

Care leavers, COVID-19 and the transition from Care (CCTC study)

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



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Project Overview

COVID-19 has necessitated changes in the way that support to care leavers is delivered. The study will contribute to understanding the impact that COVID-19 has had on the timing of young people's transitions from care, where young people go, what services and support they receive, and how they fare.

The Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and Social Care at the University of Bedfordshire has been commissioned to undertake this 18 month study which began in November 2020. The research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19.

Further information on the Care leavers, COVID-19 and transitions from care study (CCTC study) can be found here: <https://www.beds.ac.uk/goldbergcentre/research/goldberg-current-research/cctc/>

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 managers¹ 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

- **Care leavers are resilient (but still need support)**
It is important not to pathologize care leavers and assume they are a homogenous group who are destined for poorer outcomes than their non-care experienced peers. At the same time, it is important to hold in mind the additional challenges that this group may experience and how these might be further heightened during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. Care leavers have a right to tailored and accessible services and support to protect and promote their life chances.
- **Reduced bureaucracy and prioritisation of strategies to promote positive wellbeing**
The pressing imperative to adapt models of social work delivery and to maintain support for care leavers during the pandemic opened up opportunities for less rigid compliance with policies and procedures and more personalised, flexible and relational support in response to individual needs and circumstances.
- **Creative and tailored approaches to keeping in touch**
Leaving care personal advisers have sought to maintain socially distanced face to face contact, where necessary, and in line with the professional values of social work. They have also been adaptable and creative in the design and delivery of online offers including drop ins, quizzes, cooking sessions, exercise classes, candle making and song writing. Checking in on care leavers more often than usual and in different ways helped to combat loneliness, isolation and boredom.
- **'It's not just digital poverty [it's] actual poverty'**
Professionals drew attention to the nature and extent of poverty in care leavers lives and how this had been exacerbated during the pandemic (e.g. loss of work, increased

¹ Interviewees included advanced practitioners, leaving care team managers and service managers with responsibilities for looked after children 16+ and/or care leavers.

heating bills, higher food bills due to shortages of some goods and greater reliance on local corner shops). All local authorities who participated in this research increased the material support they were providing during the pandemic, including, for example, providing an extra £20 per week for those ineligible for the Universal Credit uplift and/or by providing food parcels or discretionary payments to cover rent or bills.

- **Mental health and the widening ‘care gap’**

Concerns regarding the availability of, access to, and engagement with, mental health support during the transition from care to adulthood pre-date Covid-19. The additional pressures facing care leavers during the pandemic have increased demand for mental health services at a time when access is further restricted and alternative models of delivery may inhibit engagement (e.g. reduced access to health professionals that young people know and trust, online delivery when young people are in shared accommodation). Every local authority identified mental health support for care leavers as a pressing issue and some signalled that there had been a rise in complex mental health needs within their areas, including an increase in self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.

- **Housing: winners and losers**

Every local authority expressed concerns about housing and accommodation support, with Covid-19 exposing pre-existing fragility in the system. Findings revealed that experiences were diverse depending upon young people’s needs, circumstance and where they were placed at the point of lockdown. For some, delays to placement moves were welcomed, whilst others felt stuck in limbo unable to move on as planned.

- **Moving beyond age-related transitions**

Some young people benefitted from the opportunity to remain in their existing care placement during the pandemic, rather than being expected to move on at a particular point in time. Purposive delays were viewed to be really advantageous for some young people as they offered an extended period for preparation and planning for the future as well as relational continuity and support from current carers.

- **Shortages of suitable accommodation**

Particular challenges were encountered in finding accommodation for young people who were evicted from placements (for non-compliance with Covid-19 restrictions), or who had complex needs. Four local authorities had not been able to secure suitable accommodation for some of their young people resulting in the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation and/or out of authority placements.

- **Acknowledgement of the importance of bridging the ‘digital divide’**

Services were concerned about care leavers who lacked access to devices such as a laptop or phones, WIFI or did not have sufficient data allowances. Those with limited or no access were reported to experience challenges as their education, employment and

social life moved to become predominantly digital. Efforts were made to bridge this 'digital divide' and there was an increased recognition of the importance of digital connection (for both care leavers and staff). Some also highlighted that it should not be assumed that all young people have high levels of digital literacy.

- **Varied experiences of online learning**

Education can play an important role in improving young people's life chances. Changes of homes and schools mean care leavers have often already experienced disruptions to their learning. While some young people have adapted well to virtual delivery others have struggled to remain motivated and have missed face to face interaction with teachers and their peers. The challenges for unaccompanied asylum young people trying to learn English online were particularly highlighted. Re-engaging care leavers in education and training as restrictions are lifted needs to be a priority to avoid further widening educational disadvantage.

- **Celebrating practice**

The COVID-19 pandemic presented many new challenges to local authorities and required their staff to invest significant time and effort in developing creative solutions to support care leavers. Practitioners used relationship-based practice models to prioritise the wellbeing of the care leavers during a period in which they were under intense pressure and when face to face interactions could cause anxiety due to the potential risks to them and young people. Their resilience and commitment to promoting the wellbeing of care leavers should be celebrated.

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 needs and that helps them to overcome the disadvantages they have faced during childhood (General Assembly of the United Nations, 2010; Munro, 2019)².

Care leavers are a diverse group of young people and will all have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic differently, depending on their backgrounds, individual needs and circumstances. However, as interviews with leaving care managers highlighted, the pandemic has intensified many issues that were already present in care leavers' lives.

The leaving care managers who participated in this research emphasised the strength and resilience of the care leavers they work with, in the context of an unprecedented global crisis. They outlined how many of the young people that they work with have had to deal with difficult and complex situations in their lives, with many already isolated and without access to the same support networks that their peers may have.

One thing I'd have to highlight is that we underestimate how resilient care leavers are... it's quite easy to think that all Care Leavers are vulnerable, and they are vulnerable, I'm not saying they aren't, but actually they are incredibly resilient, far more resilient than most people give them credit for, and probably more resilient than general members of public. Which I think again we've seen that in the last kind of 14 months.

[some care leavers have reflected] This is what my life has been, I've been in isolation, I have had to deal with these things on my own in the past, yes I've had a social worker, but I've always had to make do with what I've had... depending on from which angle you are coming from, my view is that I do believe that our care leavers and our looked after children might probably have had a higher level of resilience, maybe to have dealt with and to have had insight into what they have experienced as care leavers.

² In practice there are wide variations in the quantity and quality of the services and support provided (National Audit Office, 2015).

Government guidance set the tone for adaptations to direct practice during the pandemic. Notwithstanding young people's resilience and creative and flexible adaptations to models of working, **leaving care managers identified isolation, mental ill-health and housing as particularly challenging areas of practice in the context of COVID-19.**

Government guidance

Care systems, welfare frameworks and economic contexts can serve to scaffold young people in transition or exacerbate precarity in their lives (Boddy, Bakketeig and Østergaard, 2020). In April 2020 the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 were implemented. These regulations made significant temporary changes to the protections given in law to children looked after and care leavers. Government guidance specified that leaving care personal advisers should:

- contact care leavers during the pandemic, including those over 21 who are eligible for support up to age 25, but who were not accessing support before the pandemic
- communicate with care leavers in a way that is most effective for them, including by phone or video
- continue face-to-face where reasonably necessary, while following the working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance to protect staff and young people
- assess the right level and frequency of contact with each care leaver
- always consider the wishes and feelings of the young person (Department for Education, 2021, p.35).

Government guidance also stated that it was expected that local authorities would:

take account of coronavirus (COVID-19) when making decisions about leaving care, and to ensure that no one has to leave care during this period (Department for Education, 2021, p.35).

It was also outlined that this same principle should be applied in respect of young people in Staying Put arrangements and those due to make a planned move to new accommodation. Moves were to be permitted if this was what the young person wanted and the setting was safe in relation to COVID-19.

The guidance also recommended that local authorities consider putting the following additional support measures in place:

- using additional government funding for discretionary payments to cover food, utilities and rent if care leavers are struggling financially
- arranging for discretionary payments to be authorised and paid at short notice if necessary
- continuing other forms of financial support for care leavers including setting up home allowances

- allowing visits to take place over the telephone, a video-link or other electronic communication methods, where face to face visits are not possible due to coronavirus (COVID-19) (Department for Education, 2021, p.35).

Adapting models of delivery and a commitment to relational practices

Social distancing measures have disrupted traditional models of direct social work practice at a time when support needs and anxieties are heightened. Interviews demonstrated **organisational and individual workers' commitment and agility in responding to the challenges of moving to a hybrid practice model**, with greater reliance on online or virtual contact unless social distanced face to face contact was assessed to be necessary to safeguard young people. In some local authorities the flexible and creative solutions that emerged were understood as a continuation of, and congruent with, the relationship-based practice models within the local authority, whilst in others this was not explicitly articulated. Nonetheless, the **approaches and practices that were described appeared to be creative, flexible, tailored and responsive to young people's individual circumstances**. Wider research also suggests that in some local authorities the pandemic may have created conditions that have facilitated more relational and humane social work practices (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2020; Coram Voice, 2020; Ferguson et al., 2020; Pink et al., 2020; Featherstone, 2020; Munro, 2020).

In the early stages of the pandemic several local authorities described 'Red Amber Green' (RAG) rating their care leavers to establish what support was required, taking into account where they were living, their access to support, their health and wider needs and circumstances. Leaving care managers spoke of making assessments about individual young people, whilst recognising that placement type and the quality of relationships would influence what was needed and who should be prioritised for more intensive levels of support.

We quickly had to adapt to talk to young people about how we could continue to support them. We were very concerned about the more vulnerable people. Clearly, some young people live in placements with carers on hand, some live-in supported living arrangements with staff on hand. And so we always knew that they were going to be seen and to continue be supported. But the young people lived independently. And our main concern was particularly those who were just moving out to independent living, and for those who had recently moved out, say, within the last six to 12 months, and were still trying to find their feet and struggling alone.

Keeping in touch with care leavers

Local authorities reported that they had maintained socially distanced face to face visits where they assessed this was necessary. In parallel, local authorities introduced or increased virtual contact with young people. Most local authorities introduced policies which expected personal advisers to contact all young people on a weekly or fortnightly basis, either by

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.

We increased our virtual contact with young people to weekly, that's what young 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.

It's a level of intensity which is not something that certainly young people would have 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.

I think it's opened up different ways of working. There will be some young people that 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

health and wellbeing practitioners were doing with care leavers, as a measure to prevent needs escalating.

They did things like starting to attend children in care council groups, they implemented meditation sessions for care leavers and the care leavers actually recorded themselves doing some of the mindfulness and meditation sessions for other people, so we could share it...we had care leavers delivering meditation to us which was really nice.

Alongside organisational measures to maintain or enhance the service offer, leaving care personal advisers had also adopted a wide range of **creative strategies to keep in touch with care leavers virtually, including drop-in sessions, quizzes, cooking sessions, exercise classes, candle making and song writing**. The examples provided signalled a personalised and relationship-based approach.

One particular personal adviser, she's been sending a little biscuit and a teabag and stuff in an envelope to a care leaver, kind of saying, we'll sit and have a brew together...But little things like that, it means an awful lot, doesn't it, when you think actually, that somebody is sitting at home thinking about me...it's a lovely little thought.

Challenges with virtual practice

From many professionals' perspectives, the move to virtual practice had been successful, and in some cases, relationships were reported to have strengthened as a result of increased contact. However, managers shared **a number of challenges relating to virtual practice**. Workers experienced difficulties in responding to and supporting young people who were experiencing distress.

It's very difficult to be virtual and your young person is crying, and you can't reach out and hug them. It's very difficult for practitioners, although they would try to, by the end of that call to have reassured the young person but still, when you come off that phone and you're like "they're in their house on their own", so it was difficult for the practitioners to deliver the service because we were not used to delivering our service that way. That was a challenge.

Other specific challenges related to care leavers who were newly allocated to workers or who were moving on.

That's then become really difficult for those that are coming over, you know, from the social work pods, transitioning over to us. Because you're trying to build up that relationship virtually, and that's really difficult... And also, I think it feels quite uncomfortable for the social workers who have perhaps worked with these young people for a significant period of time, and then are sort of virtually saying goodbye.

In some cases, workers had sought to maintain face to face contact with individual young people within the regulations by arranging socially distanced walks (with or without a dog), bike rides and visits to local parks.

Virtual video calls with young people, yes it works with about 50% of them but the other 50%, no, they don't want to be on video, their self-esteem is so low anyway, they don't want to be seen on video... We just have to carry on, we had to take precautions, PPE, clothes, social distancing...and still go out and see young people and stick to the social distancing rules, and be creative with the parks that we've got in the local area.

The approaches workers adopted suggested a strong commitment to seeing and supporting young people in line with the professional values of social work, but this was not always without anxiety and stress for the managers and frontline workers involved.

I can remember feeling quite anxious...because although the rules are vulnerable people can get together in support groups, we made sure we did it all within the guidelines. You do feel like "oh gosh, should we be doing this? We're putting young people at risk, we're putting foster carers at risk, are we making people do unnecessary journeys?", the balance of benefits as opposed to potential negative consequences. It was quite stressful...you don't know what's the best for them and what's not but I think on the whole, a lot of them were still craving social contact and doing stuff and you have to weigh up the risk of the physical and the mental health.

The challenges associated with the transition to remote working during a period when professionals were under intense pressure was also noted.

It's also getting used to a whole new way of work, suddenly you're working virtually, I think the biggest thing is missing the support as a team. So, given the times of daily issues that you're having to deal with as a social worker or as a personal adviser, you're suddenly on your own in your own home and feeling that you have to maybe manage that. You can't turn to a colleague and say, 'What do you think?' or, 'Where's this form? Where do I find this on the system?' You're not privy to those office discussions where you chip in and go, 'I know what's going on in that case, I can tell you. I dealt with it on duty last week'. So, that's huge, it still is.

Strategies to help workers to deal with these additional demands were provided at the organisational and team level. Examples of organisational level responses included the introduction of daily manager meetings to monitor staffing levels and increases in staffing needs, a mental health support package for workers and recruitment activity to increase the number of staff, for example on the duty desk, or within leaving care teams.

At a team level, virtual meetings and check-ins replaced face to face meetings in the office and were attempts to replicate the informal opportunities for peer support that were

missing in a remote working team environment (see also Cook, 2020). As professionals negotiated these changes and associated challenges they also observed and sought to respond to the impact of the pandemic on young people's health and wellbeing.

Mental health needs and support

Children in care have significantly poorer mental health than the most disadvantaged children outside the care system (Meltzer et al., 2003; Ford et al., 2007). Self-reported mental health problems are also elevated during the transition from care and young people can feel abandoned, isolated and disconnected from services (Dixon et al., 2004; Butterworth et al., 2017). In a recent survey one in four young people aged 16-25 leaving the care system reported low life satisfaction (compared to 3% in the general population) (Coram Voice, 2020).

Professionals in our study identified **care leavers' isolation and mental health as one of their main concerns during the pandemic**. They reflected that many young people had coped well initially, but that prolonged periods of lockdown and restrictions had disrupted young people's routines and reduced access to formal and informal support, leading to **an increase in emotional health needs, anxiety and isolation**.

Isolation has been a significant issue, [for] a lot of our young people...their main connections are with a professional support network...they weren't having the level of visitation that they had previously, and it was a virtual offer, so isolation [was an issue].

Another interviewee described the sense of hopelessness that the circumstances surrounding the pandemic had induced for some care leavers.

The main way it's impacted on care leavers is their mental health and self-esteem, confidence, isolation, loneliness and just absolutely losing that drive to do well in their lives. A lot of them have become very isolated and quite depressed and don't see the point at the moment, that's what we're hearing a lot of, "What's the point?"

Messages from research with care leavers also echo these findings, with young people reporting that COVID-19 has heightened their anxiety and resulted in low mood and emotional breakdowns. It had also had an acute impact on those with pre-existing health conditions (Kelly et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2020).

Some leaving care managers described how relationship-based practice with care leavers has been imperative to support the mental health and wellbeing of care leavers throughout the pandemic.

I think it's just making sure we've got that connectivity. There's been some incidents that have happened over the last 14 months where we've had to react to them, and presented serious self-harm and things like that. Sadly, that happens. But again, the communication and the relationship between the personal adviser and the young person is crucial to that, and I think that's an element that we kind of really got working well.

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 pandemic.

We had one young person who was at university... He had very few friends, no-one around him and his mental health significantly dipped as soon as they stopped all the lectures and mixing, everyone from his halls went home, he was left there alone. His mental health kept dipping, the PA was seeing him weekly even though it was a two hour drive each way and every time she tried to get through to a GP, she wasn't getting much luck... He was offered some support [from university] but it was all over the phone and his mental health really dipped and eventually, thanks to the persistence of my PA, he was able to get support with his mental health from the GP in terms of medication and there was some support put around him we got another PA who lives in that area from another team, to go and visit him in conjunction with our PA as well. For him, it was really difficult to get any support.

A small number of leaving care managers drew particular attention to an escalation in self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.

There's been an increase in threats of suicide. And there's been an increase in attempts at suicide. And, and there's been an increase in self harm, and hospital admissions. And I'm told by mental health experts that were only just at the start of a real rise in that problem being reported. Yeah. But we're already seeing that day to day. And it's very common for me to be approached by a worker to say their young person is threatening suicide. And it's a real big pressure for PAs. We've had a slight increase in disordered eating for care leavers as well. And we've got at least two or three my team who have been hospitalized long term, because they're critically ill.

Accessing mental health services

At a time of heightened mental health need it was noted that **there were additional barriers to accessing health services**. Increased pressure on health services and the move from face to face to virtual delivery was reported to have caused some difficulties. For example, young people could not necessarily see their own GP when they were struggling and instead had to speak to a different GP over the phone which meant they did not necessarily feel able to

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 unfortunately, he's now sectioned and we're trying to work on discharge plans for him with the Section 117 team at the hospital. It's been a long road and it took a lot of effort on our part to keep taking him back to the outreach services so that actually, he would get a service. It took a hell of a lot of effort; we're talking months' worth of effort.

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

A phone conversation to talk about your mental health isn't often what young people want to do. So, I think that even if we have managed to get them into services, they quickly disengage from that service because it feels very impersonal, and if they've not met that person, why would they start sharing how they're feeling.

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

I've got quite a lot of young people that aren't actually fully engaging with virtual intervention or consultation in the same way. Because if you think, so for example, a young person who's placed at home with mum who actually, mum perpetuates the issues, he's not going to want to sit and talk on Facetime to CAMHS while his mums in the other room listening to him disclosing, 'Well, I'm struggling with my mum's mental health and this is impacting in this way', so he's just completely disengaged.

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 services and support to protect and promote the wellbeing of care leavers.

Housing and accommodation support for care leavers

Leaving care managers welcomed the government guidance that young people should be permitted to remain in their current placement during the pandemic. **Purposive delays in transitions were perceived to have been advantageous for some young people**, who benefitted from an extended period in a stable placement, which offered a little more time to plan for the future as well relational continuity and support from current carers.

Some young people, when we look back a year ago; how far they've come has been amazing and that's because of time that COVID's given us to spend with them.

An extended period in a stable placement was also reported to have facilitated further work to prepare and support young people to develop the skills for independence.

A lot of our young people have remained within the accommodation that they were in for much longer, if that is the right thing for them... that's been partly because we had a housing bidding suspension for a period during the pandemic and there were lots of people who want housing at the moment, so a backlog. It's meant young people haven't been able to move on as swiftly as they might have liked to although generally, in some ways it's been supportive and helpful for the young people to have a little bit longer, to re-evaluate their decision making and what they're going to do.

However, maintaining accommodation arrangements was not without challenges and **all interviewees identified housing as a major issue affecting care leavers during the pandemic**. In cases where young people did not comply with COVID-19 restrictions the consequences for placement stability differed widely depending on placement type and organisational approaches to managing risk. Some carers were exposed to health risks and made personal sacrifices to maintain placements.

We have had situations where, for example, in supported lodging, the young person was breaching the lockdown rules, which meant then they had to isolate, which then meant that carer wasn't able, for example, to visit their elderly relative. And that happened a few times. It meant that, for months, because of the behaviour of the young person who was in the household, they weren't able to support their own families.

In shared accommodation providers had to assess and manage the risk that non-compliance with restrictions may have on the health of other residents, as well as their staff. Most local authorities reported that providers had been tolerant and had tried to avoid evicting young people, but policies and practices varied. In one area they explained that:

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 we were saying, well that's a legal matter for the police surely to issue a fine or do a bit of, I don't know, restorative justice or whatever it 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.

But for a lot of our districts and boroughs, bidding completely stopped, private rent schemes stopped for a short period of time so all of our young people who were in semi-independent accommodation, were staying there. We made sure that we agreed with all the providers that they would stay here until at least September, that we would pay that, that would be fine and then we'd reassess what was going on in our districts and boroughs.

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.

And those young people who had sadly had to be evicted, on behavioural grounds, we had a lot of trouble getting those people put into places.... No one likes to say they're using B&B, but as an alternative to street homelessness, you know, it's got a place. We have had to cast our net a lot wider, I think, trying to find places to try and squirrel young people away and house them. And that has included going out of area, which is something that we wouldn't normally like to do.

It's those with the highest risk actually we've found quite difficult because we've still had to move the odd young person for their own safety during COVID-19 and for those, it's been quite difficult because we're not supposed to be moving anybody really and we certainly don't want young people in unsuitable accommodation, but I know we have had to present some as homeless and some have ended up in a B&B, even though we've really pushed for them to not be in that B&B or for it to be a very short period of time. I think it's our highest risk young people that have suffered the most.

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.

I think the worst situation we had, we had over 20 young people who were just waiting for their council tenancy, but for a period of time, there wasn't any bidding at all going on, or any viewings of properties. And then, obviously, we still had the same number of young people turning 18, needing to access...so waiting lists over doubled for a period of time.

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.

So for a lot of our young people, if it wasn't for COVID-19, they may otherwise have been evicted by now. So one of the dangers with that is your people who are in rental arrears, they're really on borrowed time. Because this June [2021] the ban on evictions, is going to be lifted. So a lot of landlords will now start to action, what they would have done a year ago. It's going to hit us in the very near future, and it's going to hit young people in the very near future. Particularly those who have just moved last year to independence. So that I think that's a problem looming.

Across the interviews leaving care managers raised deep concerns about the immediate and long-term implications arising from this complicated housing and accommodation situation throughout COVID-19. A situation marked by competition and congestion. Although these were not necessarily new concerns, the shortage in appropriate accommodation was something which services reported they had long grappled with, but the pandemic had deepened these problems and exposed the fragility of the system. Housing pathways for care leavers remained premised on the fact that '*ultimately children keep getting older and need to move*' and the reality that delaying transitions indefinitely was not possible.

Facing the 'digital divide'

Young people who are digitally excluded can face a range of disadvantage including a lack of social connection, barriers to learning and employment, as well as challenges to accessing information and services. The pandemic has served to highlight the digital poverty gap and inequalities in access to technology. The impact of this for care leavers was particularly apparent at the start of the pandemic.

Our young people haven't or didn't have access to digital devices in the same way that other people did, they didn't necessarily all have somebody with them that was supporting them to access and use those digital devices to engage with education and things like that. That certainly did have an impact.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of focusing on care leavers' digital inclusion, including both their access to devices and internet connections, as well as support to develop basic digital skills. **Local authorities reported that they were quick to respond to technology needs** and provided different types of hardware, internet access and funds for repairing or substituting smartphones to guarantee that contact was possible.

Absolutely, the message was very clear to all leaving care coaches and managers, if a young person does not have IT, he or she gets IT, no questions asked, whatever the cost, they get the IT because we can't afford not to have them on laptops at all. Those that didn't have mobile phones, we issued with a mobile phone... they got a phone that they could use to stay in touch with friends and leaving care coaches and people, so that was put in place for them.

Some interviewees reflected on the positive impact of care leavers having access to technology and the opportunities it provided for delivering support going forward.

We used to do phone calls of course but we didn't hold virtual discussions, we didn't use technology in the same way that we are now and I think that's going to have a really positive impact for young people moving forward because we have found that some people really benefit from a blended offer of support, some things they're much more comfortable to discuss on a screen than they are in person so we can try different ways of engaging with young people and engage young people that would not engage at all physically. That's definitely a legacy for us for the future.

Recent research has also highlighted the impact of digital exclusion for care leavers during the pandemic, and placed importance on ensuring digital access for all care leavers by integrating this into the pathway planning process in all local authorities. It also focused on the need to upskill those working with care leavers to ensure they can better support young people to develop their digital skills (Roesch-Marsh et al, 2021).

Some leaving care managers who participated in this research outlined how **the pandemic uncovered misconceptions that all young people are digitally attuned**; and the need for greater emphasis on support for young people to develop their basic digital skills.

I actually thought in the modern world that most children and young people do learn online, in school and in college, so when they were in their placements and they were saying they couldn't study online, I actually didn't know what that meant or felt like for them, but they really struggled and some unfortunately withdrew completely, and didn't do any learning online for a very long time.

Stop-start: Education and training issues

The emergence of COVID-19 and the onset of social restrictions saw the closure of education and training settings across England, and a move to virtual learning for most young people in further or higher education. Interviews with leaving care managers indicated that this has been a mixed experience for care leavers.

But I would say education has been the most difficult area. And hearing back from young people having to work sat at home in front of the computer, I think that has been very, very difficult, particularly when a lot of other things are done on your computer, you're relying on IT. So that's been very, very difficult. Not for everybody, some people have actually been fine with it, but for a lot of young people I think that's been a difficult part of lockdown. Just being so reliant on a computer rather than the other interactions that we have.

Interviews with leaving care managers suggest that **for some care leavers, not facing the academic and social pressures of attending school or college has meant they are better able to manage stress and pressures associated with attending college**. Other leaving care managers shared how some young people have had more space and time to reflect on their aspirations.

For some, it's given them a bit of a time to reflect on what they really want to do... In a couple of cases, it's turned into a bit of a positive because then they reassessed what they wanted to do and a couple of them have got new Kickstart positions, we've had three of our young people get them, one has got one in the Cemetery Service, one of them's got one working for a recruitment company for vulnerable young people and then another one has got working for us in the [local authority] project.

Other interviewees explained that some care leavers who may not have been in any form of education and training before the pandemic have now engaged with online learning.

I feel like quite a lot of people that were drifting have actually accessed online courses and been quite successful in doing that. I think a few of our care leavers have actually accessed stuff that perhaps they wouldn't have done already.

They were falling out of employment. So, it was those young people that were, actually maintaining education more during COVID, so some young people responding more to online learning, so their attendance was better than it was pre-COVID.

Challenges with online learning

However, **learning online has not been suitable for all and the majority of leaving care managers were particularly concerned about the negative impact that COVID-19 has had on young people's engagement and experience of education and training.** Several described how the social aspect of attending college is a hugely motivating factor for some care leavers, which has been lost during pandemic. The absence of the social aspect of attending college has contributed to feelings of isolation and reduced motivation for many young people leaving care.

Trying to keep them motivated and keeping them going with college has been very difficult, quite a few have tapped off and stopped attending their online courses because it's just them on their own all the time. Yes, and it's the social aspect, when you attend, it's that part of belonging to a group of people that you've made friends with and they've lost all that.

Care leavers experiences of education and training during the COVID-19 pandemic has differed depending on particular course types. As one leaving care manager explained, young people who are enrolled on vocational courses which normally include a substantial element of practical learning, may have been particularly impacted by the move to virtual learning.

I think like the ones who maybe were doing the practical-type things; hair and beauty, painting and decorating, it's pretty difficult to do that kind of course online. And they, I think, have felt increasingly frustrated because they haven't had that practical element which they enjoyed and which, you know, originally took them into the course. I think the ones who are doing a bit more academic level of study, it's not been as hard for them.

Higher education

Transitioning to higher education is often a very important personal milestone for young people leaving care. Many of the leaving care managers who participated in this study

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 isolated... their experience has been so different to previous years' experience, so I think they've been hit quite hard with 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 forward to Freshers Week! It just wasn't there. Another young person who had 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.

I'm concerned for our care leaving population as they move through looked after and going to obviously care leavers. So, thinking about the longer-term impact, we know a lot of our young people that go through the care system have interrupted education, and that may be because they moved around a lot when they were at home or they didn't attend, or they've had placement breakdowns and we've had to keep moving schools. And then I think to have that chunk of period out of school [due to COVID-19], I think that's a long-term impact for our care population.

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.

I think it's then very difficult for them looking at how we fill the gaps and perhaps give them the confidence in the social situations to move forward and to be able to go and apply for a job and to know how to behave when you go for an interview. And we have historically done a lot of work around that, but I think we're even further behind now because we need to look at what education they're missing, have they missed the basic skills. So, I don't think we've seen any evidence yet with what people have missed, but I think in the next year or two, we will.

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 jobs in restaurants, bars or clubs' and/or were on zero hour contracts. For young people on a low income loss of work or reduced payments under furlough³ heightened their financial difficulties.

I can do online shopping; I've got enough money in my bank to be able to do a big shop. If you're living on a very small income for whatever reason, it's very difficult, isn't it? And if you can't do a large shop because you have to spend over £40 and you haven't got that money, you're reliant on going to your corner [shop]...It's been very difficult for young people who are trying to budget and actually are forced to shop at more expensive places.

Interviewees reported that some young people's accommodation was also jeopardised because they had not paid their rent and were in arrears. **In line with government guidance, local authorities had been making discretionary payments to assist young people if they were experiencing increased financial hardship as a result of the pandemic.**

³ Furlough covers up to 80% of an employee's salary for the hours they cannot work, up to a maximum of £2,500 per month.

If a young person say was struggling with their rent payments because they'd been furloughed and weren't maybe eligible for the housing element of universal credit, we would think about whether we needed to give them some assistance in the short term, or use discretionary housing payments as a way to buffer the gap, because the furlough scheme's great but they were still out of pocket.

The majority of leaving care managers **welcomed the government's decision at the start of pandemic to increase Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits by £20** a week until September 2021. Some local authorities had opted to provide an additional £20 to young people who were not eligible for the Universal Credit uplift or were experiencing delays to their Universal Credit claim.

Yes, they receive the extra £20, the Universal Credit, they're all in receipt of that which has made things easier, managing on small incomes, £20 is a lot and a big help and we've replicated that with Leaving Care Maintenance Allowance, where a young person's not been able to claim Universal Credit in some cases. That has been a small but significant improvement in their payments they'd otherwise receive if they were just claiming Universal Credit previously, or we were paying them a Leaving Care Maintenance Allowance.

Other local authorities had made discretionary emergency payments to help with bills, or supplied food hampers, or accessed winter grants for young people, depending on their individual circumstances. Some managers were really positive that financial requests were *'being considered on the basis of the need, not whether or not it's been in our [finance] policy...because young people don't always fit a policy'*, whereas others **raised concerns about inequities in levels of support, or about how young people would re-adjust when enhanced payments and support came to an end.**

As a local authority, we decided not to do that and the reason for that is we know at one point, we will have to take that off young people and that would not be fair, if you've created a level where young people are then getting used to having additional funding and you then take it away, that would be unfair so we made a decision not to do that but what we have done is all leaving care coaches needed to assess the young people's financial commitments and financial circumstances and if they had some difficulties and problems around finances, money was made available for whatever they needed.

Issues affecting specific groups of care leavers

Young people leaving care are not a homogenous group. In the context of COVID-19 local authorities have sought to tailor the services and support available to their care leavers taking into account their individual needs and with reference to changes in emotional health and wellbeing over time. However, interviews did reveal some specific issues facing different groups of care leavers.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people

Leaving care managers in two thirds of the participating local authorities identified that **unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people as a group who have been especially impacted by the pandemic**. Managers highlighted that unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people had found virtual learning (including English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) especially difficult due to a combination of language barriers and reduced one-to-one support, making it more difficult for young people to ask questions in an online environment.

For them, it's been really difficult because many of them are doing ESOL courses, so English is quite difficult for them to grasp and when it's moved online, they found it very hard, even to understand how they logon, get onto their classes and so their attendance dipped with college, they found it hard to keep up with the classes and to understand what they need to do.

A number of local authorities shared similar experiences about the **difficulties surrounding online learning for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people** and said that a number who had been enrolled dropped out.

Delays in asylum decisions, because the Home Office system for interviewing young people stopped being delivered during the pandemic has also left young people in limbo. Research shows that uncertainty surrounding immigration status can have a destabilising influence on unaccompanied asylum young people's mental wellbeing (Wade, 2011). The psychological ramifications of this are also likely to be exacerbated by the crisis as young people's access to social support through college, peer support groups and contact with friends has been reduced, thus increasing their social isolation.

There's been a huge impact, particularly for our unaccompanied asylum seeking children who have been waiting for decisions on their status and whether or not they're even going to be able to remain in the country, there's been lots of delays, as there has been everywhere with the Home Office and their staffing, their ability to progress, interviews, young people being able to meet with solicitors and progress their applications, it's been hugely frustrating for them to have that even more delay to a conclusion.

There are concerns that the challenges and experiences of asylum-seeking young people will have implications for their experience of transitioning to adulthood.

For many of our care leavers, either their church or mosque is their community and during COVID, they haven't had that community, in terms of important things like Ramadan and things like that, they haven't been able to celebrate as they would have and they haven't had that interaction as well that they would have usually had, which then impacts on them learning English and being ready to move on because if they can't speak English, they can't private rent because they'd find it too difficult to understand what's going on and communicating with the letting agent or the landlord.

Protracted delays in decisions about immigration status also mean that:

We can't move them on [from semi-independent living] because they haven't got any kind of right to accommodation until they've got those decisions. So, then they're remaining there until court comes with a decision, which is just taking longer and longer really.

Young people in custody

A number of leaving care managers discussed the **unique challenges that have been faced by care leavers who have been in custody during COVID-19, and the difficulties in providing any support to these young people**. Most notably, leaving care managers explained that young people in custody have had **little to no contact and visitation throughout the pandemic**. Personal advisers have been unable to visit care leavers in custody since the beginning of the pandemic. One respondent raised concerns that this has limited relationship-based practice and led to weakening of their relationships with care leavers in custody.

For one of the staff, prison visits, seeing young people in prison, they've had no visits over the last year and the deterioration of that relationship and their [young person] health because they've not been able to go in.

In tandem, some managers highlighted that care leavers in custody have not had any physical visits with people in their support circles, including family, friends, or professionals resulting in extended periods of isolation which has been detrimental to their wellbeing. They have been “locked down” for prolonged periods of time and have also been restricted from engaging with any form of recreational or educational activity.

And they were stopped from doing any education, they were locked down 23 hours a day, it was really tight. So, I was really quite concerned and felt that we needed to, they needed to be able to contact us and also be able to respond. And I think those email accounts, it's quite a straightforward option for them. Because they can't always get access to a phone, they have to have credit, and then if they spend too much on a phone to their friend, and it's very easily soaked up.

One local authority described how they had allocated funding to their care leavers in custody to facilitate communication with them by email.

Care leavers in custody, I started funding the, they have email accounts that we fund so much, I think it's about £10 a month for each one, and I was insistent that there had to be a way that they could communicate with us and that's via email. So, whether they have these arrangements, and I'm still funding that, and will probably keep that going anyway for those in custody, because it's an immediate way they can contact.

Bateman (2020) highlights that lengthy confinement of young people without meaningful contact and restricted calls to family is contrary to international human rights standards (United Nations, 2015, Rule 44) and is detrimental to the mental health of this vulnerable group of young people.

Conclusions

For many years leaving care researchers, professionals and young people themselves have drawn attention to the challenges associated with 'accelerated and compressed' transitions to adulthood (Munro and Stein, 2008). Negotiating abrupt and multiple changes in one's life simultaneously (rather than sequentially) is difficult to cope with⁴ – a reality that the pandemic has brought into sharp focus for all of us. The principles of preparation, planning and aftercare support are recognised as important foundations to improve outcomes for care leavers and appear to have wider application as we, as a society, set about the road to recovery from the pandemic.

Care leavers often complain that they are 'forced' or 'kicked' out of care when they reach 18 and that there is a mismatch between the service that they are offered (practical support) and what they want and need (emotional support) (Munro, Mølholt and Hollingworth, 2016). Based on professional accounts, it would appear that one of the unanticipated benefits of the pandemic is that it has served as a catalyst for some positive adjustments to approaches to service delivery and the levels and types of support available. The permission that children's social care was given by government to permit young people to remain in placement for longer was welcomed and congruent with aspirations of moving beyond age-related transitions and towards transitions that are timed with greater account of young people's needs and their wishes and feelings. Some young people really benefited from this extended period in placement which meant they had care and support and could prepare and plan for the future more gradually. Leaving care managers' commitment to adapting services to ensure that care leavers were supported during the

⁴ see Coleman's focal theory of adolescence (Coleman, 1989)

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-focused' practice and towards more personalised, flexible and relational support in response to individual needs and circumstances. Interviewees provided many examples of creative approaches that leaving care personal advisers had taken to try and show young people that they were not alone and were cared for, in addition to providing additional material support to help young people during the crisis.

Interviews did, however, re-expose underlying issues affecting care leavers, including poverty and mental ill-health, which have been further exacerbated during the pandemic. There are gaps in the availability of, and access to, effective mental health services for care leavers during transition to adulthood (Butterworth et al., 2017). At a time when mental ill-health needs are elevated, access to services has become more challenging, due to increased demands on the NHS and because young people could not necessarily get appointments with health professionals who they knew and trusted, or struggled to engage in virtual sessions. A small number of leaving care managers drew particular attention to an escalation in self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts amongst their care leavers and there were widespread calls for improved access to mental health support for care leavers.

Maintaining young people in accommodation was another major challenge, particularly in cases where young people's non-compliance with social distancing measures exposed their foster carers or other young people in shared accommodation to risk. In cases where young people had been evicted a few local authorities reported major difficulties finding alternative accommodation, with some having to resort to placing vulnerable young people in Bed and Breakfast accommodation and/or out of authority placements. The lack of 'movement' in the system also meant that it was not straightforward to move young people who wanted, or needed to move, into properties. Some areas anticipated ongoing challenges securing sufficient suitable accommodation to meet the diverse needs of their care leavers, particularly those who were evicted and/or had complex needs. In the aftermath of the pandemic, it will be important to build on the positive adaptations to services and support that have been embedded during the crisis and to remain attuned and responsive to the diverse needs of the leaving care population. It will also be important to put measures in place to avoid perpetuating the inverse care law.

This briefing has focused on the views and experiences of leaving care managers. Previous work suggests care leavers sometimes have contrasting perspectives and experiences in regard to the alignment between support needs and available provision (Roberts et al, 2020). In the next stage of the research the team will be interviewing care leavers and working with them, and with professionals, to interpret the findings from the research to develop tools to inform and support best practice.

CCTC study: next steps

The research team will be analysing anonymised management information system data on around 1500-2000 young people to contribute to understanding care leavers' transition pathways. Who moves where and do those with similar characteristics tend to follow the same routes out of care?

Five local authorities, from the 19 that supply management information system data, will be involved in phase two of the research. This will involve interviews with young people, leaving care personal advisers and strategic leads. Networked learning communities comprising of care leavers, frontline and operational managers from leaving care services and partner agencies will also be established to support the development of tools to **support** best practice and dissemination of research findings.

Further information on the Care leavers, COVID-19 and transitions from care study (CCTC study) can be found here: <https://www.beds.ac.uk/goldbergcentre/research/goldberg-current-research/cctc/>

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