

ESSS Outline

Care experience and employment

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Introduction

This summary provides an overview of evidence relating to how care experience affects employment.

About the evidence presented below

We searched for academic research and grey literature using a wide range of search terms including: care experienced, care leavers, employment, work, careers, apprenticeships, mentoring, education, school, university, transitions, independent living, social capital, and resilience.

The complexity of issues surrounding care experienced children and young people can mean evidence around this topic is limited, particularly for care leavers overall work trajectory, causes for poorer education and employment outcomes, and evaluation of programs aiming to combat this.

Accessing resources

We have provided links to the materials referenced in the summary. Some materials are paywalled, which means they are published in academic journals and are only available with a subscription. Some of these are available through The [Knowledge Network](#) with an NHS Scotland OpenAthens username. The Knowledge Network offers accounts to everyone who helps provide health and social care in Scotland in conjunction with the NHS and Scottish Local Authorities, including many in the third and independent sectors. [You can register here](#). Where resources are identified as ‘available through document delivery’, these have been provided to the original enquirer and may be requested through NHS Scotland’s [fetch item service](#) (subject to eligibility).

Where possible we identify where evidence is published open access, which means the author has chosen to publish their work in a way that makes it freely available to the public. Some are identified as author repository copies,

manuscripts, or other copies, which means the author has made a version of the otherwise paywalled publication available to the public. Other referenced sources are pdfs and websites that are available publicly.

Background

Generally, pathways to adulthood for young people have become more challenging. A decline in the youth labour market, the growth of education and training, a shortage of affordable housing, and welfare policies designed to deter young people from leaving home have created a more protracted transition with increased reliance on family support.

Youth unemployment is a major challenge around the world. Almost one in four young people aged 16 to 24 years are unemployed across Europe, more than double the adult rate. This reflects the difficulties faced by young people in accessing and progressing in employment, during a period of economic recession and austerity ([Arnau-Sabatés, 2015](#)). Young people are more likely to be unemployed or on zero-hour contracts. And more recently the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic has seen the under 25's account for almost two-thirds of those who have lost their job in the UK ([ONS, 2021](#)).

Care-experienced young people face these same challenges, but compounded by their specific challenges and vulnerabilities.

Care experience

Young people leaving care for an independent life are one of the most vulnerable groups within the welfare state ([Storo, 2019](#)), characterised by disadvantage. They are more likely to face poverty and lower earnings, higher rates of unemployment, difficulties with housing and homelessness, physical and mental health issues, and stigma. These disadvantages can be long standing, with research from Sweden finding that they persisted until middle age for over half of care-experienced adults ([Harrison, 2020](#)).

Studies from different countries such as the US, Sweden and Australia show they are less likely to participate in higher and further education, and less likely to be employed, compared to those with no care experience ([Mendes, 2006](#); [Dixon, 2007](#); [Bilson, 2011](#); [Cassarino-Perez, 2018](#)).

Research across 16 countries has shown a higher risk of social exclusion and marginalisation for former fostered young people ([Annick, 2011](#)). The Scottish Care Leavers Covenant ([2015](#)) also acknowledges the need to make links between social inclusion and economic development explicit.

Recent figures from England ([Department for Education, 2019](#)) show 38% of those who leave care aged 19 to 21 not in education, training or employment (NEET), compared with 11.6% for all young people. Scottish Government statistics ([Who Cares? Scotland, 2016](#)) show that after 9 months of leaving school, 30% of care experienced young people are classed as unemployed, compared to only 8% of their non care experienced peers.

Despite an increased policy focus on education and career options, care leavers continue to face challenges and disadvantages in education, employment and training. Most encounter obstacles to finding and sustaining career options in the early years after care, and for some this can persist for years after, increasing risk of long-term unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion ([Dixon, 2007](#)). Research shows that where care leavers are in work and training it is often casual or temporary employment, or low-level, short term training and education courses ([Bilson, 2011](#)).

In addition to the personal costs, research from the National Audit Office estimated that the lifetime wider societal cost of the current proportion of 19-year-old care leavers who are NEET would be around £240 million ([Centre for Social Justice, 2016](#); [Dixon, 2018](#)).

Education

The transition to employment is made more difficult by poor educational outcomes ([Arnau-Sabatés, 2015](#); [De-Juanas, 2020](#)). Research has long demonstrated the benefits of education include better physical and mental health, avoidance of risk behaviours, lower rates of unemployment and increased earning potential, particularly post-secondary education ([Harrison, 2020](#)).

The educational outcomes for the care-experienced are in general poor. Scottish Government statistics highlight that much higher numbers of looked after young people leave school at the age of 16, and compared to the national average only a small percentage go on to study at university. While outcomes are improving, a significant attainment gap persists ([Scottish Care Leavers Covenant, 2015](#)). Compared with 11% of all school leavers, 44% of children in care for the full year and 40% of those who were in care for part of the year leaving school in S4. Who Cares? Scotland reports that only 4% of care experienced young people move onto higher education from school compared to 39% of non-care experienced peers ([Kibbleworks, 2020](#)). Other research from the UK, the US and Australia show similar findings ([Mendes, 2009](#)).

Contributory factors

There are numerous contributory factors to the poor experience care-experienced individuals have in education, including mental health, learning and behaviour problems, trauma, attachment issues, stigma, disruption in placements and schools, poverty, chaotic living arrangements, and low expectations from social workers, teachers and carers, stigma ([Dixon, 2007](#); [Mendes, 2009](#); [Bilson, 2011](#); [Scottish Care Leavers Covenant, 2015](#); [Berridge, 2017](#); [McNamara, 2019](#); [Harrison, 2020](#)).

The context of pre-care experiences is relevant in influencing learning, educational engagement and attainment ([Berridge, 2017](#)) and the experience of care often fails to compensate for this ([Wade, 2006](#)). Young people are likely to enter care through abuse and neglect, often with long-term physical and mental health issues instigated or exacerbated by this, as well as in substance misuse and offending behaviour ([Harrison, 2020](#)). They begin their care journey with considerable and often long lasting educational deficits, and as around half enter care aged 13 or older, it leaves state intervention with limited opportunity to influence attainment at this stage ([Driscoll, 2013](#)).

Experiences while in the care system, such as high numbers of placement moves, low educational expectations from others, and non-prioritisation of education by social workers in organising placements can cause educational disruption and have a detrimental impact on attainment ([Harrison, 2020](#)).

The education system

Difficulties can also relate to the education provision encountered. Some leave care at an age where they are likely to be in further education. Leaving care can be a very stressful time, further education can be a difficult transition to make, and where it is made can be difficult to keep focussed when there are other competing priorities. Care-experienced graduates compared with the general population are more likely to be older, disabled, from a minority ethnic community and a non-UK national. These are all potential markers for educational disadvantage ([Harrison, 2020](#)).

Education systems often lack the vision and flexibility needed to properly accommodate the needs of young people in care ([Gilligan, 2019](#)). Berridge ([2017](#)) finds evidence that entry to care can benefit schooling, but achievements may take longer for children in care. This suggests educational systems need to allow for longer time-scales, and focusing on educational progress not just attainment while in care is important.

Care-experienced students are less likely to study STEM subjects, and are underrepresented in higher status universities. This may mean that they are less likely to locate graduate-level employment, progress to postgraduate study, and access high-skilled employment ([Harrison, 2020](#)). The need to become self-supporting and employed as quickly as possible can leave some care-experienced individuals pursuing vocational qualifications. Others report low educational expectations of them, with carers encouraging less academic pathways ([Harrison, 2020](#)).

Transitioning out of care

The transition to adulthood is a significant developmental stage, reaching the age to leave home, enter higher education, join the workforce, and form long-term relationships. A successful transition depends on both core resources (IQ, parenting quality, socioeconomic status) and adaptive resources (adult support, coping skills, planfulness / future motivation) ([Greeson, 2014](#)).

How young people transition out of care, with access to support and resources, is important to the development of workplace skills. There has been a growing recognition of the interplay of low income, poor educational attainment, insecure or unsuitable housing, and relationship discontinuity as factors that hinder successful transition to adulthood for care leavers ([Furey, 2021](#)). While some make a successful transition, settling into stable post-care living and employment, and others make steady progress with help from support networks and professionals, a significant number face an enduring struggle. Post-16 participation has been identified as a particular area of disadvantage and difficulty for many care leavers ([Dixon, 2007](#)), who lack adequate independent life skills and stable adult relationships for support ([Cassarino-Perez, 2018](#)), leading to persistent unemployment and over-representation in low paid, unskilled occupations.

Care leavers also face social exclusion due to their experiences of life in care, and the adjustment after care. These may include excessive dependence, weakened or non-existent networks of support, stress and anxiety, and a personal identity often dominated in a restrictive way by their care-experienced status and resulting stigma ([Arnau-Sabatés, 2015](#)).

Key areas in transition

Studies of young people leaving care show key areas for a successful transition as age, housing and employment ([Wade, 2006](#); [Bilson, 2011](#)).

Care leavers consistently move to independent living earlier than other young people. This is against a general trend, with families providing financial, practical and emotional support for longer periods of time. On average in Scotland care experienced people live independently from age 17, compared to 25 for their non-care experienced peers ([Kibbleworks, 2020](#)). Those leaving care have to deal with the key elements of transition - setting up a new home, often in a new area, leaving school, navigating further education, training, employment, or unemployment - abruptly over a very short period, leaving them less adequately prepared for independent living. The demands of managing this compressed transition, together with their lower qualifications, place care leavers at a distinct disadvantage against other young people entering the labour market ([Stein, 2006](#); [Bilson, 2011](#)).

Care leavers report feeling they had left care too early, were not sufficiently prepared for living independently, and experiencing problems including financial and accommodation insecurity ([Furey, 2021](#)). The state, as corporate parent, often fails to provide the same ongoing financial, social and emotional support offered by families of origin.

Employment

Youth unemployment rates are generally higher than adult rates. Younger people have less human capital and contacts, relevant work skills and experience. Employers have to weigh up the future benefits of investment in young workers, and are likely to be let go before more senior workers (Bell, 2011; [Harrison, 2020](#)). The care experienced are likely to be doubly affected by both these wider social and economic trends in employment ([Dixon, 2007](#)) and the disadvantages faced by those who are leaving or have been in care (unstable accommodation, financial difficulties, mental and physical health issues, stigma).

The care-experienced

Employment is important in young people's transition to social and economic independence because work is associated with stability and social integration for young people who have experienced care ([Arnau-Sabatés, 2015](#)).

Studies show young people aging out of care in the US, UK, Australia and Canada experience poorer employment outcomes than their peers from the general population ([Gypen, 2017](#)). Care leavers are more likely to have difficulty gaining employment, work unskilled jobs, have weak networks, lower earnings, and lack preparation for independent living ([Annick, 2011](#); [Arnau-Sabatés, 2015](#)). Care leavers are far less likely to be engaged in education, employment and training ([Dixon, 2007](#)). For these young people the idea of getting a job (even applying for a job) can be overwhelming, as are the many surrounding issues usually taken for granted - clothing, travel, food, socialising, workplaces.

On leaving care or education, and lacking family safety nets, the care-experienced may be more preoccupied with fulfilling their basic needs - finding somewhere to live and a job - as quickly as possible, meaning no time to plan for further down the line. Those who continue to receive contact and support from former carers potentially experience more stable transitions out of higher education ([Harrison, 2020](#)). There are also the effects of taking care of physical and mental health on maintaining employment.

Long periods of unemployment for young people with complex needs can have an effect on future incomes, depreciation of acquired skills, sense of life dissatisfaction and unwillingness to work. And when employment is gained, it is often in part-time, low-paid, and low-skilled jobs, which make it difficult to plan a future-oriented career ([Furey, 2021](#)).

Specific groups of care-experienced individuals (for example, teenage parents, those in rural or remote areas, ethnic minorities) can also face additional challenges ([Stein, 2006](#); [Mendes, 2009](#)).

For many care-experienced the challenges and barriers to participation are a result of why they were brought into care and the support they receive during and after care.

Pre-care

Many children entering care do so with a background of disadvantage that can affect their education and employment outcomes. The difficulties and experiences that brought them into care - loss, neglect, abuse or trauma, poor parenting, family problems, poverty - can have a lasting impact, particularly where needs are not subsequently addressed. These traumatic experiences can negatively affect attachment and brain development, and lead to long-term problems in social functioning, relationships and employment ([Mendes, 2009](#)).

Socio-economic disadvantage, parental background and income, are predictors of education outcomes and subsequent success in the labour market, which is particularly relevant to the care-experienced ([Dixon, 2007](#)).

In-care

Future progress and life chances can be shaped by quality and stability of the in-care experience. For some it can have a positive impact, for others it doesn't compensating for earlier difficulties and disadvantages. Many young people experience inadequacies in state care, including poor-quality caregivers, and constant shifts of placement, carers, schools and workers.

This lack of stability, continuity and consistency undermines their social and educational and employment opportunities, and their ability to make a successful transition towards independence. Children who experience supportive and stable placements, including an ongoing positive relationship with social workers and significant others, are far more likely to overcome the adversities resulting from their pre-care and in-care experiences, and prosper when they leave care ([Mendes, 2009](#)).

Dixon's study ([2007](#)) found that a number of features of the care experience were associated with poor outcomes after care:

- Involvement in risk behaviour can at best divert and at worst prohibit young people from establishing an early foothold on the career ladder
- Those leaving foster care were less likely to be unemployed and appeared less likely to become unemployed over time. It is likely that this reflects the trend towards higher participation in post-16 education amongst the foster care group and the practice of placing more troubled teenagers in residential care
- High rates of exclusion and truancy are evident within the looked-after population generally, and is linked to poor education performance and future risk behaviour such as offending, substance misuse, social exclusion and unemployment. Missing out on school can result in missing out on work experience placements and on opportunities to develop confidence, interpersonal skills and a sense of achievement through academic and non-academic activities.

Post-care

Negotiating the changes and challenges involved in transitioning from care to independent adult living is a testing and complex process. For many it can prove overwhelming and destabilising, particularly in the absence of stability and limited support networks ([Wade, 2006](#); [Dixon, 2007](#)). Those who leave care earlier have a higher risk of non-participation in employment, even when accounting for placement movement, length of time looked after, and significant challenging behaviours ([Wade, 2006](#)). It is likely that having time to complete schooling and prepare for post-care living provides young people the space to develop the skills and the circumstances necessary for employment. Early work experience

Various studies suggest the positive value of first work experiences for care leavers, with evidence that work experience before age 18 helps improve

employment outcomes when they reach their mid to late twenties ([Arnau-Sabatés, 2015](#)).

Barriers

A focus on the educational achievement of looked after children may have played a part in obscuring the need to support employment, despite similar challenges ([Bilson, 2011](#)). In Scotland 30% of care experienced young people were unemployed within nine months after leaving school, compared to 5% of their non-care experienced peers. 66% of care leavers are in employment by 30 years old compared to 82% of their non-care experienced peers ([Kibbleworks, 2020](#)).

Dixon ([2007](#)) identified three types of barriers - personal, institutional, structural - to employment.

Personal barriers include poor education attainment, which can have an enduring impact on career opportunities. There is also the issue of willingness or readiness to take up such opportunities (exercising personal agency) ([Arnau-Sabatés, 2015](#)).

Institutional barriers such as benefits regimes and a lack of transport and childcare services can offer additional challenges to finding and sustaining participation.

Structural barriers affect care leavers' access to career opportunities and include wider labour market trends, particularly one that places a high premium on academic achievement.

Pay scales for young adults are often structured to reflect the norm of remaining within the family home and receiving parental support until the early twenties, meaning they're insufficient to sustain independent living ([Dixon, 2007](#)).

Housing

Housing and related financial security is another key aspect of the barriers faced by the care-experienced in employment. The sudden withdrawal of care agencies while having to cope with the emotional and practical upheavals of adapting to living alone, are major challenges ([Furey, 2021](#)). Leaving care brings with it the need for post-care accommodation as few care leavers can or do return to their families. Many young people move to semi-independent or independent living and sustaining this can be difficult on a financial, emotional and practical level. Insecure or unsuitable (remote from education, employment and training providers) accommodation can undermine career stability and participation ([Dixon, 2007](#)). A study of care leavers in Victoria ([Mendes, 2009](#)) shows many enrolled in apprenticeships and training courses unable to complete their training due to a lack of stable accommodation.

Housing may be a greater priority for care leavers than careers, and that experience immediately after leaving care exerts a strong effect on the ability of young people to access and sustain involvement in education, training and work ([Bilson, 2011](#); [Furey, 2021](#)).

Supportive environments / relationships

Many care leavers appear to experience social exclusion and are denied the opportunity to participate in mainstream social and economic systems ([Mendes, 2006](#)). What is consistent throughout the literature around care experience, education and employment is the need for a supportive environment.

Many of those with experience of care have faced multiple disruptions in relationships, schooling, housing and placements. Mental health problems (depression, stress disorders, alcohol and drug dependency, etc.) have been shown to impact on their access to education, the labour market and housing. Some come from troubled families, have experienced neglect and

abuse. The importance of placement stability, support from a consistent key person, ongoing positive relationships with social workers, and societal and family support during the transition to adulthood are repeatedly highlighted ([Mendes, 2006](#); [Annick, 2011](#)).

Lack of continuous support may result in fractured networks for young adults leaving care, limiting who can be called on for support. These experiences can lead to an unwillingness to commit to new relationships, particular important in the workplace ([Furey, 2021](#)).

Placement stability

Studies ([Stein, 2006](#)) suggest that successful educational outcomes are closely associated with placement stability, being looked after for longer, and having a supportive and encouraging environment for study. Without this stability and encouragement, post-16 employment, education and training outcomes are likely to be poor. Generally, those who leave care earlier, at age 16 or 17, had more unsettled careers, and were more likely to be unemployed.

Lack of stability in care may add to pre-existing difficulties. In England, 1 in 10 looked after children will experience some instability in terms of change of placement, school or social worker over a 2-year period undermining the possibility of psychological security. This becomes more pronounced as young people transition from care and support networks weaken ([Furey, 2021](#)). A small study showed high levels of emotional support within the workplace as of particular importance to those who had experienced less overall placement stability.

Support networks

Young people finding work is associated with two important concepts - social capital and agency. Finding opportunities partly depends on the young person's connections (social capital). These connections may be absent or difficult for young people in care to build or sustain ([Arnau-Sabatés, 2015](#); [Harrison, 2020](#)). Success transitioning to employment may be dependent on

an adequate overall support network, including continuous care from a single supportive adult, work colleagues and supervisors ([Furey, 2021](#)), and also accessing career opportunities through family, extended family and friends, and religious, sporting or cultural associations which the care-experienced are less likely to have ([Mendes, 2009](#)).

Work relationships

The work environment experienced by care leavers is critical to sustaining their employment success ([Furey, 2021](#)). Work-based relationships can be a source of informal support for care leavers while extending support systems, and nurturing talents and interests. Contributing and being valued in the workplace can promote self-confidence and help overcome the care-experienced identity / stigma. This is particularly important for care leavers with a history of disrupted relationships.

Personal development

Low expectations and ambition for those leaving care alongside the previously mentioned disadvantages means many are poorly equipped and supported to navigate the transition to higher education, training, and employment ([Furey, 2021](#)). They need help in developing the soft skills - interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, self-advocacy - needed to succeed in work environments ([IES, 2020](#)).

Supporting the care experienced with employment

There are still relatively few evaluations of programs promoting education and employment opportunities. The literature on how to best support those with care experience tends to look at promoting stability, skills and extending care. Effective multi-professional working between social workers, carers, teachers and others is seen as essential ([Berridge, 2017](#)). High quality services and support are necessary for relationships, stability, support and resilience.

Those with more complex needs will require more intensive and structured support. An increased focus on education and career planning whilst in care can also increase young people's potential and options within the labour market ([Dixon, 2007](#)).

Hart ([2020](#)) identifies four categories of actions to help people with complex needs become employed, ranging from skill-based approaches to supportive workplace environments. A holistic approach is necessary, working collaboratively with young people across multiple levels of support, from individual to community to government. Mendes ([2006](#)) suggests programs should address a number of key areas and needs including provision for:

- ongoing counseling / support in times of isolation and depression
- a system to help celebrate major life cycle accomplishments
- drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs
- assistance to renegotiate relationships with family members
- assistance with developing informal support networks
- resources to help with basic financial difficulties and access to benefits
- assistance and advocacy in accommodation, education and training
- a designated after care worker
- unlimited time frame for the support of these young adult

The Institute for Employment Studies ([2020](#)) highlighted key areas for effective practice including accurate identification, effective engagement, effective assessment and profiling, a trusted consistent advisor, delivery of personalised support packages, strategies focusing on employers, and in work support. They also identified key areas for supporting employment:

- defining, identifying, reaching, engaging, enrolling disadvantaged young people not in work
- planning for, preparing and navigating the employment market
- job-specific and employment-related skills
- managing / overcoming specific barriers, eg health, transport, language
- engaging, changing behaviour, incentivising employment

- workplace support to stay / progress in work

Education

There is a need for better support aimed at care-experienced graduates.

Harrison ([2020](#)) suggests:

- exit bursaries and extended accommodation contracts past the point of course completion
- developing networks for care-experienced graduates to provide careers-related information and guidance, increasing knowledge of pathways into professional employment
- targeted support for care-experienced students' graduate transitions
- ensure care-experienced students are not defaulted into vocational and other alternative pathways at 16

Findings from a study ([O'Neill, 2019](#)) on care-experienced students in further education emphasised:

- reliable, consistent relationships with a trusted member of staff
- continued, consistent access to informed and good quality practical, financial and emotional support, advice and guidance
- year round, consistent accommodation
- a care-experienced bursary
- care experience student advisors
- tailored support for those with a disability or caring responsibilities

More specifically, the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant ([2015](#)) recommended and elaborated on:

- improved and strengthened links between schools, Skills Development Scotland, social work and tertiary education providers
- consistent and extensive use of ASL legislation to ensure that looked after young people have Coordinated Support Plans
- Further and Higher Education providers develop and offer effective, consistent and equitable care leavers' support

- throughcare and aftercare services
- FE and HE providers establish proactive and effective communication links.

The Scottish Government in recent years has introduced the care experienced student's bursary and housing grant, aiming to decrease the financial barriers they face. To remove further barriers all higher education institutions in Scotland agreed to guarantee places for care experienced students who met the minimal entry requirements ([Kibbleworks, 2020](#)).

Employment

Care leavers can face more challenges and need additional support to gain and sustain employment. Few employment-related interventions however show long-term positive effects. Some studies found a positive correlation between employment services received through general independent living programs and employment outcomes for youth in care ([Woodgate, 2017](#)). Very few of the studies and reviews looked at job quality, or whether work was meaningful, important for programmes aimed at youth, as youth-heavy sectors typically show higher turnover rates ([IES, 2020](#)).

Greater awareness of the specific employability needs of care leavers is needed. A holistic approach encompassing health and wellbeing, housing, and financial support that acts as a route to apprenticeships and / or meaningful work is required. The Scottish Care Leavers Covenant ([2015](#)) made key suggestions, including:

- an integrated national vocational training and progression pathway for care leavers
- reduce barriers to accessing Modern Apprenticeships
- ensure opportunities are aligned to care leavers' needs
- a full systemic approach to information sharing and joint working across education services, social work and throughcare teams, Skills Development Scotland, Department for Work and Pensions and specialist providers

Strengthening the focus on careers within care plans and pathway plans would help support the transition into work ([Dixon, 2007](#)). This would enable an early assessment of strengths and aspirations and enable professionals to help young people address deficits in skills, abilities and motivation sooner.

Encouraging participation in a course or training needs to be consistent with what young people want for themselves as many are involved in a cycle of placements they feel unable or unwilling to complete ([Wade, 2006](#)).

Employers

[Become](#) suggest ensuring employers understand the barriers which care leavers face and adjust their recruitment practices accordingly. Employers can have a huge role to play in reaching out to young people and offering routes into employment for those who might have had disruption to their education and other challenges in their lives. The Learning & Work Institute guide ([2017](#)) highlights ways in which employers can make a difference in supporting care leavers to develop the skills, experience and confidence they need to gain, stay and progress in work.

Hart ([2020](#)) identifies employers' inclusive behaviours and attitudes, their willingness to participate in training programs for employing young people with complex needs, as of particular importance in providing sustainable employment opportunities. Furey ([2021](#)) points to the relationship of a workplace supervisor as including aspects of a mentor-like relationship, in contrast to a managerial relationship, within which the young person feels cared for.

Work-experience and apprenticeships

Structured work experience, training programmes, apprenticeships and mentoring have been seen to produce positive outcomes. Supported work placements can offer an opportunity to develop or refresh skills, build confidence and self-esteem, and develop career goals ([Dixon, 2007](#)).

English local authorities promote internships to facilitate care leavers' access to employment ([Furey, 2021](#)). But while apprenticeships are seen as a good employment option for young people, care leavers can often be put off by the low levels of pay and the entry requirements. Taking an apprenticeship can leave them financially worse off than being unemployed ([Become](#)). The low pay can be a barrier because they cannot earn enough to support themselves independently, while becoming eligible for council tax and other bills, and having benefits reduced.

This Centre For Social Justice ([2016](#)) sets out a series of policy recommendations to support the continued development of services and support for care leavers in England, focusing particularly on traineeships and apprenticeships:

- allow care leavers to retain their benefits during the first month of an apprenticeship
- allow care leavers to retain their Housing Benefit at the existing level for the first month of an apprenticeship or traineeship
- extend the policy of looked-after children able to stay in foster care until the age of 21 to residential care leavers
- make higher education funding portable for 16–19-year-olds
- use the Barnet Hub model or similar to give holistic support to care leavers looking for employment
- a national forum for local authorities, voluntary organisations and stakeholders to share best practice
- enhance the role and status of personal advisers and make it a requirement that personal advisers be better trained for their role

Mentors

Mentoring connects young people with adults to offer guidance, support, and encouragement to develop their competence and character. Mentors can offer a stable relationship, important because placement changes, changes of caregivers, are common life events for care experienced young people.

Placement and relationship instability is an important risk factor for child development and has also been linked to negative outcomes for young people leaving care ([Cassarino-Perez, 2018](#)). Mentors can also provide additional and consistent support during transition ([Bilson, 2011](#)).

Most large quantitative studies of the impact of mentoring come from the USA. The evidence base is not great, but suggests that mentoring may have some impact on problem or high-risk behaviours, academic / educational outcomes, and career / employment outcomes ([SCRE, 2003](#)). A small number of studies in the UK found mentoring could enhance the resilience of children leaving care, found benefits for care leavers associated with having someone to talk to and help pursue their interests, identified positive outcomes such as increased confidence and self-esteem, success in examinations or gaining independent living skills. Longer mentoring relationships were associated with a greater likelihood of a positive outcome ([Bilson, 2011](#)).

Skills and personal development

A recurring issue referenced is the need for help in finding a job. This can cover anything from personal / interpersonal skills (how to talk to people, how to avoid being nervous, how to dress) to practical skills (complete applications, write a CV, timekeeping) to practical needs (financial help with clothing, travel). Basically forms of preparation for independence before leaving care.

At the community level, initiatives tend to focus on developing individual skills. Hart ([2020](#)) identified common structural tactics used in initiatives at the local authority level, to facilitate employability and encourage young people with complex needs to enter the labour market. The main shared characteristics of these projects are: a focus on providing vocational and life skills training to participants, an emphasis on a holistic approach, and establishing collaborations with local and multi-agency services, as well as with young people with complex needs themselves.

Continuing financial and emotional support is necessary to help young people maintain direction and the connections between economic participation, stable housing, life skills also highlight the need for career planning to be envisaged as part of a comprehensive package of leaving care support ([Wade, 2006](#)).

Many young people leave care lacking skills, confidence, qualifications, and motivation. Improving life and coping skills are essential in dealing with the transition into employment ([Hart, 2020](#)) though there have been few studies or reviews looking at the impact of support for things like self-esteem and confidence ([IES, 2020](#)).

They need help to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to prepare them for work. This kind of career planning needs to take place while in care, not just at the point of leaving ([Wade, 2006](#)). There is some evidence to suggest that targeted career support by professionals was associated with better career outcomes ([Bilson, 2011](#)).

Resilience

Furey ([2021](#)) points to resilience as a framework for understanding factors supporting successful transition during key points in life. Studies on care leavers have shown that resilience is promoted by stability in care, opportunities for a delayed transition to adulthood, participation in life decisions, and access to social support ([Bengtsson, 2018](#)).

Relationships and emotional support

Emotional support was identified in one study ([Furey, 2021](#)) as the key factor supporting transition to successful employment. This may be under-recognised, in favour of the more tangible resources that are traditionally promoted. The importance of social workers, personal advisers, carers and others as aspirational figures for those leaving care, supporting their career ambitions, is highlighted. Interventions that support building trust within caring relationships offers emotional stability, and a greater

chance of developing resilience and successfully negotiating employment / the workplace.

Carers can be influential in promoting (and sometimes hindering) progress in work and education, playing an important role in opening up opportunities, giving support, being role models and cultivating the young person's agency. Gilligan (2017) highlights the importance of carers in the work-related progression of the care leavers, especially around gaining work experience while still in care.

Transitions

How young people fare after they leave care is shaped by previous experiences in placements, in schools and in their family and social lives. Improvements in these experiences - placement continuity, housing security, career support and support from leaving care services - and in their own skills (Furey, 2021) are likely to make the adjustment to independence easier to achieve (Wade, 2006).

The social inclusion model suggests that a range of ongoing supports and services are needed to ensure improved outcomes for care leavers (Mendes, 2006) including:

- stable and supportive placements with a positive attitude to education
- maintenance of links with family members or community supports
- a flexible and functional process for graduating from dependence to interdependence
- active involvement of young people in the leaving care planning and decision-making process
- a range of accommodation options

Support structures in the UK tend to fragment when young people leave care. A longer or more nuanced approach to independence, that reflects maturity and skills development, rather than an age cut-off, could better support care leavers (Furey, 2021). In-care support needs to be followed by support preparing for leaving care and independence, including independent living

skills programs. Research suggests that young people who experience planned transitions from care and who leave care at an older age are more likely to participate in education and employment ([Mendes, 2006](#); [Stewart, 2014](#); [McNamara, 2019](#); [Cameron, 2018](#); [Furey, 2021](#)) because they are provided with greater ongoing social and economic support to meet their basic needs.

More support in finance, employment, healthcare and decision-making is necessary to help them successfully live independently ([IES, 2020](#)).

Useful studies

Arnau-Sabatés ([2015](#)) study focuses on adult care leavers from Ireland and Catalonia who have substantial work experience, looking at the work trajectories of young adult care leavers' from their perspective. The study explores the factors that the young adults now consider influenced their entry into, and progress in, work. Analysis shows different pathways and a range of related influences and circumstances. The roots of their progress in typically began long before leaving care. Participants reported:

- the important role of carers in encouraging and supporting their entry into work
- the formative value of their first work experiences
- Positive and early work experience was associated with a smoother transition to life beyond care
- education as an important enabler in progression in the world of work
- first work experiences as a source of resilience
- positive work experience appears to arise from and contribute to the young person's social capital

Cassarino-Perez ([2018](#)) study reviewed and analyzed the pathways from care to education and employment finding that placement instability might be where the problem of achieving improvements in care leavers' education and

employability lies. It examines the association of employment outcomes with placement stability, race, mentoring, gender and education; and the association of education outcomes with placement stability, race, mentoring, gender and maltreatment. Findings include:

- placement stability is linked with a high probability of having a high-school diploma for the care leavers
- gender (being a girl) and education (having a high-school diploma) were related to higher probabilities of having a job
- the importance of early detection, stability plans, and a child-centered approach
- the importance of mentoring in the transition of young people to adulthood

Bilson ([2011](#)) looks at an action research project carried out in North West England that aimed to assist Children's Services Departments and Care Trusts in developing their strategies for supporting care leavers into employment and training. The study found a range of models and approaches that can be utilised to develop local and regional partnerships offering employment and training opportunities designed to meet the needs of care leavers, including:

- preparation for employment/employability: focused on improving basic skills, enhancing personal development and promoting a realistic understanding of what would be expected in the work environment
- work experience: involved looked-after children at secondary school or care leavers post-16 undertaking usually unpaid work for a short time to gain experience in the workplace
- work placements / traineeships: enabled participants without qualifications and at any level of ability to gain longer periods of experience in the workplace and usually to study for a qualification
- apprenticeships: focused on training on the job for three years alongside studying for an NVQ, often with no entry criteria

- mentoring: involved older care leavers engaged in education, training or employment mentoring younger looked-after children and care leavers, acting as positive role models, supporting and encouraging achievement at school and in employment
-

The Transition project ([Kibbleworks, 2020](#)) aimed to deliver transformational change that wasn't currently available to overcome barriers that prevent care leavers from thriving. The project enabled Kibbleworks to widen its role in supporting those at risk of worklessness, poverty and homelessness through direct support from a newly founded team of Transitions Advisors; provided support to care leavers to sustain employment, education and tenancy and to encourage positive participation in society.

Findings suggest:

- engaging with the Transitions team allowed young care leavers to progress with independent living by increasing their experience, skills and knowledge relevant to independent living
 - young care leavers were often unaware of the financial supports potentially available to them, such as bursaries, benefits applications, debt management
 - the provision of easily accessible support can narrow gaps allowing young care leavers to build up skills and knowledge to move on to support themselves in a sustainable manner
-

Dixon ([2018](#)) evaluated the York Cares Bright Futures Project which supports care experienced young people to increase and improve their employment related skills, knowledge and opportunities. Learning from the stakeholders suggests that ingredients for success include:

- providing a range of different types of skills development and work experience opportunities across a variety of employers and organisations to meet skills and interests
- sharing clear information on the project and opportunities with all those involved via a range of mediums
- having sufficient staff in place to inform, prepare and support all stakeholders
- benefiting from the oversight and co-ordination of an experienced umbrella organisation

The workshops were delivered by employers and helped young people to develop their CVs and understanding of application and interview processes and techniques. They reported that the experiences had increased their knowledge and boosted their confidence and interests in relation to career options. Pre-placement meetings were an important preparatory step for work placement opportunities and an informal introduction that helped young people to know what to expect and what was expected of them when they began their placement. For some young people the pre-placement meeting allowed them to change their mind if they felt the placement would not be right for them.

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