



## Research Briefing one: Professional perspectives on supporting young people leaving care in the context of COVID-19

Based on the accounts of 31 leaving care managers<sup>1</sup> from 14 local authorities across England, this briefing paper explores the impact that the pandemic and subsequent restrictions have had on care leavers' lives and circumstances. It also illuminates how children's social care have adapted their services and support from the first lockdown in March 2020 to May 2021.

Detailed information about the research methodology (Newlands et al., 2021) is available here: <https://www.beds.ac.uk/goldbergcentre/research/goldberg-current-research/cctc/>.

### Key messages





## Introduction

Every year around 13,000 sixteen to eighteen year olds in England leave their foster homes or residential care and negotiate the transition to adulthood. They are expected to navigate a number of changes in their lives (setting up home, managing day to day living and their finances and maintaining education, employment or training) at a much younger age than their peers in the general population and without the levels of practical, emotional and financial support that families typically offer their children. Growing awareness that abuse and neglect, in-care experiences and early independence can place care leavers at risk of social exclusion and poor outcomes, has resulted in implementation of legislation to extend the duties that local authorities have to support this group into early adulthood (Children and Families Act 2014; Children and Social Work Act 2017). These measures reflect a growing acknowledgement that care leavers have a right to support that meets their specific





phone, text or videocall. This increase in frequency of contact was reviewed on a regular basis with young people and flexed according to their individual needs and in line with the COVID-19 regulations.

*‡ people needed and we had the information to be able to review that RAG rating. If young people were RAG rated as red, we would go out directly to see them and assess the situation and support, with access to crisis services if that was required or mental health services generally.*

Leaving care managers perceived that the increase in contact was welcomed by most young people as it provided a sense of being cared for during a period of isolation and uncertainty. For others, increased contact from a personal adviser was much more intense than young people had been used to.

*@ been used to. Initially, there was quite a bit of resistance from them to that because they might only have been having contact with their personal advisers, sort of on a six-weekly plus kind of frequency. And then, to go over to weekly, it was quite intensive. But we did have reports back from young people that they were appreciative of that.*

Many leaving care managers shared the view that new ways of working with young people were positive changes that would inform future practice. Leaving care managers particularly recognised the value of flexible and creative ways of keeping in touch with young people, depending on individual preference and need.

*@ will possibly prefer the virtual calls, rather than the face-to-face visits.*

*We want to continue to be creative in the way that we communicate with our care leavers, and base how we communicate with them on their needs and their wishes, rather than we must come and see you face to face every eight or 12 weeks. So we will definitely consider, based on what each individual care leaver wants, use of virtual meetings, video calls, email.*

Additional support from children's social care, partner agencies and/or charities was also put in place in some areas. One local authority had introduced an outreach programme which meant workers could build relationships and work intensively with young people with complex needs (visits up to five times a week, including evenings and weekends, for up to six months). They reported that this model was proving to be effective in reducing the use of crisis interventions and facilitating more regular engagement with adult mental health services. Another local authority had increased the work that their Early Help emotional









One leaving care manager highlighted the complexities surrounding the extreme isolation that some care leavers have endured with a reduction in social support having a detrimental impact on mental health, which can then be further compounded due to difficulties accessing mental health support during the

open up. Another leaving care manager noted the barriers that care leavers face to accessing mental health services, due to high thresholds for access to primary mental health services, lengthy waiting lists for Increasing Access to Psychological Therapy (IAPT) services, and limited resources within leaving care teams to offer the level and scale of mental health support that is needed.

*Then we had another young person who hit mental health crisis and just trying to get him the help he needed was absolutely horrendous. He found himself homeless on the streets and it just felt like every door we knocked at was a knock back. Eventually, we managed to get him an assessment under the Care Act for his mental health and effort on our part to keep taking him back to the outreach services so that actually, he*

The impersonal nature of virtual consultations was also highlighted as a challenge for young people.

Young people's living arrangements could also undermine the feasibility of engaging in appointments at times when therapeutic intervention would have been really valuable.

Previous research has identified gaps in service provision as young people negotiate the transition from care to adulthood and as they move from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to Adult Mental Health Services (CAHMS to AHMS) (or cease to be eligible as they do not meet adult service thresholds) (Campbell et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2010; Butterworth et al., 2017).

Findings also signal the need for improved multi-agency coordination and recognition of the importance of trust and relational continuity to facilitate access and engagement. Messages from the professionals in this research highlight how these systemic issues are

exacerbated in the context of COVID-19 and bring into sharp focus the need for effective

*If a young person breached COVID-19 rules or legislation in their temporary accommodation, they were being evicted from their temporary accommodation for breaking the rules, and then that duty to house was being discharged as a result. And*

*@ might be, but we definitely saw an increase in young people not being able to stay in temporary accommodation, and greater use of hotel accommodation, greater use of hotels out of area*

The majority of leaving care managers reported that accommodation and housing for care leavers has been a very complicated picture throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The reasons behind this varied depending on the local authority, but for the most part related to suspensions of biddings for council housing, difficulties with access to private rented accommodation for care leavers, combined with a shortage of placements in semi-independence placements due to young people staying longer.

Managers from a small number of local authorities also signalled that they had seen an increase in the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation and out of authority placements due to a lack of placement choice. Interviewees explained that this was particularly the case where young people were in very unsafe and precarious situations, or where young people were presenting as homeless.

Bed and Breakfast accommodation is not 'suitable' accommodation, and it is concerning that some local authorities have reported an increase in its use for the placement of vulnerable young people during the pandemic. The use of out of authority placements is also worrying as it distances young people from their support networks at a time when their emotional resilience is already being tested as a result of the crisis.

### *Re-adjusting and potential housing issues in the longer-term*

As the pandemic has gone on local authorities have sought to develop strategies to enable placement moves and acknowledged that postponement of planned housing moves could not be sustained. Managers described a period of 'placement gridlock' with too many bottlenecks in the system.

Moreover, a few leaving care managers specifically raised concerns that the planned removal of the Eviction Ban in June 2021 has the potential to cause a surge in the numbers of care leavers being evicted from independent housing, including council tenancies and privately rented accommodation.

Across the interviews leaving care managers raised deep0 G[( )] TJmova10.000008815(s)-8( )0 G[(b)-6(o)-5(u









outlined how the pandemic has impacted on care leavers' experience of higher education and reported that they have had a unique and challenging experience.

*These care leavers: particularly those residing in Halls of Residence have been markedly impacted by the COVID impact and have been particularly isolated I think, having that experience and it not looking like they thought it would.*

This is echoed in research conducted during the pandemic which found that care experienced and estranged students in higher education have faced significant challenges, including a reliance on temporary and part-time work that is no longer available, no alternative home to return to, and lower levels of practical and emotional support (Become et al., 2020).

One leaving care manager shared a number of examples of young people choosing to defer higher education places, and others missing out on important opportunities that they had worked hard for, such as scholarships and internships that were no longer available.

*I know two who decided to defer going to university from college because they felt they would not get value for money, that they are going to be paying all this money in student loans but not getting the experience. I know one who had been looking worked really hard and won this scholarship to go to China as an exchange and she had worked really hard, it just fell through, I know of one again had won a scholarship to go to the [University] and the business went bankrupt and he struggled with that, the business was going to sponsor him, they had plans and [COVID-19 is] stopping that.*

There were concerns about the long-term impact of the pandemic on education and training for care leavers, in that the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social restrictions have the potential to deepen inequalities that many care leavers already face, including disrupted education due to placement moves and barriers to engagement.

*@ going to obvi*

Re-engaging care leavers in education and training opportunities will be a key priority as social restrictions are lifted. Interviews with leaving care managers highlighted that it will be particularly important to invest in a wide range of initiatives to support care leavers with education and training that meets their needs. For some young people leaving care, a few leaving care managers underlined the importance of programmes that will support young people to increase their confidence to engage with education and training going forward.

### Employment and discretionary financial support

Recent economic forecasting suggests that the under 25s have been worst affected by unemployment during the pandemic and that they are over-represented in sectors that have shutdown (Learning and Work Institute, 2021). Although the furlough scheme has prevented some redundancies, interviewees did report that a number of care leavers had lost their jobs because they worked in retail settings, had part-time contracts and/or were on zero hour contracts. For young people on a low income loss of work or reduced payments under furlough<sup>3</sup> heightened their financial difficulties.

Interviewees reported that some young people's accommodation was also jeopardised











pandemic and when the risks of financial hardship, stress, anxiety, isolation and ill-health were heightened also helped, in some areas at least, to move away from bureaucratic and 'task-





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