



"What About Us?"

**A Manifesto of Asks by Young
People with Care Experience in
Northern Ireland**



Front cover artwork by Serena



**care
journeys***

triangles 

The graphic for the word "triangles" is composed of three small, stylized triangles in blue, yellow, and green.

**Believe in
children**
 **Barnardo's**

The graphic for Barnardo's is a green square containing three stylized human figures in white.



OUR ASKS

1 We need more support as we progress into adulthood until at least age 25

2 We need people to understand our experiences of care to stop stigma and discrimination

3 We need the skills and resources to help us to help ourselves

4 We need long-lasting relationships with the important people in our lives

5 We need workers who can adapt, reflect and be aware of our needs

6 We need safe and affordable housing in order to build happy and loving homes

7 We need supported opportunities to make friends, be part of society and to make our own decisions

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

1 To ensure we receive the best support into adulthood, we want to be part of bringing the Adoption & Children Act 2022 to life. This should include:

- A leaving care worker until we are 25
- Access to financial support to help us navigate adult life and independence
- Access to a mentor/ floating support who will support us in daily life

2 To be able to challenge the stigma and discrimination we face as young people with care experience there needs to be:

- more education to raise awareness about care experience
- a change to the uncaring language in policy

3 To be able to get the skills and resources we need to help us to help ourselves through interdependence. To support this we need:

- the same opportunities as the rest of the UK starting with the scheme 'Care Leavers Covenant' for Northern Ireland

To 'level up' with young people who are not care experienced and combat loneliness and isolation with schemes that offer access to:

- free Wi-Fi
- free bus travel

4 We need long-lasting relationships with people in our lives such as foster carers, workers and other young people that are protected through important schemes like Lasting Links and Staying Put

5 We need workers who adapt, reflect and are aware of our needs - including more understanding of our emotional health and opportunities to support our wellbeing

6 We need safe and affordable housing in order to build happy and loving homes; help with guarantors for private housing and more points for social housing

7 We need support and opportunities to make friends, be part of society and make our own decisions

INTRODUCTION

"It feels like Northern Ireland politics doesn't care about care"

The original idea for a Care-Leavers' Manifesto came from the ideas of young people with care experience from Barnardo's Triangles Project. It came from feelings that there are problems faced by young people leaving care in Northern Ireland that are underrepresented and misunderstood by politicians, policy-makers and the wider community.

There are also discrepancies and inequalities between the experiences and entitlements of Northern Ireland care leavers and those in the rest of the UK.

This project aims to provide a platform for people with care experience to give their thoughts on these matters and present the issues and opinions they have raised. It also aims to use this information to exhibit some potential recommendations that come from those with real lived experience and awareness of the care system. It consists of discussions, activities and feedback taken from focus groups and one-to-one sessions as well as direct quotes to show the real people behind the project.



Young people involved

This project will highlight some of the stories and issues that have been raised by young people as part of the care-leavers manifesto project and the suggestions that have been derived from these issues.

- Views and opinions expressed have been gathered from 17 different young people aged between 18 and 25 recruited from Belfast Barnardo's Leaving Care Services, including Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People Services, Aftercare Services and Triangles (A Barnardo's UK national programme for care leavers)
- This took place via a series of focus groups and one-to-one sessions carried out by workers and student social workers across Barnardo's services in Northern Ireland in 2022. Sessions were generally young-person led and all of them were carried out with the ethos of co-production to ensure they are as representative as possible of young peoples' true thoughts and feelings and not overtly steered by workers.
- The young people who have contributed to the Manifesto come from a range of backgrounds and the project is still growing with recruitment still ongoing for young people with care experience to share their views and spread awareness. Further contributions are expected in the near future and there is potential for the project to continue as a vehicle for further feedback and reflection.
- There has been a focus on displaying quotes here representing points taken directly from young people. This is to attempt to make sure that the manifesto stays as representative as of young people's views as possible.

Names have not been included to ensure their rights to confidentiality.





YOUNG PEOPLES KEY ASKS



Artwork by Luke

We need more support as we progress into adulthood.

To ensure we receive the best support into adulthood, we want to be part of bringing the Adoption & Children Act 2022 to life. This should include:

- A leaving care worker until we are 25
- Access to financial support to help us navigate adult life and independence
- Access to a mentor/ floating support who will support us in daily life

OUR CONCERN

We're really happy that the Adoption & Children Act 2022 extended support to care leavers up to the age of 25, however we need to make sure that legislation becomes a reality. We need these changes to be actioned as soon as possible.

As young people who have grown up in the care system, we are experts by experience and we want to be involved in helping policy makers design what this extended support looks like.

Having access to ongoing support from a leaving care service was one of the most common themes from young people with care experience as part of the manifesto project.

Many said that their Leaving Care worker was a lifeline and a vital source of support in hard times. Leaving Care workers (also known as Aftercare workers/ Personal Advisors/ PA's) were seen 'crucial' and a 'lifeline' in supporting young people to prepare for independence as any good parent would- supporting with skills such as managing money/ accessing mental health/ financial support and just somebody there to celebrate your achievements and be there when times get tough.

However- the 'cliff edge' (as it is often described) in which support drops off at 21 was shared to be the most difficult of times. Young people asked "who decides when you're independent?" and questioned whether a parent would be OK to 'cut ties' and stop supporting their own children at 18 or 21.

Even though the Adoption & Children Act was passed in 2022, for many young people in Northern Ireland support still ends at 18 or 21.

The worry of what now?

The worry of what will happen after you leave supported accommodation was a major concern for young people, with one young person telling us that she wishes she could have continuation of support as **"I feel my *social worker knew me fairly well before I turned 18 but now I get very little support post 18 and that my worker involved does not know me well and I feel like I don't have access to the same level of support. I'm worried what will happen when I leave supported accommodation- I don't know if I will get the support that I need*"**

Young people told us that having support when leaving care was crucial in what is already a difficult time where you often feel like **"i'm being forced into independence when I'm barely ready"**

A GOOD AFTERCARE SERVICE IS:

- lifesaving
- checking in on you
- helping you pay bills
- independence skills
- emotional support
- practical support

Money and Finances

As part of the support offered from Leaving Care Services, young people also told us that financial support is a lifeline and that budgeting is difficult. With the cost of living increasing and cuts to benefits, times are becoming tougher and tougher and many are living off little.

One young person told us that he feels that on the current weekly living allowance of £59.09 weekly makes it difficult to budget and save money **"the weekly allowance only allows for purchasing necessities"**



OUR VOICES

Mentors/ Floating Support

Young people told us that a mentor would really help the transition from leaving care to adulthood. There was also a want for opportunities to become mentors themselves.

Many said this would be good if they were a 'peer mentor'

"access to real mentors with care experience and real-world understanding of life in and around the care system" "I would love the opportunity to take part in a mentoring program. I've come a long way since leaving care and would like the chance to go into residential settings and tell children living there that there is a real chance at having a positive future."



A mentor is...



"a helping hand"



"support in the community"

One young person told us ***'Mine was great, we done a lot of fun stuff together and went to concerts.'***

However, consistency was key as another young person said that ***"By the time I had been assigned a mentor, I was 18 and I was no longer able to access the service."***

OUR ASKS

Overall, young people told us that the system doesn't treat them like a parent would. When they leave the care environment, young people who have been in care will have to deal with relationships, plus the potential for isolation and loneliness, and a lack of support. They may also struggle with trauma/the impact of early life experiences, stigma in society and the challenges of independence at an early age.

Having access to an ongoing source of support is a lifeline to young people who may not have access to a support network that other young people who are not care experienced may have.

- **We believe that further pressure is needed for Stormont to bring to life the Adoption and Children Act 2022 and action the extension of Leaving Care services to young people up to the age of 25.**
- **We want access to a Mentor for young people with care experience up to age 25.**
- **For financial support to be accessible by all young people with care experience.**
- **Trialling a basic income for care leavers- similar to the Wales scheme to combat poverty.**

<https://www.nyas.net/news-and-campaigns/news/new-financial-scheme-for-care-leavers-in-wales/>



Artwork by Star

2

To combat the stigma and discrimination faced by young people with care experience by

- Promoting more education in raising awareness about care experience
- Changing the uncaring language in policy

OUR CONCERN

The concern raised most often in the manifesto was stigma, stereotypes and discrimination based on experience of care.

Language

Young people felt that the language used for care leavers in policy was 'patronising' 'negative' and 'confusing'. Terms such as "relevant" and "not relevant" to describe whether you are eligible to access services feels "horrible" and adds to the stigma of being "a care kid"

Education around care experience was also seen as a factor with young people feeling they are constantly battling labels like **"troubled"** and preconceived perceptions of who they are based on their experience.

Young people with care experience who identify as LGBTQ+

Young people told us they felt that there was a distinct lack of understanding around gender identity and LGBTQ issues and many of them felt alone in being able to discuss them.

Small changes were welcome for young people who in addition to the stigma of care experience have the stigma around gender identity to deal with.

"seeing the non-binary options on the recruitment form was good"

."The LGBTQ+ community should be talked about more in school to educate those who have no knowledge around it"

OUR VOICES

"Educators should be mindful of the language they are using e.g 'take this letter home to your parents'"

" People assume things about you and your experiences - that you've had a tough life. They label you - "you're a care kid for life" - that label puts a downer on you - makes you feel like that's who you're going to be for your entire life - but I want to be more / do better for myself. - it doesn't define you"

"people used to think it was like Tracy Beaker- like and ask me did I get to choose my foster carers? I laughed, like I was lucky if there was any choice- they're not queuing up- its not a fairy-tale"

OUR ASKS

- **Get rid of negative terminology that exists in Policy and in everyday practice within Local Authorities and services. Introduce a language that cares** https://www.tactcare.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/03/TACT-Language-that-cares-2019_online.pdf
- **Promote education and training around care experience for everyone who comes in to contact with young people with care experience. This could be delivered by young people with care experience.**
- **Better services/ support for young people with care experience who identify as LGBTQI+ in Northern Ireland.**

We need the skills and resources to help us to help ourselves. To promote interdependence we need:

- The same opportunities as the rest of the UK starting with the scheme Care Leavers Covenant for Northern Ireland
- To 'level up' with young people who are not care experienced and combat loneliness and isolation with schemes that offer access to:
Free Wi-Fi and Free bus travel

OUR CONCERN

Young people told us that they want support to be independent but to also know they have the same opportunities as young people who haven't been in care.

Levelling up- Opportunities

Young people with care experience face lots of barriers starting out in life and it is not a 'level' playing field. Having opportunities such as The Care Leavers Covenant a national inclusion programme that supports care leavers aged 16-25 to live independently. The Covenant is signed by councils, organisations and businesses in England, Wales and Scotland is a way of government pledging to 'bridge the gap' for young people with care experience by offering things such as priority interviews, free digital equipment and access to jobs, training and offers support to young people with care experience in removing the barriers that are often in the way.

Digital Exclusion

Digital exclusion is an issue faced by young people with care experience that can impact their everyday lives. The move to a complete digital landscape means that now, more than ever, many are at risk of falling behind and facing isolation. Young people told us that having access to WiFi was crucial for their mental health, wellbeing, accessing education and work.

"Free wifi is so important for young people leaving care – promotes our mental well-being, allows for self-care, social groups"

"I need it for participation and human contact"

OUR VOICES

Interdependence

Young people felt that the children's homes they grew up in didn't encourage independence ***"and often do the opposite due to staff 'doing everything' for children there'. 'There are little opportunities to learn life skills in a children's home. The staff will cook with you, but you have to ask them. I shouldn't have to ask.' 'I think that life-skills should be taught in school to prepare them for living independently.***

Young people said they wanted to learn life skills such as budgeting, organising bills, keeping a home together and healthy relationships.

A home for life

A good example of this that was talked about is the [National House Project](https://thehouseproject.org) that provides support and expertise to local authorities around the country to set up and manage Local House Projects so that young people leave care in a planned and supported way. Young people experience leaving care together and this peer community supports them to develop the practical and emotional skills that they need to live interdependently. ***"They work on houses which become their homes to live in for as long as they want."***

[Home](#) | [The National House Project \(thehouseproject.org\)](https://thehouseproject.org)

Free bus travel for young people leaving care

Young people told us that loneliness and isolation is a massive factor in their wellbeing and that this can often be because ***"everyone is so far away sometimes and i cant afford to get the bus there"***

Free bus travel for care leavers has been successfully implemented in some places within England, Wales and Scotland and has been evidenced as a way to promote wellbeing and health. Barnardo's are currently working on a campaign to request that all young people leaving care in the UK have access to free bus travel.

OUR ASKS

- Ensuring that all children and young people have access to support in gaining skills for adulthood
- Free bus travel schemes to combat loneliness and isolation
- Free wifi scheme to combat digital exclusion
- Creating a 'Care Leavers Covenant' for Northern Ireland
- Implementing a National House Project in Northern Ireland

Key Recommendations

We believe that offering access to free public transport for Care Experienced young people is a solution to supporting care leavers.

Our research project has evidenced the impact that access to free bus travel has on care leavers lives- including

- Ability to access positive social connections
- Ability to access work, education and training opportunities
- An enabler in positive parenting skills including access to childcare, health appointments and quality time with wider family and connections

This project is a great example of how a rural authority such as Cornwall can get this far in making free bus travel for care leavers sustainable and part of their local offer.

***Transport for Freedom
Campaign- a report by Cornwall
care experienced young people
into the benefits of free bus
travel
(carejourneys.org.uk)***

Recommendation

Provide care leavers with free bus travel to help tackle social isolation.

Local authorities to offer free bus travel as part of their local offer to care leavers, as a means of tackling loneliness and help keep young people connected.



4

We need long-lasting relationships with people in our lives

such as foster carers that are protected through important schemes like lasting links and staying put

OUR CONCERN

Young people told us that relationships are the one of the most important things in life and throughout your care experience. They told us that having family-like relationships and feeling loved and cared for is what is needed. However, many felt that this support is not maintained, and relationships don't often last.

Young people told us that moving placements, foster care breakdowns and service closures added to this. ***"They (Foster Carers) pick and choose who they will keep in contact with – my foster carers are in Belfast all the time but never text to see me"***

Losing friends was also a massive concern, and the stigma of care experience when having to disclose to friends ***"Friends weren't able to stay over/I couldn't stay over at their houses without them being police checked – How embarrassing?"***

Young people spoke of the great impact of schemes like Lasting Links which helps to protect vital support and relationships from previous placements

"Lasting links is really good, I like being able to stay in contact with people from the childrens' home"



OUR VOICES

We asked young people what works?

- Importance of support with family contact after 18
- Supported contact with adopted siblings and those from foster placements

“At 13/14 I was given contact with my siblings whom I hadn’t met before/didn’t know very well and they didn’t show up to the contact – at this age I was not prepared enough for this outcome at that time’ more support would have helped this situation.”

- feeling able to visit family and friends (support with travel) ***‘I was supported in seeing my friends’, ‘I made good friends in care’. ‘I got paid trips to England to see my family/parents over there which is good’***
- Real connections and positive relationships with staff and other people in placements.

‘I enjoyed the weekly take-away nights, this made it feel more homely – weekly treat.’

- Role models and relationships in placements - ***‘I have had really good social workers in my past. However, it is hard when they leave and you are nervous about who you will get next’***

OUR ASKS

- Develop policy to effectively nurture, support and protect relationships that have developed within both care/leaving-care services and foster placements
- When commissioning services/ providers to include capacity to maintain relationships after care/ services ensuring that young people have opportunities to keep friendships and meet other young people
- Promoting services such as Lasting Links in all part of Northern Ireland



5

We need workers who adapt, reflect and be aware of our needs

including more understanding of our emotional health and opportunities to support our wellbeing

OUR CONCERN

Young people told us that they felt that getting a good, supportive Social Worker/Personal Assistant was down to 'random chance'. There was huge disparity in experiences; many said that their workers were a lifeline and supported them through "everything"

Whereas others felt that some workers were not helpful and that the process of getting a new one assigned should be easier. 'We should have more say over who are social worker/PA is as you don't get on with everybody' and 'someone we can vibe with'

Mental Health

Young people also told us that mental health issues still feel a bit stigmatised and that being able to have open conversations around mental health, medication and support with their PA's would be beneficial. "My worker has been my lifeline- she knows when i'm feeling down"

What makes a good support?

- *Someone who is reliable and will do what they say they are going to do*
- *Someone who can relate to my experiences and is realistic*
- *Someone who has good awareness of care experience*

What makes a bad support?

- *Someone who thinks they know it all*
- *Someone who is condescending and undermines your feelings and provides unrealistic solutions – at times of crisis we just want someone to be there not give solutions*
- *Someone who doesn't listen – having to keep re-explaining myself*

OUR VOICES

"The Aftercare service was my everything when i moved out- and having that person just checking in on me was incredibly supportive. I dont know what i would have done without her"

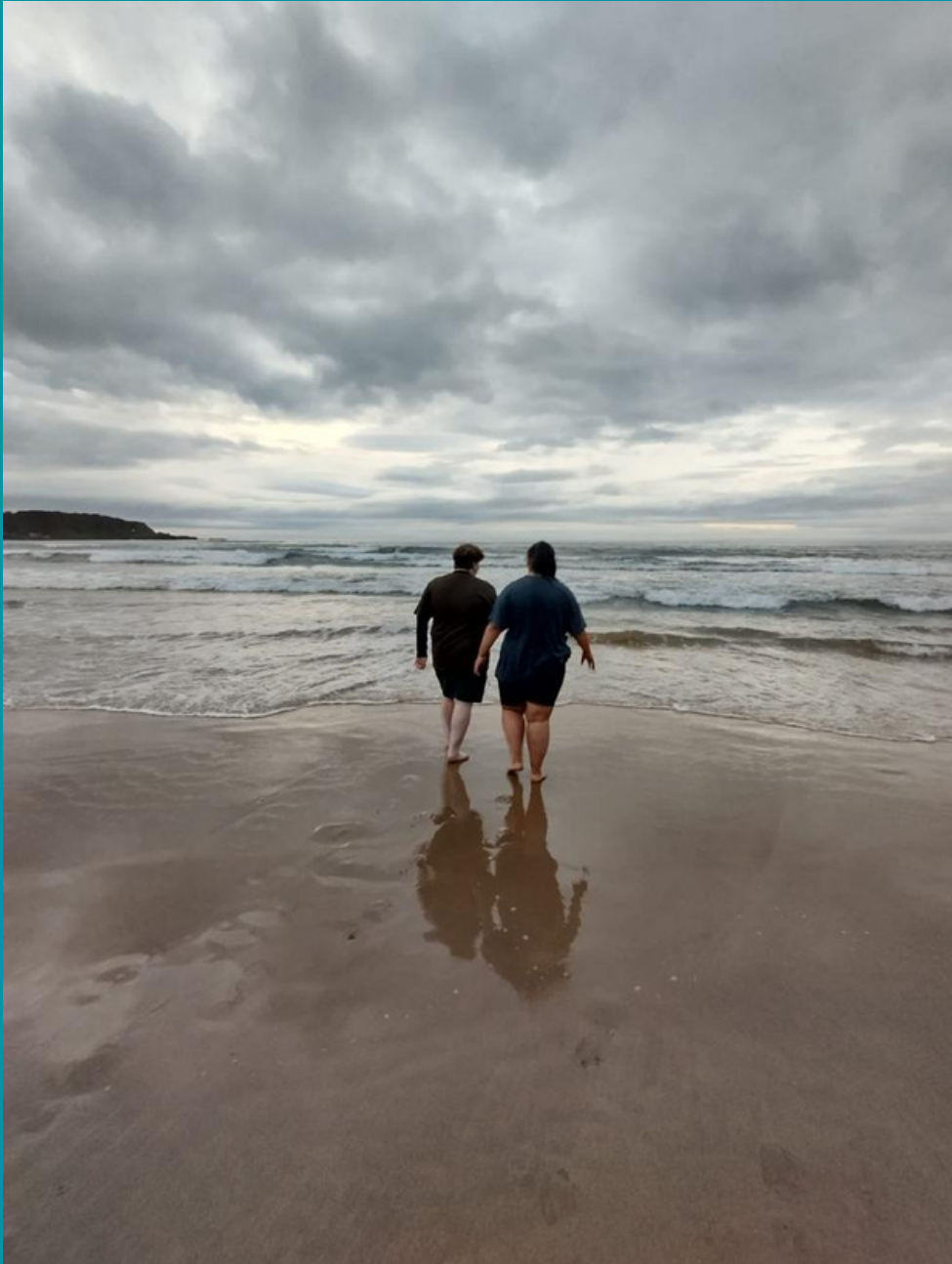
" Where there is staff absences there is no replacement and you have you have to just call the well-being centre. Sometimes you have to contact the managers in order to get answers.

"I've had no contact with a PA since 10th January (~3 months)" 'mine has been off on leave since before Christmas but have not had much contact with her.'

"If I tell my PA something good she never tells me anything positive or gives me compliments. Only focuses on negatives. I feel like she hasn't read my file?"

OUR ASKS

- Specifically tailored counselling for young people leaving care with Leaving Care Services fully resourced to embed this**
- Mental health services trained and aware of experiences that young people may have had within the care system and some of the specific issues that might be related to that experience.**
- Services promoting and commissioning long term Mentoring programmes including the option have a peer mentor**
- Support reflective practise for Social Workers- Provide a platform for workers to see feedback from young people to help inform practise.**



We need safe and affordable housing in order to build happy and loving homes by:

- Prioritising young people leaving care in social housing as we often have to live alone at an earlier age and more flats being built for young people
- Supporting us by either be or finding us a Guarantor

OUR CONCERN

Young people leaving care are at an alarmingly increased risk of homelessness and of being exploited because they don't have a safe place to live. Young people told us that trying to find a house when leaving care felt "impossible and lonely"

"There are not enough options for people leaving care. Often we have no choice about where we will live after leaving supported accommodation."

Young people said even after having been supported in safe services- they felt they had to leave as soon as they were 18 and often felt "pushed out".

"When I was leaving children's home, I got put in to a B&B full of drug addicts so I ending up having to move back in with mum which wasn't good for me"

No Guarantor

When young people did find a house they struggled to get a guarantor with services not being able to do this for young people. ***"I missed out on a really good house because i didn't have a guarantor"***



OUR VOICES

"it took so long for them to find me somewhere to live i had to stay in so many different places- it was lonely"

"I eventually got my Aunt to be my guarantor, if it wasn't for her I don't know what I would have done"

"My sister had to move out of her flat because it was so mouldy that she was worried it was going to make her baby sick. She's moved back in with my mum and I'm worried about her being safe there."

OUR ASKS

- A Guarantor Scheme to help us to get more equal access to private housing that is available to non care-experienced peers. It is difficult enough already without
- More consideration given to young people leaving care in regards to social housing
- More points assigned to give young people leaving care to give a better chance of avoiding being forced into homelessness or unsafe living situations
- Northern Ireland to look at GAP home schemes and The House Project that aims to support young people with care experience to gain independence skills as well as a forever home



We need opportunities that support us to make friends, be part of society and make our own decisions

OUR CONCERN

Isolation

Despite everybody being more connected than ever through social media, feelings of loneliness and isolation seem to be more common than ever. As well as making it difficult to keep in touch with old friends, moving between different areas and placements means that opportunities to find like-minded people and create new friendships can be really difficult.

This is even more true for those who may be from a different country or not speak English and for unaccompanied young people this isolation can be even more intensified.

Unaccompanied young people we spoke to told us that they needed more opportunities/activities for unaccompanied young people to be involved in

Social clubs

Services like youth clubs offer opportunities to make new friendships and relationships but as people go into adulthood and get older these opportunities become more scarce. Young people told us that they "often have access to residential trips and events" but these can be few and far between which can stifle potential friendships. Also, there can also be difficulty in knowing how to form new friendships and young people have said that they would like more help in being able to spot 'toxic' traits and 'red flags' when making new relationships.

Voice and Influence

Young People with care experience can often feel that they have no influence over how services can help them. **There was considerable interest from all the young people we spoke to in being more involved and consulted on how services are run and how resources are allocated.**

OUR VOICES

"Meeting and speaking with other people who may have similar experiences to our own who understand where we're coming from (is good)"

"It would have helped me a lot to have had interactions with other people who had care-experience whilst i was living in the children's home."

"having the chance to speak to somebody who has been in a similar place but had then gone on to be successful adult would have given me hope for the future."

"We don't get an opportunity to talk about the changes we already want to make."

"Triangles (programme) has meant that i met people from all over the UK and its been amazing"

"We're passionate about making a change and using our voice - and connecting with other people who want to make a change"

OUR ASKS

•Support for a panel of young people with care experience who can be a source of guidance and influence on services. A panel like this could be consulted to help give services better understanding of what works and what doesn't to make sure resources are used effectively

•More support for opportunities like Social Clubs to meet other young people with care experience and peers and to build new friendships and relationships.

-More involvement in UK wide programmes and initiatives such as Triangles

THANK YOU

**For taking the time to read our list of asks and
our Calls for action.**

**Please write your name or that of your
organisation on the line below and share on
social media to
pledge your support for our
call for change.**



Please contact **hal.abraham@barnardos.org.uk** or
rachel.telfer@barnardos.org.uk for more information or any queries
around the manifesto

supports change for young people leaving care

THE CARE LEAVERS MANIFESTO 2022 -
NORTHERN IRELAND
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