid A-level) and you see in my second year I got like D’s, E’s, and U’s.”

- Ashley

## Finding a home

**Government guidance acknowledges that going straight from care to living independently will often be too big a step for young people. Local authorities are advised to commission a range of semi-independent and independent living options with appropriate support, for example supported accommodation schemes, foyers, supported lodgings and access to independent tenancies in the social and private rented sectors with flexible support.<sup>9</sup>**

The accommodation options available to care leavers vary between local areas for reasons such as the availability, cost, and suitability of different housing types. The research participants all had different housing journeys after care.

### Supported accommodation

Most local authorities have supported accommodation schemes in some form; bedrooms with shared facilities, bedsits or self-contained flats, with support available 24/7 on-site, in the daytime only or on-call support at night.<sup>10</sup> Nationally, 10 per cent of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were living in semi-independent, transitional accommodation in 2016.<sup>11</sup>

For many of the participants, supported accommodation was a stepping stone, before moving into more independent accommodation. This research suggested that the supported accommodation provided to care leavers varied in quality and suitability. Some had poor experiences in supported accommodation.

**“When I was in the hostel I was around all these young people who had all these issues. I felt like it was putting me at risk living there.”**

**- Christine**

One young person, a refugee with no English language skills, was placed in an all age hostel where he was living alongside gang members. Police raids were commonplace and the young person was handcuffed because he was suspected of involvement. He has been unable to live in shared housing since that experience.

### Example: Centrepont supported accommodation

Centrepont has a high support service in London that houses seven young care leavers. Each young person has a key worker who works with them to develop their independent living skills. One of the young people has really excelled during his stay. He came to England as an unaccompanied minor and lived with a foster family for a short while. After living in high support accommodation for four months, he is already equipped with sufficient independent living skills to move on to medium support accommodation. He is completing an English language course at college and Centrepont staff are providing extra study support in Maths, as well as assisting him with CV writing.

Others spoke highly of their time in supported accommodation because it enabled them to build their independent living skills with support.

**“I think I had a lot of health issues. I needed counselling, the support worker was really great because if I'd been in that situation on my own and didn't have anyone to come and knock on my door and get me up in the mornings... When you needed intense support it was really, really good.”**

**- Jessica**

Some participants moved into supported accommodation after living independently without support when they had not been ready. One young person lost her first tenancy because she struggled to pay her rent and was placed in supported accommodation.

**“I'm better prepared now; I know what I need to pay and what's important.”**

**- Olivia**

## Social housing

The availability of social housing varies greatly between local authority areas. Social housing is the accommodation type with the biggest shortfall, according to 32 per cent of practitioners surveyed. Affordable social housing has been declining for a number of years. There were only 6,800 additional affordable units for social rent in 2015/16 compared to 39,560 additional units in 2010/11.<sup>12</sup>

**“Care leavers are given priority for social housing but we only get so many units per year. In 2016 we got 18 flats and we've been told the number will go down drastically this year and we have over 300 care leavers now. It's a real problem.”**

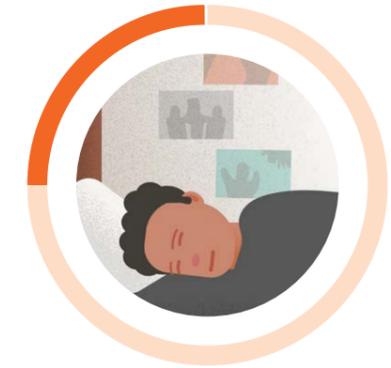
**- Local authority practitioner**

Local authorities are not legally required to prioritise care leavers for the social housing stock that is available. However, guidance suggests that reasonable preference should encompass a 'wide range of needs, including, but not limited to, the need to - provide a secure base from which a care leaver... can build a stable life'.<sup>13</sup> The local authority housing allocation scheme gives reasonable preference to care leavers, according to 74 per cent of practitioners. This equates to 36 out of the 43 local authorities surveyed.

Many of the care leavers interviewed had lived in social housing. Their experiences raised several issues. Firstly, not all were adequately supported through the process of bidding for social housing and not everyone knew what to look for in a prospective property, which meant that some young people ended up in unsuitable accommodation.



**43 per cent** of care leavers felt their worker was helpful in explaining the process of applying for housing from the council



**25 per cent** of care leavers lived in council housing at some point since leaving care

**“I was really naïve when I was that age... I just bid on any property that I could on the local council website. I ended up getting this nasty little one bedroom flat on some nasty council estate area. I didn't think.”**

**- Stephanie**

Secondly, some young people who went straight into a council tenancy at 18 felt rushed. Not all care leavers will be ready to enter a contract to live at this level of independence and checks may not always be in place to assess their ability to manage.

**“I got my flat about two months after I turned 18, my council tenancy. So that was like this big ordeal before I turned 18... I feel like if I hadn't been pressured to find somewhere quickly I might have had better options or got a better area.”**

**- Paul**

One practitioner described how he holds panel hearings to check whether a young person is ready for a social housing tenancy. Representatives from children's services and housing attend as well as the young person.

**“If the panel agree that a tenancy can be provided then housing will set them up in the system and they will get a pin number and start bidding... Most care leavers go into social housing, probably 80 per cent.”**

**- Local authority practitioner**

## Private rented sector

Private accommodation is increasingly important given the shortage of other accommodation types and length of waiting lists. However, there are a number of barriers preventing care leavers from accessing private tenancies. Private landlords are subject to a lower degree of regulation and so rent tends to be much higher than the social housing sector, particularly in London and the South East. Many landlords demand rent upfront alongside a deposit, which is especially difficult for care leavers who do not have the financial support of their family. According to 60 per cent of the practitioners we surveyed, rent deposits and bond guarantee schemes are offered to care leavers in their area. Care leavers are also entitled to a setting up home allowance of £2,000 to buy essential household items; this is not to cover the cost of rent or a deposit.

Landlord's perceptions also affect a young person's chance of securing a tenancy; 13 per cent of care leavers said they had been unable to access accommodation because the landlord was unwilling to accommodate them. Practitioners explained that competition enables landlords to pick and choose, often favouring young professionals or students in cities and holiday makers in rural or seaside areas. Landlords can charge higher rents to these groups and are reluctant to take on benefit claimants.



**40 per cent** of care leavers say that not having enough savings for a deposit was a barrier to accessing accommodation

**“It’s really, really, really difficult to get care leavers into the private rented sector. It’s the biggest challenge we face... Because of the background of the care leaver as soon as you say ‘it’s a care leaver’ or you give a reference or they’ve been in prison, the landlord won’t agree to take them.”**

**- Local authority practitioner**

Practitioners reported that some care leavers struggle to present themselves in a positive way to prospective landlords, often because they are anxious and unprepared. It may be the very first time they have had to conduct themselves in a professional manner.

Local authorities are well aware that the private rented sector will play an increasingly vital role in accommodating care leavers. One local authority had taken steps to alleviate the challenges by acting as a guarantor.

### Recommendation

**The Government** should establish a national care leaver rent deposit scheme to enable care leavers to access private rented accommodation.

### Recommendation

**The Government** should process Universal Credit claims from care leavers up to 8 weeks before their 18th birthday to ensure they receive their first payment as soon as they turn 18.

## Experiences of homelessness (sofa surfing and rough sleeping)

Worryingly, some care leavers had experienced homelessness after leaving care. Participants talked about the impact it had on their mental health and feelings of security as well as the wider impact on the people that care leavers were reliant upon. Two had sofa surfed for over a year.

Living in precarious housing situations or being homeless meant that young people were unable to move on with their lives because they did not know what to expect one day to the next.

**“Think of it (sofa surfing) as you’re living in a place where you’re uncertain whether you’re going to be there the next day or not so you couldn’t focus on anything else... Probably the most precious thing a human can have is certainty, where I can guarantee myself to wake up the next day in the same bed. So that was not there, cos where are we going to go, what’s next, what’s gonna happen?”**

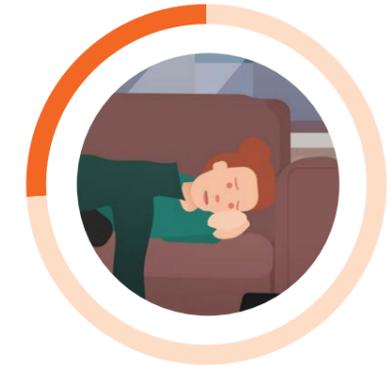
**- Adam**

The Housing Act 1996 is a safety net for care leavers who become homeless. Those aged 18 to 21 are in priority need so local authorities must secure accommodation for them. However, this safety net does not kick in until the care leaver has reached crisis point and has presented as homeless and been assessed.

Given their vulnerability, there is also a real risk that they may be classified as intentionally homeless. For example, those care leavers who build up rent arrears and lose their tenancy because they are unable to manage their money.

### Recommendation

**The Government** should amend homelessness legislation to extend priority need to include all care leavers under the age of 25.



**26 per cent** of care leavers have sofa surfed



**14 per cent** of care leavers have slept rough

### Recommendation

**The Government** should remove homelessness intentionality for all care leavers under the age of 21.

## Unsafe and unsuitable homes

Some care leavers reported feeling unsafe in their local area and their home. This reflected other studies which found that young people often report not feeling safe in their post-care accommodation.<sup>14</sup> Feeling unsafe was due to factors such as inadequate street lighting, entrances to flats being down alleyways and living in areas with a reputation for crime.

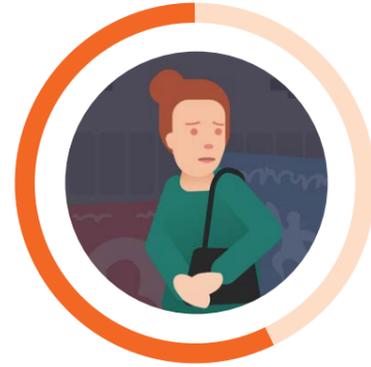
**“This one was on a main high street and in quite a rough area that’s notorious for a lot of crime to happen at night time. The front door entrance was down an alleyway with no light, so I found this quite nerve-wracking sometimes.”**

- Emily

One survey respondent felt unsafe in their home due to harassment from a neighbour.

**“Care leavers are usually more vulnerable and placing me above him in a flat had a massive impact on my mental health because he was bullying me so much. A lot of people in social housing can be vulnerable and have health issues.”**

- Care leaver, via survey



**57 per cent** of care leavers felt unsafe in the area where they first lived after leaving care

Care leavers argued that communication between local authorities and landlords - whether private, housing association or other - is key to ensuring that care leavers are placed in suitable accommodation. One care leaver was placed in social housing which was dirty and felt unsafe. She ended up sofa surfing rather than staying in unsuitable accommodation.

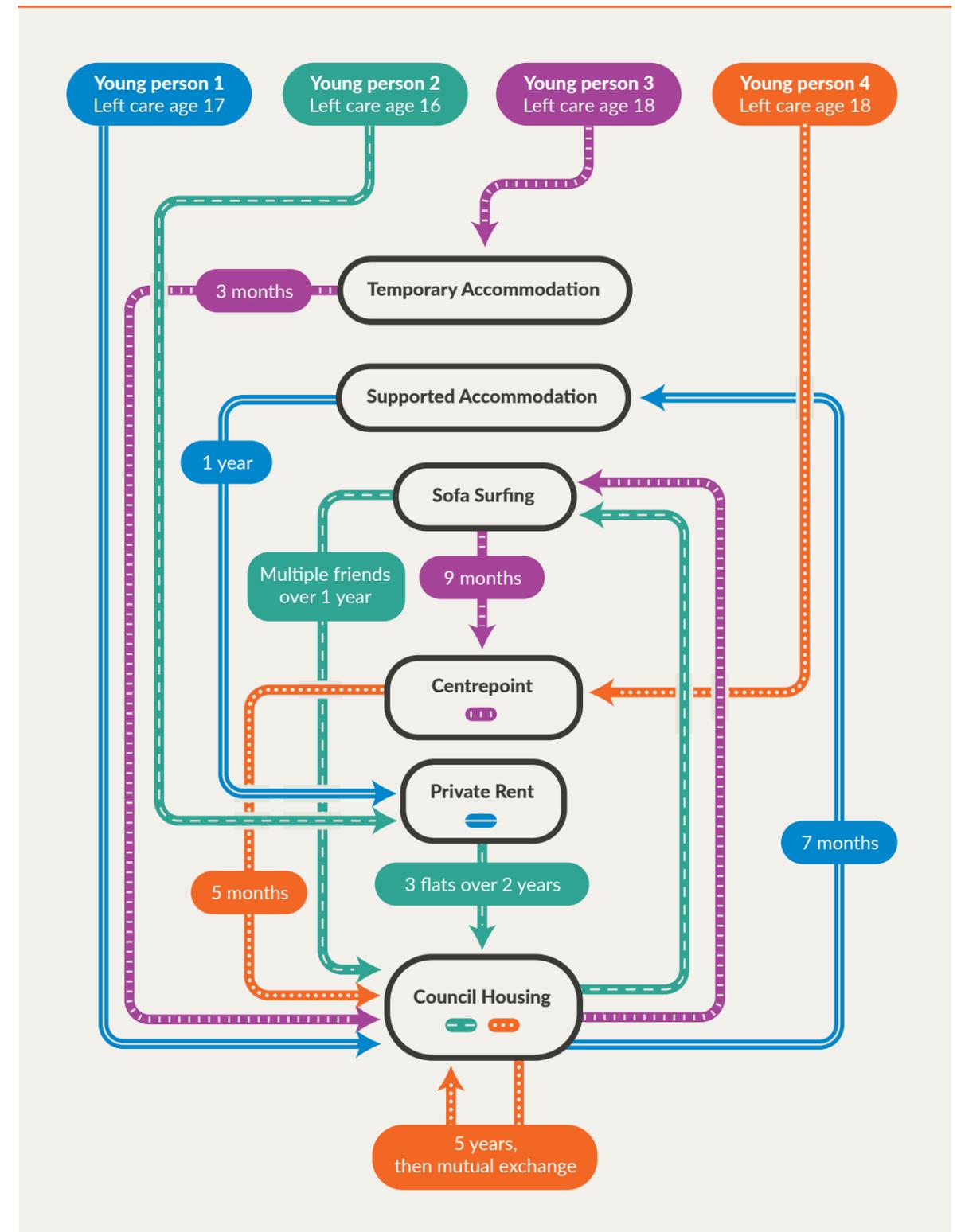
**“I was staying with friends. You could say sofa surfing. I was doing that for over a year. I felt unhappy, I felt like I was tied to this tenancy that I didn’t want. I didn’t want to live there; it was a nasty place to live. I felt incredibly unhappy having to pay rent for this place and council tax even though I wasn’t living there.”**

- Stephanie



## Multiple accommodation moves after care

Many care leavers have multiple accommodation moves after care, sometimes punctuated by periods of homelessness.



## Moving on from care

Having left care and established an independent life, there are still barriers which prevent care leavers from thriving.

### Poor preparedness for managing a tenancy and finances

Some care leavers learnt the practicalities of living independently through their mistakes. The research uncovered instances of care leavers building up rent arrears, failing to pay utility bills and being unable to fulfil their basic needs like washing clothes or buying food.

“Even now I’m still learning things, but if you’re not independent you wouldn’t learn these things. So you wouldn’t learn how to mop the floor, wash the dishes, cook yourself some pasta and burn it, throw it in the bin, cook another one.”

- Adam

Only 44 per cent of the care leavers felt the main professional supporting them had been helpful in ensuring they had the practical skills to live independently. While many local authorities now offer training to help care leavers develop independent living skills, most of the young people interviewed described how they did not engage in this when preparing to leave care. It was not until they were living on their own that they realised they needed to learn these skills. One care leaver lost her tenancy because she failed to pay her bills.

“I lived in a lot of gas poverty I’d call it. I’d say that many young people live in gas poverty. We never have enough money to just keep our houses warm for a little while, let alone to have a long hot bath.”

- Christine

Financial capability is crucial to living independently. However, there is a lack of uniformity in the financial support offered by local authorities, meaning that care leavers cannot be sure that they will receive the support and guidance they need.<sup>15</sup> A young person’s pathway plan should address their financial capability and money management capacity, along with the strategies to develop their skills in this area.<sup>16</sup> However, 15 per cent of the practitioners we surveyed said there are no services in their area to help care leavers to manage their finances.



42 per cent of care leavers felt ready to live independently when they first left care

“Not enough is done to prepare young people financially for independence. We used to have an independent provider deliver support on this but they lost their funding and now we have no service for this. As a social worker I feel I can offer financial guidance but to a basic level.”

- Local authority practitioner, via survey

As care leavers lack the familial networks that support the development of financial capability, many are forced to learn through hard experience.

“I got myself in to a lot of debt from the age of 16 upwards ... It made me really scared of finances if I’m completely, brutally honest. I really shied away from finances.”

- Michael

Managing utility bills was cited as the biggest challenge. Some participants were completely unaware that they would be billed for their gas, council tax, water, electricity or a TV licence. There is a real risk that care leavers will miss payments and fall into debt. While some local authorities exempt care leavers from council tax, 79 per cent of the practitioners surveyed said that care leavers in their area were not exempt. This has created a system of inequality as some care leavers need to pay council tax while others do not. In particular, those care leavers who move out of the area may need to pay council tax, even if their home local authority has implemented the exemption.

### Recommendation

The Government should exempt all care leavers under the age of 21 from council tax payments to ensure uniformity across local authorities.

## Difficulty paying rent

Regardless of levels of financial capability, many care leavers simply do not have sufficient income to cover the cost of their rent. Some respondents to our survey had to borrow money to pay for rent; six per cent borrowed from family and friends and three per cent took out a bank loan.

“It was just a challenge paying the rent because at that time I was on benefits. I was 17. I didn’t even have any idea of what the rent was. It wasn’t until I was working, because I was on such a low wage, £3.30 an hour because I was on an apprenticeship, it didn’t work out.”

- Craig

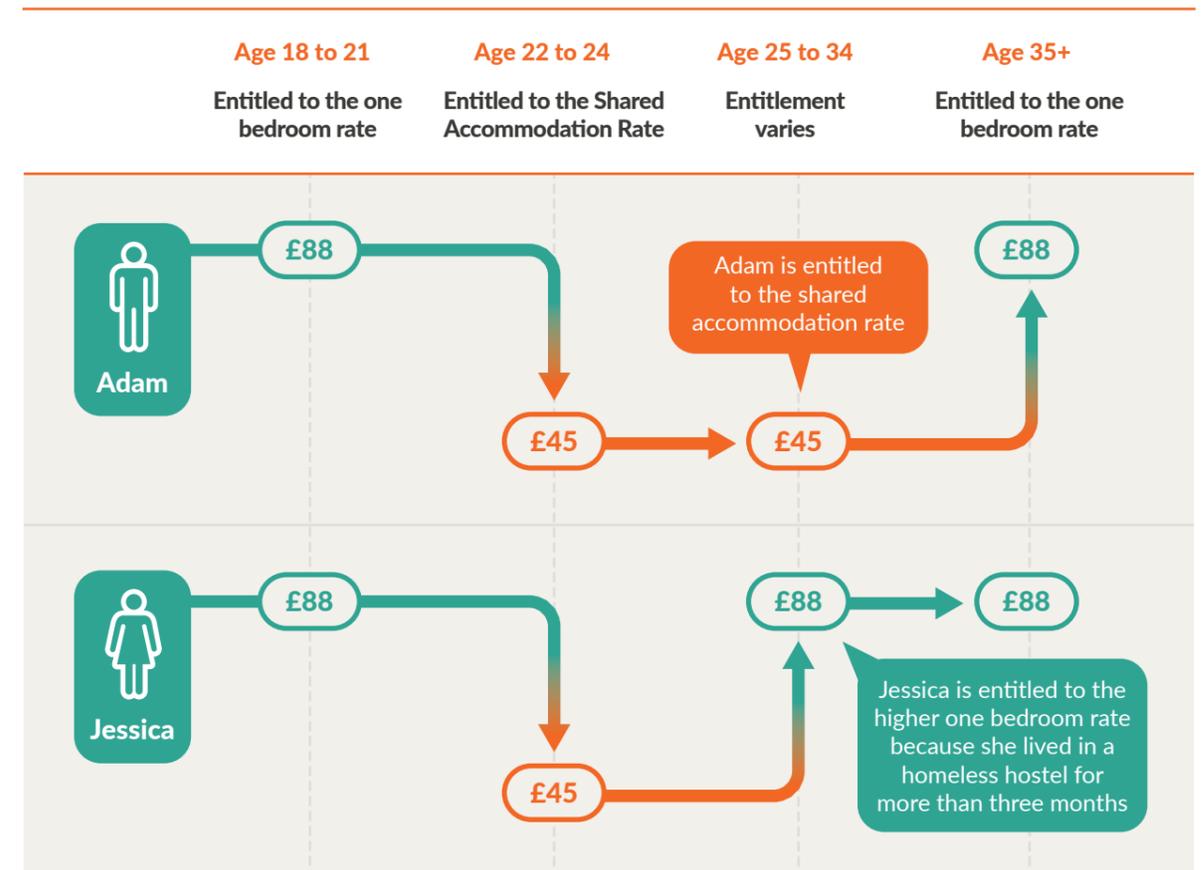
Housing benefit is a lifeline. However, the amount payable is based on the confusing Local Housing Allowance (LHA) system for residents in the private and social rented sectors. Care leavers are entitled to the one bed LHA rate until they turn 22 when their entitlement

falls to the Shared Accommodation Rate.<sup>17</sup> There is an added complication for those who have lived in hostel accommodation; these young people are entitled to the one bedroom LHA rate between the ages of 25 to 34.

### Recommendation

The Government should extend the exemption of care leavers from the Shared Accommodation Rate of Local Housing Allowance until the age of 25.

Two care leavers living in the Sunderland Broad Rental Market area will have the following housing cost entitlement:



Care leavers face a rent cliff edge when they turn 22, creating yet more housing instability.

The complexity of the LHA system has unsurprisingly led to confusion among care leavers. A social worker described one case:

**“I supported a young person, who is quite chaotic, into private rented accommodation and was evicted so she couldn’t get social housing. Her housing allowance dropped down when she turned 22 so she lost the flat at 22. We spoke about it, this is going to come up next year and you need to plan, but probably out of desperation she let her arrears accumulate and so she would be deemed intentionally homeless.”**

**- Local authority practitioner**

As care leavers often have their rent paid directly to the landlord by the local authority or the housing benefit office, some do not know how much benefit they have been awarded. Without this knowledge, care leavers cannot take ownership of their benefit claim and will not know if they have been awarded the incorrect amount. One care leaver explained that he did not

know what the housing allowance was and that there are different rates.

**“It was all paid directly. We never actually saw the money, it all went to the landlord. We did not have a clue what was going on.... We had no idea how much our rent was because we don’t see the money. Care leavers need to know how much you’re getting and what you’re entitled to.”**

**- James**



**39 per cent** of the care leavers claiming housing benefit say it is not enough to cover their rent

## Loneliness and unhealthy relationships

Care leavers are vulnerable to isolation and loneliness when living independently.

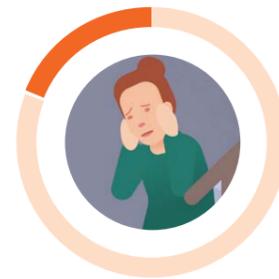
**“I’ve really suffered with isolation and loneliness. Even having friends round, you have to deal with being by yourself at some point and that’s something that I couldn’t deal with. It’s a huge, huge thing for young people and I definitely felt that. I felt that in my hostel and that was 24 hour staffed.”**

**- Jessica**

Another participant who now mentors young people leaving care highlighted that this is a long standing problem that continues to impact on care leavers.

**“I’ve got a participation group with care leavers and the issue which keeps coming up is isolation and loneliness. These are the kinds of issues that I suffered in that situation; I think that not really much has changed in that area.”**

**- Ashley**



**19 per cent** of care leavers have nobody in their support network they could turn to for help

Independent Visitors are volunteers who visit, befriend and advise children and young people in care. Under the Children Act 1989, local authorities have a duty to appoint an Independent Visitor for looked-after children if it is in their interests to do so. There is no duty on local authorities to provide care leavers with an Independent Visitor; however research suggests that some do.<sup>18</sup>

## Example: Centrepoint mentoring

Centrepoint mentors work with young people on a one-to-one basis for 12 months, tailoring their support to the needs and ambitions of the young person they’re supporting. One care leaver described the difference it had made to her:

**“Having a mentor has been so important; it’s a really useful thing for care leavers to have. The first mentor I had was after I had left care and she helped me to gain confidence, learn new skills and find a job. She helped me to think about my longer term goals. It was cool because by the end of the year I had a life goal in different subsections split by monthly goals, yearly goals and where I wanted to be in five years’ time. It was really beneficial. We also went on a few trips to museums, the theatre or for dinner. The mentor I have now has been helping me to move on from supported accommodation and prepare for my own council tenancy. They’ve looked for funding for appliances and other things I need to buy for the house. A mentor will also work with me when I move in a few weeks, so that I have help with my finances and paying rent.”**

**- Emily**

Loneliness can lead to engaging in unhealthy relationships. One young person did not set appropriate boundaries with people because she felt isolated.

**“I took on a lot of bad relationships over that time. I had my own flat, I let people abuse that fact as well because I thought it was the cool thing to do to have parties all the time and have friends live there.”**

**- Stephanie**

A practitioner identified this area as a problem and described how this can lead to knock-on effects for care leavers in managing their tenancy.

**“I think the biggest issue is emotional resilience and loneliness, and also managing peer relationships and family relationships... It’s developing some resilience and a bit of street savvy about not letting anybody in your home and being very selective and a bit protective of your space.”**

**- Local authority practitioner**

## Recommendation

**The Government** should extend the entitlement of looked-after children to an independent person to care leavers aged 25.

## Recommendation

**Local authorities** should ensure all care leavers in their area know about and have access to an Independent Visitor at any point until the age of 25.

## Insufficient ongoing support

Under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 all local authorities have a duty to appoint a personal advisor (PA) for care leavers up to the age of 21. Personal advisors provide advice and support, and co-ordinate the provision of services to ensure that needs are met. Many of the young people who participated in the research described positive relationships with their PA, quite often more positive than they had had with their social worker. However they did raise several worrying issues. Two care leavers described how their cases had been poorly handed over.

**“There was no hand over between the social worker and the personal advisor. I was meant to have a meeting with the old social worker and the PA but it ended up just me meeting the PA.”**

- Paul

Some care leavers also reported not seeing their personal advisor frequently enough.

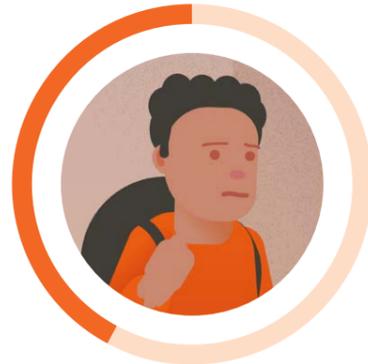
**“I didn’t have much support. They only come round every six months. Otherwise they might give you a call randomly and see if you need help with anything, if you don’t ask it won’t get done. I needed more help.”**

- James

The Children and Social Work Act will give care leavers the right to a personal advisor until they are 25 if they want one. Practitioners raised concerns about local authority capacity given that the caseloads of personal advisors are already very high.

**“I’m in two minds because obviously I think it will be fantastic for care leavers to have an extra four years of support if they wish to, but in terms of resources, in terms of money, I don’t see that working... In terms of capacity, our PAs at the moment have 27-28 cases, it’s huge. I don’t know how they deal with that, it’s impossible.”**

- Local authority practitioner



**42 per cent** of care leavers felt they could return to their local authority for help

In addition to a personal advisor, guidance underpinning the Children Act 1989 stipulates that floating support should be provided to help young people living in their own tenancies for the necessary length of time and should follow the young person if they move house, where possible.<sup>19</sup> Floating support offers help within the home, with tasks that are essential to managing a tenancy, such as help with budgeting, household tasks and looking for education, employment or training opportunities.

Our survey revealed that 85 per cent of practitioners do offer floating support to care leavers living independently; this represents 34 local authorities. However, 58 per cent of practitioners, representing 22 local authorities, felt they do not have sufficient floating support capacity to meet demand from care leavers. For young people with lower needs, floating support offers essential support to prevent tenancy breakdown, which may be much more harmful to the young person and expensive to the local authority in the longer term.

### Recommendation

**Local authorities** should ensure all care leavers in their area have access to floating support at any point until the age of 25, including those in private rented accommodation.

## Care leavers do succeed

Against the odds, many care leavers have very good outcomes, despite pitfalls along the way. The challenges that they have faced and overcome have meant that they have grown into resilient young adults.

**“Everything that’s happened in my life is all just down to me making it happen. As much as that sounds big headed, that’s the truth.”**

- Craig

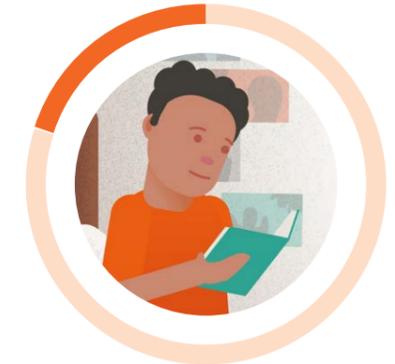
Allowing young people to take positive risks in a supported environment enables them to build their resilience and their confidence. Having the right support is crucial to this and ensures that young people keep themselves safe and avoid dangerous risk taking behaviour as they grow. Sharing positive examples was cited as key, ensuring that care leavers know that they are not destined for negative outcomes.

**“The press and the current news stories just show the negatives, but we’ve got one going to Oxford, we’ve got 23 in university. The press itself is quite negative and the stories are meant to shame people but what does that say to our care leavers? They are stereotyped into one type but they’re not. But they’re care survivors; we don’t say that they’ve survived abuse and neglect and that they’re the most resilient kids you’ll meet.”**

- Local authority practitioner

The care leavers interviewed reported finding support at work, in education, from wider family networks and new friends. In particular, care leavers described how meeting other care leavers in the same situation was ‘life changing’. The care leaver network is in itself a powerful resource for young people and we heard instances of various events and schemes to bring care leavers together.

One care leaver said his brother’s support through care and afterwards was his strength:



**20 per cent** of care leavers had completed AS/A levels



**9 per cent** of care leavers had reached degree level

**“I’m very close to my brother, because we’ve been together through everything. That’s definitely helped a lot I would say. It’s a shame because other people might not have the same support, because they’ve left their families, left everything and they’re just thrown into the darkness.”**

- Adam

## The challenges ahead

There have been several changes to national policy over recent years which better protect care leavers and are ambitious for their futures. However, our research revealed the extremely difficult jobs that local authorities have in translating this policy into real change on the ground. While some care leavers are supported to move on positively from care, unfortunately too many still have poor outcomes.

### The relationship between housing and children's services

Children's services have overall statutory responsibility for care leavers but housing departments play an essential role in the housing stability of care leavers. To ensure that a range of housing options are available which meet the current and future needs of care leavers, children's services departments must work closely with housing departments and partners in the local community.

Many practitioners reported that there is a joint protocol between children's and housing services in their area that is working effectively. Many also highlighted limitations and expressed the desire to review their protocol.



**86 per cent** of practitioners report that there is a joint protocol between children's & housing services in their area

Negotiating a protocol which works across all districts can be a real challenge.

**"We have the county council and eight separate district councils. All of which have to be entered into discussions separately. To get a protocol between them all is very challenging. The districts are very different, one might be a tiny hamlet and another might be a main city. There are challenges to resolve. We've tried to do one protocol but it's taken us two years to get it through."**

- Local authority practitioner

**"Its effectiveness is down to working relationships, but also access to resources. If there is no housing, the protocol is going to be of limited value and just used to put pressure on whichever organisation is deemed to have primary responsibility in law."**

- Local authority practitioner, via survey

The structure of local authorities also has influence. For two-tier local authorities, children's services sits at the county level, while housing sits at the district level. This presents a huge challenge given that multiple districts under one county level may have different approaches.

### Increasing workloads, reducing capacity

Practitioners' workloads are increasing due to the rise in the number of children requiring help. Enquiries made by local authorities because they believe a child is or may be suffering significant harm increased by 124 per cent over the last decade and the number of children on child protection plans has risen by 94 per cent.<sup>20</sup> The average caseload per children and family social worker is 16, rising to more than 25 in some areas.<sup>21</sup> Practitioners talked about the impact that this has had on their workloads.



**65 per cent** of practitioners feel that their local authority does not have sufficient staff capacity to fulfil its duties to care leavers

**"The case loads are such an issue. I've been working in the unit for 6 years and my case load is twice what it was then... Workers are burnt out so they're even less effective. It is such a shame; it's really hard to watch. I know so many of these young people need our support and need us to be taking them out for a coffee and to be exploring options but we just don't have the time."**

- Local authority practitioner

Councils have largely protected spending for children's social care despite reductions of council spending elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> However, practitioners explained that while they have not necessarily had direct funding cuts, managing within existing budgets "becomes more and

more challenging if you're having to extend that service to more and more children without any additional funding." The cost of supporting a care leaver is high. Local authorities spend an annual average of £6,250 on each care leaver aged 16 to 21. However, this spending does vary widely, between £300 and £20,000 per care leaver in some areas.<sup>23</sup> Overall, net spending on leaving care services rose from £231 million in 2015/16 to £239 million in 2016/17.<sup>24</sup>

Rising workloads mean that social workers may be unable to do the intensive preparation and support with care leavers that they would like to. One social worker discussed the difficulty of balancing a large caseload which includes abused children coming into care and those about to leave care requiring lower level support. Care leavers tend to be lowest priority.

### Insufficient support for poor mental health

Poor mental health and wellbeing permeated the accounts of young people and was cited as a key issue by practitioners. Care leavers' mental health and wellbeing needs are not sufficiently addressed, despite the often traumatic experiences that young people in care have had. Initial health assessments are completed on entry to care, followed by six monthly looked-after child reviews and annual Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) which address health and wellbeing issues. However, evidence suggests these assessments are variable and often poor, with insufficient follow up for those children who are in need of extra help.<sup>25</sup> Therefore the mental health needs of looked-after children are not always sufficiently met, leading to further problems in the long term. Looked after children and care leavers are between four and five times more likely to attempt suicide in adulthood.<sup>26</sup> This is particularly worrying given the levels of loneliness and isolation that young people described.

For those young people transitioning out of care, access to mental health services can be difficult. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are expected to work with young people up to 18, though evidence suggests that 16 to 18 year olds who aren't in education are unlikely to get access to CAMHS as funding for it is generally organised through school and colleges.<sup>27</sup> At 18, young people can be referred to adult mental health services though the eligibility thresholds are often higher. Through our survey, practitioners highlighted the need for care leaver specific mental health services.

**"I think mental health services for care leavers should be up to 25. Because a lot of those young people have emotional, high level emotional needs, or low level mental health needs... They require a service that understands the impact of their care history and early trauma."**

- Local authority practitioner

**"I suffered really badly with depression. I ended up in hospital after an overdose. I've really suffered with isolation and loneliness."**

- Jessica

## Care leavers placed out of area

In April 2016, 36 per cent of looked-after children had been placed outside the locality boundary; 14 per cent of whom were over 20 miles away from home.<sup>28</sup> Problems may arise when the young person leaves care and is offered accommodation in their home borough when they may not have lived there for some time. One young person described how she had never really lived in her home borough as she had been in care out of the area since she was 11, but returned there as a care leaver. It took five years to organise a mutual exchange with a care leaver in the borough that felt more like home to her. Those care leavers who returned to a borough with which they have little connection felt lonely and isolated.

**“There’d be times that if there was any problems or anything going wrong at my house hardly anyone could come and help, like my friends, because it was so far away.”**

### - Sarah

Practitioners also acknowledged that this is a problem for many care leavers and that there is room for improvement in the processes and legislation surrounding local connections and reciprocal arrangements between local authorities. One practitioner stated that “a more national approach to care leaver housing could be positive.” However, at the heart of the challenge is the difference between the availability of housing stock in different areas:

**“The principal of reciprocal arrangements is positive, but not every borough has its own housing stock anymore. It’s not like for like. Again it’s an idea that’s nice, but in reality you can’t offer something if you’ve not got it.”**

### - Local authority practitioner

## Recommendation

**The Government** should bring children’s legislation in line with homelessness legislation by enabling all care leavers to qualify for local connection if they have been resident in that area for at least two years.

## Conclusion

Care leavers face many challenges in accessing housing stability and practitioners struggle to support them to do so. Too many care leavers are being forced to live in unsuitable conditions, sofa surf or sleep rough. Problems with the housing market, shortfalls of housing stock and young people’s practical and emotional readiness to live independently all impact on care leavers’ future outcomes. While there are processes in place to overcome these challenges our research has shown that sometimes these processes fail.

The care leavers in our research often faced a sudden transition to independence and felt unprepared for independent life. Many were not ready to manage a tenancy, especially in regards to paying bills and financial planning. They faced disruption to education, loss of support networks, being placed in poor quality accommodation and unsafe areas, and loneliness and isolation. While pathway plans are tools to aid preparation for independence, care leavers and practitioners agree that they could be more effective.

Local authorities continue to face complex challenges in delivering support for care leavers. Leaving care practitioners face increasing workloads with reduced capacity; resulting in care leavers not receiving as much support as they need. Both joint protocols with housing authorities and reciprocal arrangements between areas can also be limited in what they can achieve. Access to the private rented sector is extremely difficult. Housing benefit does not always cover the cost of rent and reduces when the care leaver turns 22 in line with local housing allowance.

There have been some positive policy changes to protect care leavers in recent years such as Staying Put and the extension of some care leaver provision up to age 25 under the Children and Social Work Act. However, this needs to go further. While other young people will continue to have the support of their parents well into adulthood, the government must ensure that care leavers receive all the support they need too. Our recommendations highlight the areas where support should be extended in line with the Government’s commitment to good corporate parenting.

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