



SUPPORTING JOURNEYS TO INDEPENDENCE

Improving support for young people
when they first leave care.

BARNARDOS

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Changing childhoods. Changing lives.

LEAVING CARE IN ENGLAND

"I feel that a lot of people who are not care-experienced get a lot of help from their parents... The government need to realise that care-experienced young people struggle, we don't have the luxury of having family to support us."

The number of children in care in England has increased by 23% in the last decade.¹

This means that more young people aged 18 are leaving the care system every year. On leaving care these young people face a significant reduction in support. Many are expected to manage alone before they feel ready and they often struggle with issues ranging from managing their own tenancy, to living on a low income, to struggling because they feel lonely and isolated.

This paper highlights care leavers' experiences of accessing support across a range of different areas. It also sets out actions different government departments should take to improve support for these young people as they make the transition to early adulthood.



There are over 80,000 children in the care system and every year around 13,000 young people leave care.²



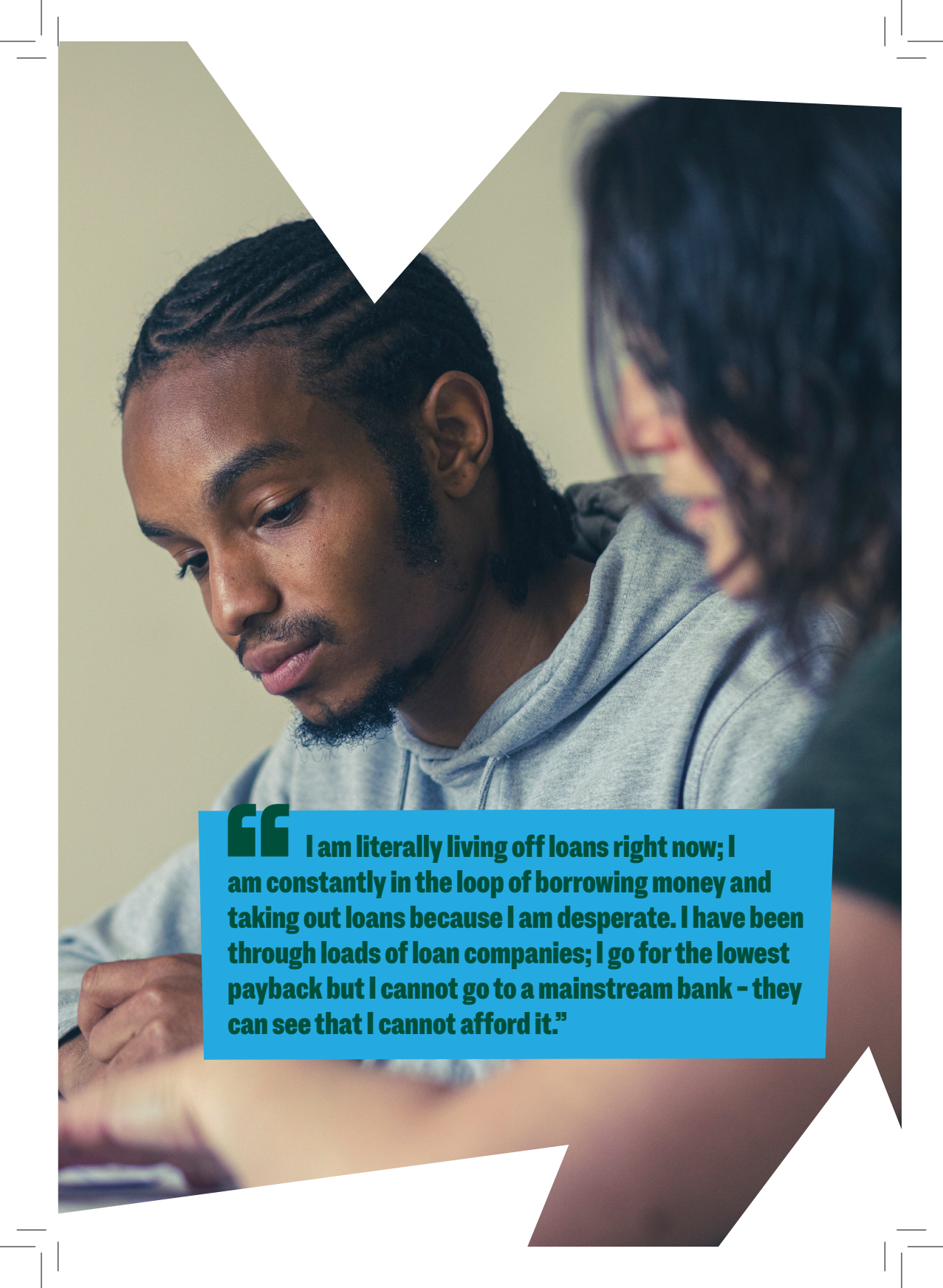
Around half of 24-year-olds still live with their parents,³ however most young people leave care at 18.



Over 1 in 5 care leavers say they didn't feel involved in plans and decisions when they first left care.⁴

How should support for care leavers be improved?

Barnardo's is calling on the Government to publish a **national statutory offer** of support for care leavers aged 16-25. This should be produced in partnership with care-experienced young people and should involve each government department setting out the actions that they will take to help level the playing field for those who grew up in care.

A photograph of a man with braided hair, wearing a grey hoodie, looking down at a document. A woman with dark hair is partially visible in the foreground, looking towards the man. The image is framed with a white border and a dark blue arrow pointing downwards from the bottom right.

“ I am literally living off loans right now; I am constantly in the loop of borrowing money and taking out loans because I am desperate. I have been through loads of loan companies; I go for the lowest payback but I cannot go to a mainstream bank - they can see that I cannot afford it.”

FINANCIAL SECURITY AND A SAFE AND STABLE PLACE TO LIVE

Many care leavers are living on a low income, often surviving on or near the poverty line.⁵ Benefits for this group are low and without family to provide a financial safety net, many fall into debt.⁶

Not having sufficient income impacts care leavers' ability to find a safe and stable place to live. Currently a lack of suitable and affordable housing is resulting in some care leavers finding themselves in unsafe situations⁷ such as being forced to live in unfit properties including those with mould and damp. Too many young people find themselves without anywhere to live at all and have to resort to sofa surfing or sleeping rough.



57% of care leavers say that managing their money was difficult when leaving care.⁸



1 in 3 care leavers become homeless in the first 2 years after they leave care.⁹



1 in 10 care leavers aged 19-21 are in unsuitable accommodation or it is not known if it is suitable.¹⁰

What can be done to improve financial security for care leavers?

- Change the rules so that care leavers claiming Universal Credit are eligible for the over-25 rate.
- Require all local authorities to provide rent deposit and guarantor schemes for care leavers.
- Increase the value of the Setting Up Home Grant for care leavers in line with inflation. This would help care leavers to afford essentials such as beds, cookers and furniture.
- Improve support for care leavers who are homeless.

ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

Many care leavers say they struggle to access health services due to limited provision, high thresholds, and long waiting lists.

Young people who have grown up in care often move areas and say that this can make it challenging to register with GPs, dentists, and opticians.¹¹ Accessing appropriate mental health support can also be difficult.¹²



Adults who grew up in a residential home are between 3 and 4 times more likely to say their health is 'not good' than good.¹³



50% of children in care meet the criteria for a mental health disorder¹⁴ compared to 20% of all children and young people aged 8-25.¹⁵



Looked after children and care leavers are between 4 and 5 times more likely to commit suicide in adulthood.¹⁶

How can health services better support care leavers?

- Provide free prescriptions to all care leavers up to the age of 25.
- Enable all care leavers to access Children and Adolescent Mental Health services until the age of 25.
- Introduce a Virtual Mental Health Lead for children in care and care leavers in every local authority. This professional would co-ordinate access to mental health services for this group of children and young people.



ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Children in care and care leavers often struggle to access education. Children and young people tell us they that the right support is not always in place to help them learn and that teachers do not always have the training to understand the trauma and emotional vulnerability felt by many children in care.¹⁷

Many children in the care system experience frequent school moves which can disrupt their education and result in them spending periods of time out of education completely.¹⁸ Moving to both higher and further education can be also be difficult for this group and the support available from universities for care-experienced students is variable.¹⁹



Children in care on average achieve an Attainment 8 score, less than half of that of the overall pupil population.²⁰



38% of care leavers aged 19-21 are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), compared to around 13% of all young people.²¹



Just 14% of care leavers go to university compared to 47% of all young people.²²

What can be done to help care leavers access education, employment and training?

- Extend the statutory role of the Virtual School Head to include a duty to promote the educational achievements of care leavers up to the age of 25.
- Introduce a new government-backed kitemark scheme for higher education.
- Introduce bespoke pathways in youth employment initiatives such as the forthcoming young guarantee to provide specific support for care leavers.



“ I was never offered anything when I moved into university. I had to do it all by myself and no one helped. Other people had their parents drop them off but I had nobody.”

LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

The experience of coming into care can often cut children off from friends and relatives, and moving around the care system between different foster and residential care homes can make it difficult to maintain long-term relationships.²³

This means that many young people leave care without a social network to rely on. A major survey by Coram Voice in 2020 highlighted the extent that care leavers were facing loneliness and isolation compared to the general population.²⁴ While the fieldwork for this was conducted before the pandemic we know from the young people Barnardo's supports that care leavers remain at increased risk of loneliness and isolation.²⁵



26% of care leavers report low life satisfaction compared to only 3% of the general population.²⁶



22% of care leavers say that they 'always/often' feel lonely compared to 10% of all young people.²⁷



15% of care leavers report that they do not have a good friend compared to 5% of all adults.²⁸

What can be done to help care leavers build networks within their community and tackle loneliness and isolation?

- Introduce a national scheme of free bus travel accessible to all care leavers up to the age of 25.
- Extend eligibility for support from an independent visitor – volunteers who act as an older buddy or a friend to children in care – to care leavers up to the age of 25.
- Introduce schemes to help care leavers access activities such as free entry to exhibitions in museums and galleries.

CARE LEAVERS AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Many care-experienced young people say they feel adults have low expectations of them, and that some carers will call the police in relation to incidents which could be dealt with informally.

This is particularly true for Black care leavers as outlined in Barnardo's 2023 report – Double Discrimination.²⁹ Care leavers with experience of the criminal justice system also say their needs are often not understood, and the support available from social services for care leavers in prison can be poor.



52% of children in care have a criminal conviction by age 24 compared to 13% of non-care-experienced children.³⁰



Nearly 1 in 10 Black children in care have served a custodial sentence before they are 18 - compared to less than 1% of children in the general population.³¹




24% of the adult prison population have previously been in care.³²

What more can be done to prevent care leavers becoming involved in the criminal justice system and better support those that do?

- Introduce a statutory duty on local authorities to prevent unnecessary criminalisation of children in care and care leavers. This duty should require all local authorities to work with partners to produce a specific protocol on how this will be achieved locally.
- Update the Prison Service Strategy for supporting care-experienced People to provide more emphasis on the need to join-up support between children's services and the prison system.

Endnotes

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“ [Living independently was] lonely, most young people really want to move to independent living but it’s not the same as you think it will be. It’s you and this house, if you don’t have any savings or not enough money to buy a TV or something to entertain yourself, sometimes it can be really, really lonely.”

About Barnardo's

Life can make children growing up in the UK today feel like they don't belong. We know they do.

At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear – changing childhoods and changing lives. We've been helping children, young people, and families to be safer, happier, healthier, and more hopeful for over 150 years – and we'll be here for as long as we're needed.

Last year, we provided essential support to 356,200 children, parents and carers through 760 services and partnerships across the UK.

This vital work is only possible thanks to our partners and supporters, including those who donate and shop with us. But we're not stopping there.

Together, we're bringing love, care and hope into children's lives so every child can feel like they belong.

Last year we supported 6,900 children in care and 2,700 care leavers. We are one of the largest independent fostering agencies providing foster homes to 661 children and adoptive parents to a further 241 children.

For more information contact Nicola Smith, Senior Policy Adviser - Children in and Leaving Care, Barnardo's.

Email public.affairs@barnardos.org.uk or continue the conversation by following us on social media at [@barnardos](https://www.instagram.com/barnardos) [#CareLeaverConvos](https://twitter.com/barnardos)



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