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THE EDUCATION JOURNEYS OF YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING CARE IN YORK AND NORTH YORKSHIRE

Briefing

January 2021

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The education journeys of young people leaving care in York and North Yorkshire



“You know, kind of seeing normal people can go to uni and that it’s an option. I’ve always kind of wanted to go to uni and to do that for me, I just kind of love learning things and developing my own knowledge”.

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

Introduction

This briefing was commissioned by Future HY, the York & North Yorkshire Uni Connect partnership, to provide a resource for network members to draw upon in order to access to key data sets and hear directly from those with lived experience of care and from the professionals supporting them.

It includes an overview of care-experienced young people’s views and outcomes to explore what might help or hinder their journeys through school and onto further and higher education options. It introduces the group via the perspectives of care-experienced young people themselves and the views of the professionals working with them, alongside reference to existing research evidence on experiences and outcomes. It also draws on national and local statistics to illustrate education, employment and training participation rates in the local authorities compared with other areas and to young people in the general population.

The briefing outlines the enablers and obstacles that impact on care-experienced young people’s participation in education. It includes suggestions for how education, business and public bodies can support this group to have the same opportunities as any other young person would have, to achieve their aspirations and potential. Four care leavers and six professionals provided their views, stories and recommendations through interviews with the researchers.

Methodology

FutureHY commissioned a small research project to draw together into one document, data and information on care-experienced young people in York and North Yorkshire and their education journeys. The project involved:

- Desk-based exploration and collation of relevant statistics and existing research evidence
- 1-to-1 interviews with four care-experienced young people from the two local authorities
- 1-to-1 interviews with leaving care services staff, Virtual Schools and University widening participation staff.

It includes reference and links to relevant data sources.

1. Introducing young people in and leaving care

This section provides a brief introduction to the care system and to the children and young people who have been in care. It shows that the care population is very diverse, with varying reasons and ages for coming into care, and different experiences of living in care and leaving care. Most of these factors will have implications for their journeys through education, as discussed in the next section (2) .

a. Definitions

The terms children in care, looked after children, young people leaving care, care leavers and care-experienced young people are used interchangeably in this summary, to reflect the terms used by the different participants.

What does being in care mean?

Children and young people come into care when they are unable to live with their parent(s) or family. Being in care means that they are legally looked after by the local authority (on behalf of the state), which shares parental responsibility with the child's parent(s). They are sometimes referred to as a Looked After Child (LAC) or Children Looked After (CLA), though they tell us that these are not terms that they particularly like (TACT 2019).

Children can be in care at any age from new-born up to the age of 18 years. There were around 80,080 children in care in March 2020. The number has been increasing year on year and represents a rate of 67 per 10,000 of all children under 18 years of age in England (DfE 2020).

Some children might stay in care throughout their childhood, while others will oscillate between going into care and going home throughout. Others might come in to care and return to live at home quickly, and some come into care in their mid-teens and, therefore, will be in care for a very short time. The length of time spent in care and finding stability during childhood can have implications for overall outcomes and experiences for these children in and after care. In addition to the move from family into care, some children will experience multiple placement moves while

they are in care. In the year from March 2019 to March 2020, 68% of those in care experienced one care placement move, however, 11% had three or more moves (DfE 2020). Previous research carried out by the authors has found that some young people can move placement 10 or more times in one year, which can cause considerable uncertainty and instability in their lives (Dixon et al 2015).

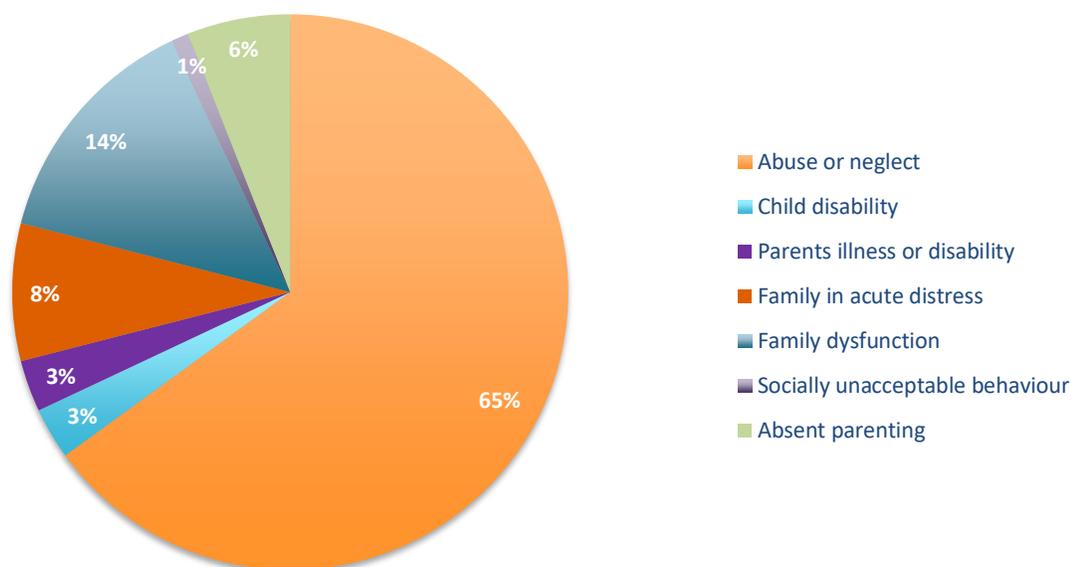
The most common age-range for coming into care is 10-15 years, with an increasing number coming into care aged 15, 16 and 17. The reasons for the increase in older children coming into care include a change to the law in 2009 (Southwark Judgement), which meant that teenagers at risk of homelessness were considered to be in care; and the rise in unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) who tend to be older teenagers, coming to the UK and entering care.

The majority (72%) of children who go into care are looked after by foster carers (mostly unrelated, however, sometimes this might be family members – known as kinship or connected carers). Around 15% of children in care live in children’s homes or other group residential settings or schools (DfE 2020).

Children come into care to keep them safe and cared for. They enter care for a range of reasons, including parental death, illness or absence; family experiencing acute distress, dysfunction or being unable to cope; child disability or difficulties; or maltreatment (see Figure 1).

For many years, the most common reason for children coming into care has been maltreatment. This continues to be the case, with 65% of children coming into care in the year to 2020 because of abuse or neglect (DfE 2020).

Figure 1 Reasons for Entry to Care (March 2019-20)



Source: DfE 2020

Children can be legally brought into care, where a court will decide to remove the child from their parent(s), or they can come into care on a voluntary basis, where the parent(s) or child requests care. All children in care will have an allocated social worker and have a care plan ([What is a care](#)

[plan?](#)), which sets out what support they need and who should provide it. They will be supported by a range of children's services staff, who support the child alongside the social worker as well as other specialists such as designated health professionals (e.g. GP and looked after children's nurse) and a virtual school head and designated teacher, who have a special remit for supporting the education of care-experienced children. Those in residential settings will also have a key worker to care for them.

What does leaving care mean and who are care leavers?

The terms leaving care and care leaver are quite fluid. Care leaver generally refers to a young person aged 16 or over who:

- left their care placement for semi-independent or independent accommodation after the age of 16 or
- a young person in care who turns 18 and is therefore no longer legally looked after, who might have moved from their care-placement or who remains with a foster carer either on a formal basis up to age 21 (known as staying put) or informally as a member of their foster family

The vast majority of these young people will be eligible for a leaving care service from their local authority up to the age of 25, providing they were in care for at least 13 weeks spanning their 16th birthday. There are four categories of eligibility for leaving care services ([see here for eligibility criteria](#)). About 11,000 young people leave care each year in England. Leaving care services currently support around 43,000 care leavers (DfE 2020).

Leaving care services follow-on from the work that social workers do. This includes an allocated leaving care worker, usually known as a personal adviser (PA), who focuses on supporting young people in their journeys to adulthood. Care leavers will have a Pathway Plan ([what is a pathway plan?](#)), which follows on from the care plan and reflects discussions between the young person and their PA about their needs and goals, as well as what support is needed to achieve them and who should provide that support. Leaving care services provide holistic support to enable young people to fulfil their emotional, social and financial wellbeing, and enable them to find a safe and settled home after care from which to pursue their education, employment or training goals.

The legislation and corporate parenting

Caring for young people in foster care, children's homes and care leavers is the responsibility of a wide range of professionals, including local authority children's services social workers and leaving care workers.

The Children Act 1989 and Children Leaving Care Act 2000 (and their subsequent amendments) are the main pieces of legislation for care-experienced children and young people. The legislation states that responsibility stretches beyond children’s services to the wider community and other agencies, departments and services, whose work might impact directly or indirectly on care-experienced young people. This principle of shared responsibility is known as Corporate Parenting. The principle, which since 2017 is embedded in law, is based on joint responsibility amongst relevant agencies to act as any good parent would by doing their best for care-experienced young people when developing and providing policies and services. In introducing the principle of Corporate Parenting in the 1990s, Frank Dobson MP advised that as a benchmark for good Corporate Parenting, agencies should ask “*would this be good enough for my child?*”

“How I envision it is, obviously care leavers don’t really have parents they can rely on so the council becomes... guardians to the child and so they obviously have to provide the child with everything that their mum and dad would have provided them with. It’s important that people in care and care leavers know that that is kind of how to look at it. If you need something that your mum or dad would have provided you with, to go and ask [the council] for it”

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

Corporate parents include public agencies and providers such as health services, education, training and employment providers, housing providers, leisure services and benefits agencies amongst others. In 2016 the government introduced the [Care Leaver Covenant](#) – which asks for multi-agency sign-up by public, private and voluntary sector organisations to set out the [local offer](#) of what support is available for their local care-experienced young people. (see the local offers for [York](#) and [North Yorkshire](#))

Increasingly education providers and employment services are working to improve their offer by increasing the participation levels and the support for care-experienced young people.

Some Universities have signed up to the care leaver covenant and provide support such as year round accommodation for care leavers who do not have families to return to during vacation, or provide welcome packs for those who arrive at University without the basic necessities to begin their education journeys.

Both the University of York and the University of York St John offer specific support to care experienced students currently at University and to local children in care who might be considering University as an option (see here for information [on national HE and FE offers](#)).

Some job centres meanwhile, will have a named worker for care-experienced young people to ensure that their particular circumstances are understood and considered.

Corporate Parenting can also go hand in hand with Corporate Social Responsibility, a principle whereby businesses contribute positively to their local community and workforce. York Cares, an employee volunteer charity, provides an excellent example of how local employers can support

care-experienced young people to develop their awareness of the local job market and the relevant skills to enter the local workforce (see [York Cares Starting Blocks](#) and [The Bright Futures project](#)). Other national examples include the Children’s Society and Catch22 young people’s charity’s [Bright Light apprenticeship project for care leavers](#) .

b. Data snapshots and sources

Care and leaving care data

Data about the care and leaving care populations are gathered by all 51 English local authorities annually for the year up to March and are submitted to the Government’s Department for Education (DfE), which publishes updates each year (see [DfE website](#) for updates on care and leaving care data). These data provide an annual snapshot of characteristics and trends within the care and leaving care system. The next update is due to be published in autumn 2021.

Data on the demographic characteristics of children in care include age, gender and ethnicity. Care data includes reason for entering, age at entry and type of placement (see Table 1).

Data are also gathered on outcomes in accommodation and participation in education, employment and training (EET) for care leavers aged 17-21 years, who are in contact with their local authority.

Education data

Further information is gathered from all local authorities on the educational progress for school children who are in care or are classed as children in need. Data include rates of special educational needs, exclusions, and attainment levels at key stage 1, 2 and 4 (GCSE results). See [DfE website](#) for updates on outcomes.)

Most [Virtual Schools](#) will also hold data on the education experience and progress of their local children in care.

Data on attainment, exclusions and demographics of all school children are gathered via the [National Pupil Database](#) (NPD).

Information for post-18 participation is gathered via the [Individualised Learner Records](#) (ILR) and the [Higher Education Statistics Agency](#) (HESA).

Currently it is not possible to easily link data from these data sources, therefore the education journeys cannot be easily tracked from school through to college and/or University. Since 2020, DfE is piloting a new database to draw together these data along with data on earnings and benefits (from the Department of Work and Pensions) to follow progress through and after education, known as the [Longitudinal Education Outcomes](#) (LEO) database.

The following sections utilise data from the DfE annual snapshots on the care populations.

Table 1. Data snapshot for children in and leaving care in England for the year to March 2020

80,080	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children aged 0-17 are in care
63%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are aged 10-17
65%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entered care because of abuse or neglect
72%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are looked after in foster carer
20%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are in placements more than 20 miles from their homes
11%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of children went missing from their care placements in the year to March 2020
11,000+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people aged 18 leave care each year
approx 43,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Care leavers aged 17-21 in leaving care system
28%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of those who ceased to be looked at 18 were Staying Put with their foster carers
15%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of 19-21yr old care leavers were living in semi-independent accommodation (hostel/supported lodgings)
35%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of 19-21yr old care leavers were living independently
85%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of care leavers aged 19-21 were considered to be living in 'suitable' accommodation
6%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of 19-21yr old care leavers were in HE
20%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of 19-21yr old care leavers were in other education
39%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of 19-21yr old care leavers were NEET

Source: DfE 2020

Data for children in care and young people leaving care aged 17-21 in York and North Yorkshire (Y_NY) (shown in Tables 2 and 3) broadly reflect that of the national picture in terms of age and reasons for entering care, the most common placement type and outcomes for care leavers.

The following tables present data from the DfE data snapshot for the year to March 2020. Figures 2 to 3 draw on these data to illustrate levels of participation in education, employment and training (EET) and those not in education, employment or training (NEET). They include data for York and North Yorkshire care leavers aged 17-18 and 19-21 years compared with care leavers nationally and with young people aged 19-24 generally. (Note: data for the same age-range is not currently available.)

Table 2. Data snapshot for York and North Yorkshire’s children in care

	York	North Yorkshire
Total children in care	262	443
Age range of those in care		
Under 1 year	21 (8%)	27 (6%)
1 to 4 years	52 (20%)	70 (16%)
5 to 9 years	58 (22%)	75 (17%)
10 to 15 years	79 (30%)	157 (35%)
16 years and over	52 (20%)	114 (26%)
Age range at point of entry to care (% only)		
Under 1 year	22%	28%
1 to 4 years	23%	15%
5 to 9 years	21%	17%
10 to 15 years	22%	22%
16 years and over	13%	18%
Placed more than 20 miles from home	c	148 (33%)

Main reason for coming into care		
Abuse or neglect	194 (74%)	330 (74%)
Child disability	c	14 (3%)
Parents illness or disability	18 (7%)	10 (2%)
Family in acute distress	18 (7%)	59 (13%)
Family dysfunction	20 (8%)	15 (3%)
Socially unacceptable behaviour	c	0
Low income	0	0
Absent parenting	6 (2%)	15 (3%)
Placement type		
Foster care	183 (70%)	324 (73%)
Children's homes, secure units, residential schools, other group residential settings	26 (10%) approx	31 (7%) approx
Went missing from care placement (% only)	9%	11%
More than three placements in the year	20 (8%)	50 (11%)
Convicted during the year (age 10 – 17)	8 (8%)	c
SDQ strengths & difficulties measure complete	103	188
Score is normal	49 (48%)	83 (44%)
Borderline score	11 (10%)	33 (18%)
Cause for concern	43 (42%)	72 (38%)

Source: DfE 2020

(Note c = number too small to include. Figures have been rounded up.)

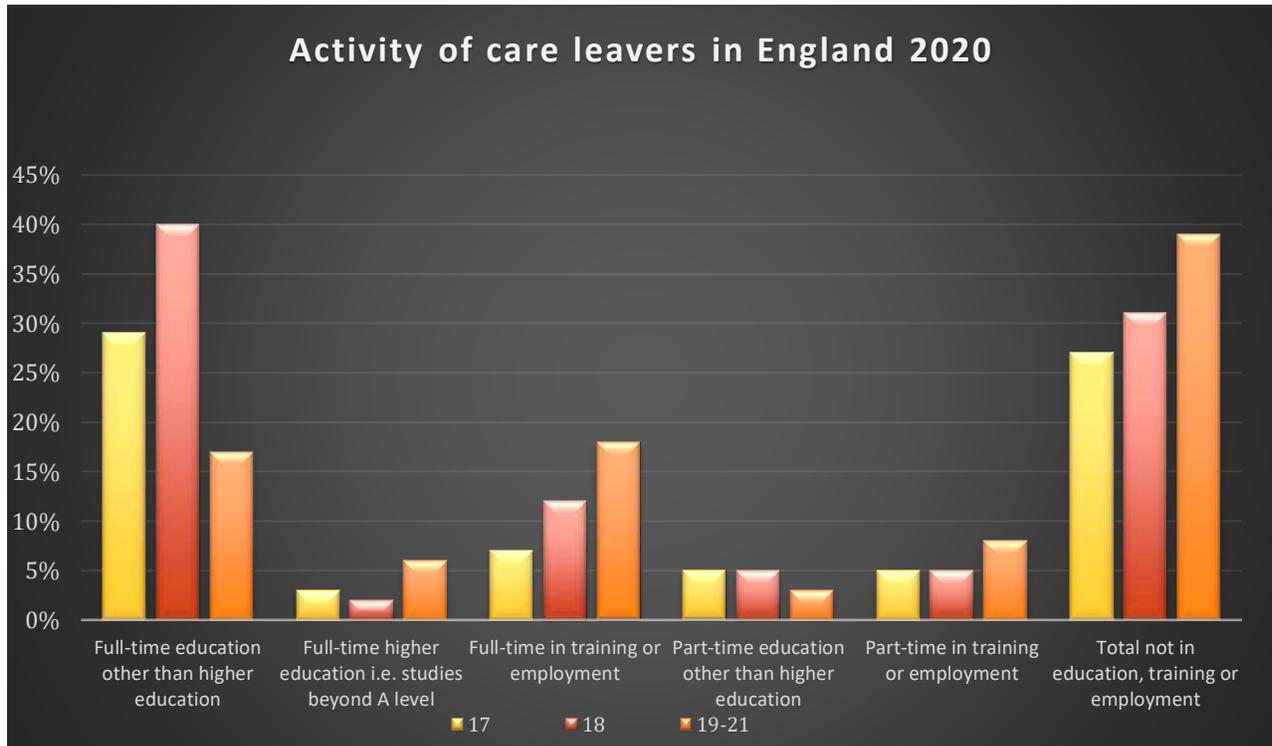
Table 3. Data snapshot for York and North Yorkshire's Care leavers

	York		North Yorkshire	
	17-18 yrs.	19-21 yrs.	17-18 yrs.	19-21 yrs.
Number of care leavers	23	79	65	183
North Type of accommodation				
Semi-independent/transitional	c	11 (14%)	13 (20%)	19 (10%)
Supported lodgings	c	c	9 (14%)	6 (3%)
With former foster carer	8 (35%)	8 (10%)	23 (35%)	22 (12%)
With parents or relatives	c	10 (13%)	8 (12%)	21 (11%)
Community home	0	6 (8%)	0	11 (6%)
Independent living (house/flat)	0	36 (46%)	0	78 (43%)
Type of Activity				
Education other than HE	11 (48%)	10 (13%)	23 (35%)	28 (15%)
HE (studies beyond A level)	0	5 (6.5%)	c	17 (9%)
In training or employment	7 (30%)	25 (32%)	c	63 (34%)
In education, employment or training	18 (78%)	51 (65%)	45 (69%)	108 (59%)
Not known	0	0	c	11 (6%)
Not in education/employment/training (NEET)	c (22%)	28 (35%)	17 (26%)	64 (35%)

Source: DfE 2020

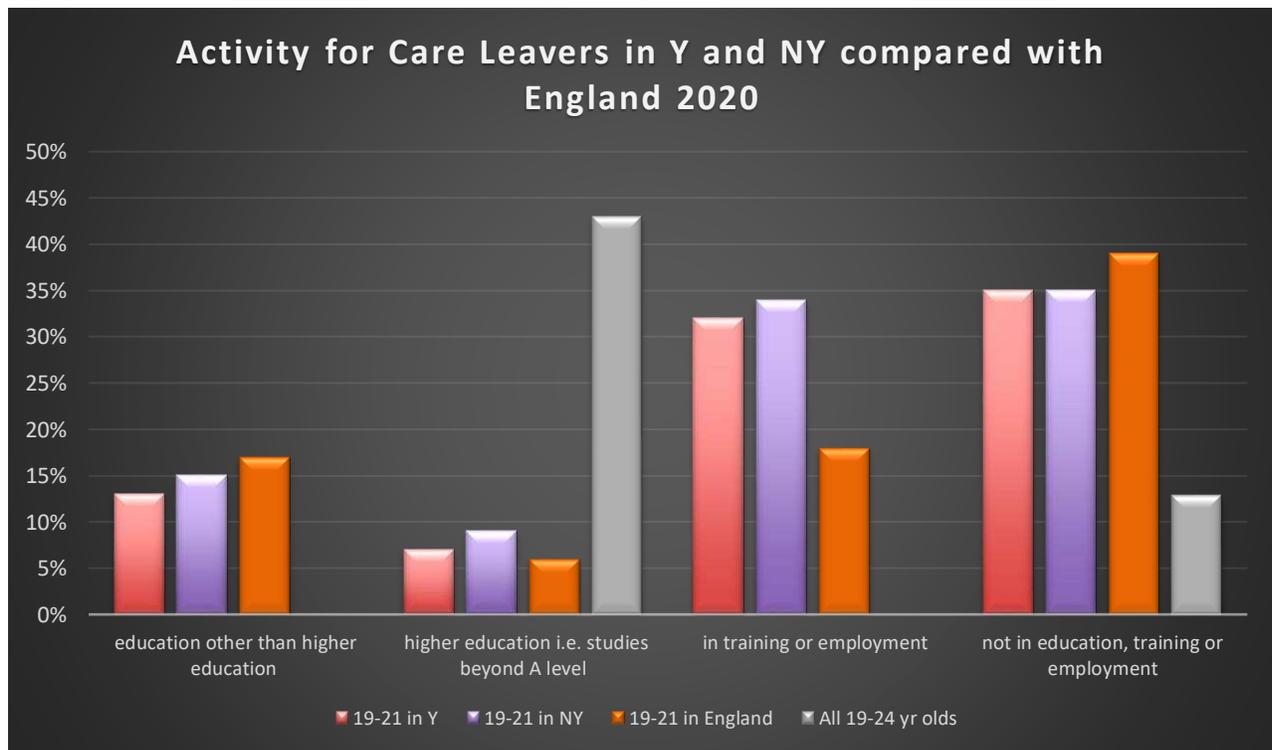
(Note c = number too small to include. Some data were supplemented by NY and Y teams. Figures have been rounded up)

Figure 2 Education, Employment and Training Participation of Care Leavers in England



Source: DfE 2020

Figure 3 Education, Employment and Training Participation of Care Leavers in Y and NY



Source: DfE 2020

2. Care-experienced young people – experiences and outcomes

Experiences and outcomes for care-experienced young people will vary according to their pre-care, in-care and after-care circumstances. Evidence shows that for some young people, care is a positive and protective factor, whilst many others describe difficult and disruptive circumstances. A selection of comments from young people interviewed in earlier national studies, demonstrates some of the good and bad aspects of the care journeys.

“Being in care makes my life better by having a safe house and bedroom”
(Coram Voice 2018)

“Carers make me feel like part of the family, they include [me] in different things they were doing. I call them mum and dad”
(Dixon et al 2015)

“Every time you move, you feel rejected and this affects your self-esteem and confidence”
(Barnardos 2006)

“I have been moved several times without being told why, so I am used to being moved with no apparent reason”
(Dixon et al 2015)

“Good [things about care] not a boring moment, [foster carer] is caring, loving, treats me as part of the family. Bad things about care is reaching the age of 18 and having to move on”
(Dixon et al 2015)

Practice evidence and research carried out with care-experienced young people also indicates some differences in the journeys to independent adulthood compared with young people who live with their families. Research carried out by Stein and colleagues described care leavers’ transitions to adulthood as *accelerated and compressed* (Stein 2006). This continues to resonate through contemporary practice and research evidence.

Moving to independent adulthood sooner

Many care-experienced young people move on to independent living much sooner than other young people leave the family home. Data shows that most leave their care home around the age of 18, and whilst most will move into semi-independent options (supported lodgings, foyers and hostels), where they continue to receive some accommodation-based support, over one-third of

19-21 year old care leavers live in their own tenancy. The average age for leaving the family home for independent living amongst young adults generally, meanwhile, is 28 years old (ONS 2016).

Experiencing transitional milestones in a short space of time

Care-experienced young people tend to take on the responsibilities of adult living not only much younger but in a shorter space of time and often in a less linear order compared with other young people. For example, for many the priority at 18 is finding somewhere to live as many do not remain with former carers or return to families. There is also a need to establish the financial means to support their independent status (few can rely on the bank of mum and dad) and some become parents themselves, with care leavers being around three times more likely to become young parents than young people generally (Craine et al 2014). There is also a higher risk of mental health difficulties, with some data indicating that care-experienced young people are five times more likely to be diagnosed with mental health needs than young people generally (Ford et al 2007). This has been linked to the impact of childhood trauma and separation, and is reflected in the growing evidence on the impact of maltreatment on brain development, along with its effects on general wellbeing.

Resilience

Along with the challenges that emerge from adverse childhood experiences such as maltreatment, separation and placement instability, many care-experienced young people are likely to have displayed considerable resilience during their childhood and early adulthood in order to overcome these challenges. Furthermore, they tend to navigate the transition to adulthood and take on the accompanying responsibilities without the levels of parental support that many of their peers can expect and rely on. This is an important strength that carers, education providers and employers can recognise and nurture to ensure that these young people make a full, rewarding and important contribution to the local student body and the workforce of the future. Resilience literature suggests that care-experienced young people have unique characteristics and life experiences that, when accompanied by an ability to identify and utilise support from a range of sources, can help them achieve and overcome challenges or adverse circumstances (Rafaeli 2017, Stein 2008).

Stigma and negative stereotyping

There continues to be a lack of understanding and awareness of children and young people who have been in care. In some cases views can be distorted by negative stereotyping, which in turn can lead to care-experienced young people feeling stigmatised or, as a care leaver in one study described; feeling “*tarnished with the brush of being in care*” (Dixon and Baker 2016).

Another study of care-experienced young people, carried out by the charity Coram Voice, found that about 1 in 8 young people in care aged 11-18 years felt adults did things which made them ‘*feel embarrassed about being in care*’. Furthermore, 1 in 10 care leavers felt that, as a care leaver, they have been treated worse than other young people. This reflects findings of previous

research, as described by a participant in Buchanan's 1995 study; "you say you are in care and lots of people feel sorry for you. I hate that feeling".

3. Education pathways

School

Available data demonstrates the impact of difficult childhood experiences on care-experienced young people's school participation and progress. It also highlights factors that can protect and promote mutually positive education and care experiences.

A consistent finding within government data and research is the gap between the educational attainment levels of care-experienced young people and their non-care class mates. Recent data continue to show much lower levels of attainment at key stage 4. For example, 2019 data on the average Attainment 8 score for York and North Yorkshire was 23.5 and 15 respectively and 19.2 for care-experienced young people nationally ([DfE 2019d](#)). These were around half that of the average attainment level of 46.5 for all school children ([DfE 2019c](#)).

Reasons for this difference have been located in family disadvantage, trauma, placement instability as well as higher rates of school exclusions. Additionally, children in care are more than three times more likely to have special education needs than children in the general population (56% compared with 15%), which may affect their education experiences (DfE 2020b). They are also around five times more likely to have a fixed period exclusion than all school pupils (DfE 2017).

A number of factors located within the care experience, however, can have a positive impact on education progress. Research findings over the past two decades indicate that age of entering care, stability and placement type are associated with EET progress levels. For example, studies show those who enter care early and remain settled in stable foster care tend to do better in education outcomes than other care-experienced young people (Jackson et al 2003, Dixon et al 2006). Research by Sebba et al (2015) found further evidence of care as a protective factor for education success, particularly in terms of settled care placements.

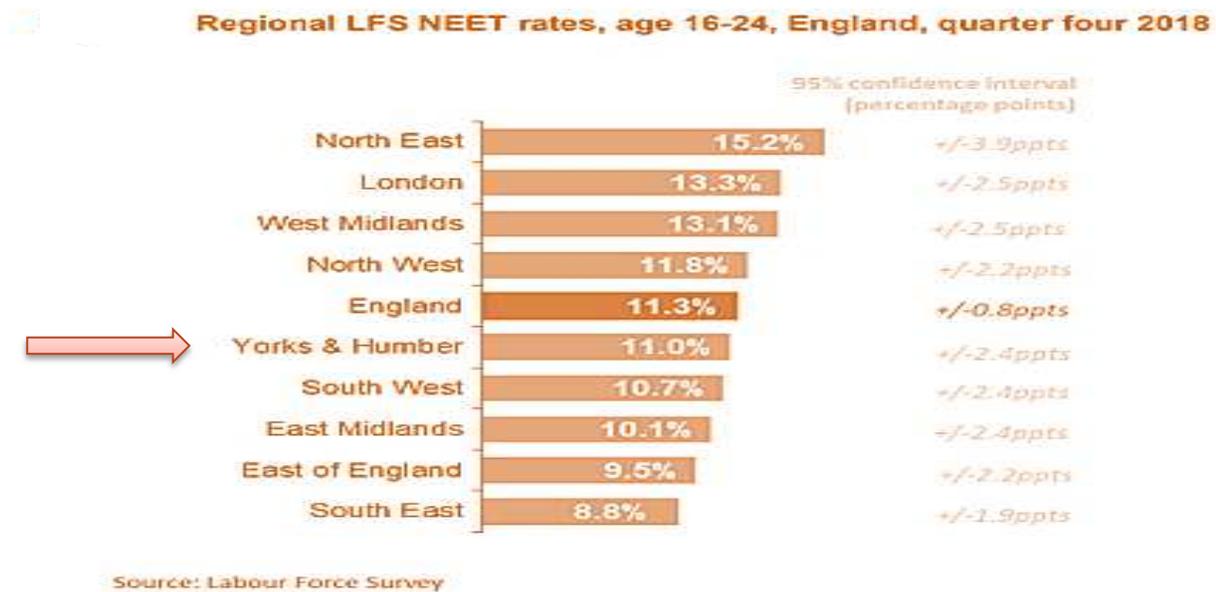
Post-18 participation

The impact of the attainment gap is evident in data on post-school and post-care EET participation. Care leavers aged 19-21 have lower rates of participation in further education (FE) (17%), employment and training (18% compared with 62% for 18-24 year olds generally) and higher education (HE), which despite an increase from 1% to 6% over the past decade, compares to over 40% of young people generally who go to University (CSJ 2016).

Subsequently, the risk of being NEET (not in education, employment or training) is higher for care leavers (see Table 3). Around three times as many were NEET in 2019 compared with 19-24 year olds generally (38% and 12% respectively) (DfE 2019). Figures for York and North Yorkshire

indicate that 35% of 19-21 year old care leavers were NEET (see Table 3). The closest comparison data (see Figure 4) shows that 11% of 16-24 year olds in Yorkshire and the Humber were NEET in 2018.

Figure 4 Regional NEET Rates for 16-24 year olds



a. The inter-relationship between care and education

As outlined above, evidence identifies several factors inherent in the care experience that can negatively impact the education pathways of care experienced young people. These include the impact of trauma and difficulties that led to the child's entry to care, separation from family and home, placement instability and adjusting to new carers - all of which can be unsettling and disruptive to school experiences.

As discussed above, elements of the care experience have also been shown to be protective factors in the education experiences of children in care. Furthermore, international research identifies educational success as a protective factor for achieving positive outcomes in other life areas (Berlin et al 2011), demonstrating the mutual benefits of promoting positive care and education journeys.

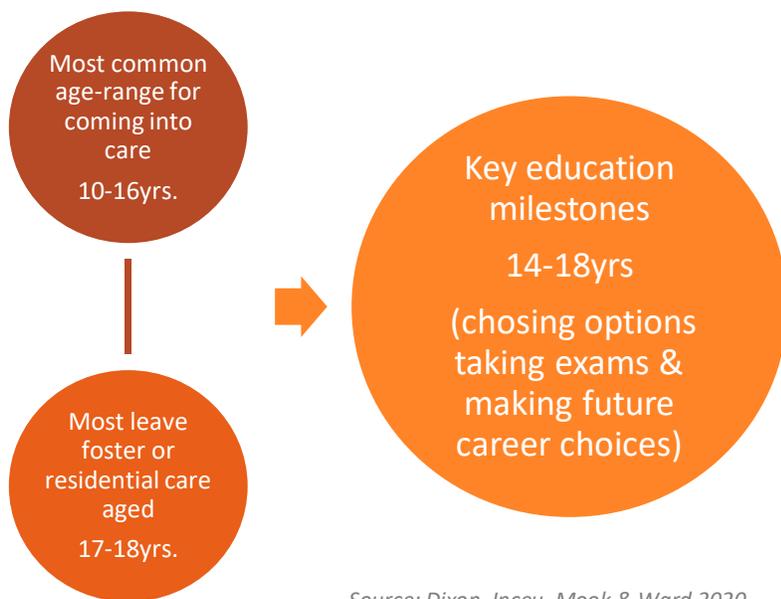
Importantly, however, it is evident from data on known characteristics of the care experience, that for some young people, key care milestones can coincide with key education milestones to interrupt their progress and attainment (see Figure 5).

For example, the most common age-range for entering care is 10-16 years. This is a crucial time in young people's school career; transitioning to secondary school, choosing KS4 options and taking GCSE exams.

Additionally, the age at which compulsory education ends accords with the age at which young people legally leave care (18 years), though some leave their final care placement aged 16 or 17. Leaving care and the uncertainty leading up to it, can therefore, coincide with other important educational milestones, such as end of school vocational or academic exams and applying for post-18 options, whether FE, HE, training or employment. The potential impact of leaving care on educational outcomes, is illustrated by one participant in Gill’s 2017 research (see Figure 6 below).

Consequently, for some care-experienced young people, education opportunities and career decisions can be disrupted or put on hold whilst the focus shifts to finding somewhere to live

Figure 5 Care and education milestones



Source: Dixon, Inceu, Mook & Ward 2020

after care. This is evidenced by recent research, which shows that care-experienced young people attending FE and HE tend to be older. For example, over half of care-experienced young people who enter HE are aged 21 and over (Harrison et al 2020), indicating a return to education once other areas of their lives are more settled. Whilst there has been an increase in the range of support to enable care-experienced young people to return to their studies later, this is currently age-limited to the mid-20s and coincides with the ending

of leaving care support at age 25. Again, this introduces a further temporal obstacle for care-experienced young people, as whilst many of their fellow students will return home to parents after graduation, and obtain support to access employment or further study, most care-experienced graduates do not have this option.

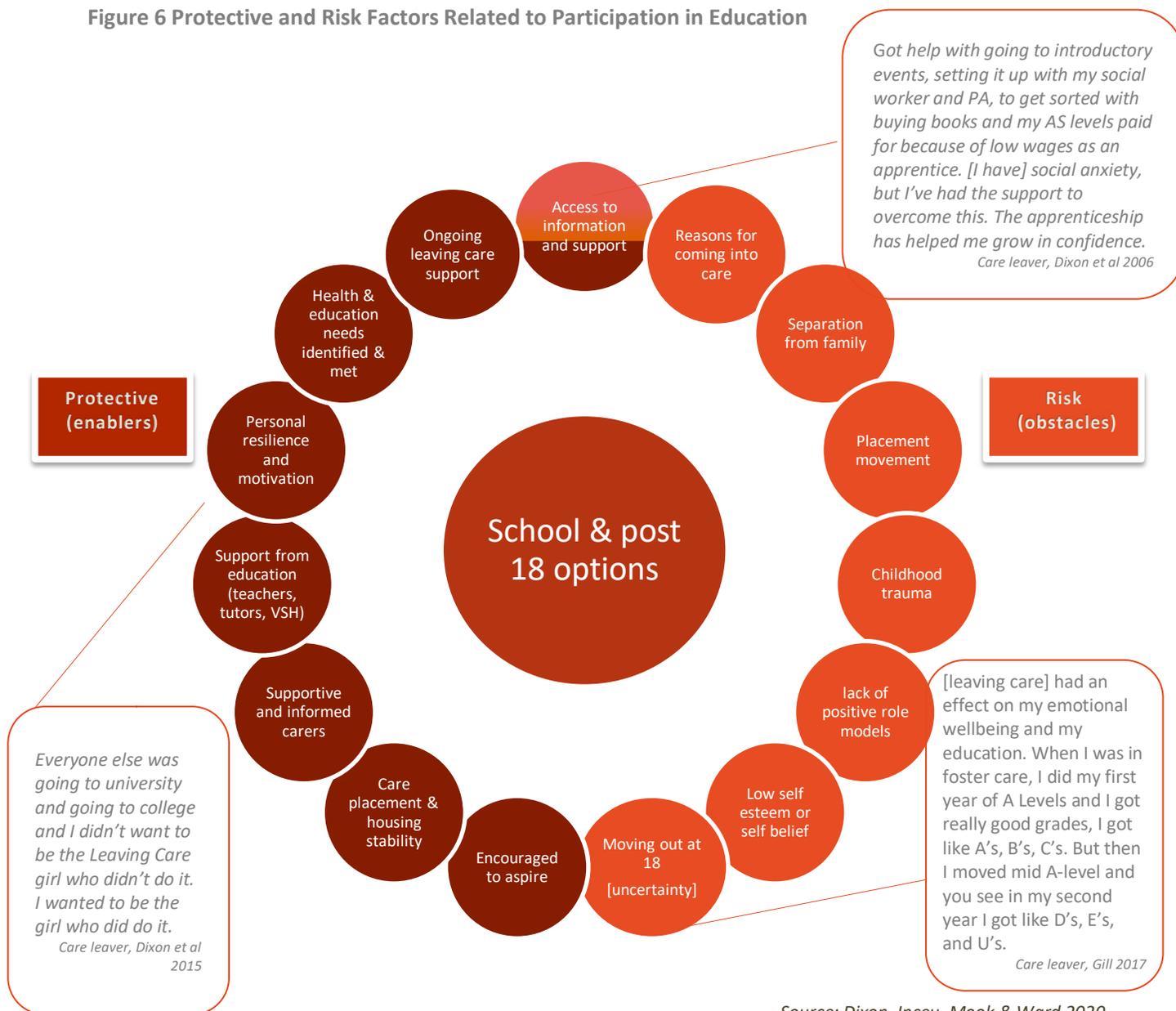
This interplay between key points in the care and education experiences highlights the importance of providing individualised and timely support from staff and carers who understand the impact of these issues for care-experienced young people. It also indicates the importance of ongoing support throughout the education journey from both professional and informal support networks, as illustrated in case studies A and B.

b. Risk and Protective factors for participation in EET

Existing practice and research evidence has identified risk and protective factors for positive outcomes in EET and other life areas for care-experienced young people. These include factors

associated with past or current circumstances, personal qualities (agency), supportive social networks (social capital) and access to resources and professional support.

Figure 6 Protective and Risk Factors Related to Participation in Education



Source: Dixon, Inceu, Mook & Ward 2020

Data gathered during the current study on what can help or hinder education journeys, resonate with existing findings and highlighted further areas for consideration when supporting care-experienced young people in their education journeys.

4. The Views of York and North Yorkshire young people and staff

Interviews were carried out with care-experienced young people, leaving care professionals, virtual school staff and widening participation experts from York and North Yorkshire, towards

the end of 2020. They explored experiences and perspectives around the factors that can enable and obstruct participation in post-18 education (and employment). Selected quotes have been used to demonstrate recurring themes (see Figures 7 and 8), and these have been situated within existing evidence. Two illustrative case studies are used to demonstrate what can make a difference to young people's participation.

a. What are the obstacles for care leavers' participation in EET?

Despite the provisions to improve pathways to FE and HE for young people leaving care over recent years, key messages from young people and professionals in this research highlighted the need for earlier and more consistent support throughout young people's education journeys.

Some young people stated that they did not feel that they had the right support or that the professionals working with them fully understood what being in care meant for them. For many young people, carers, teachers, and school pastoral support services play an integral role in determining their educational outcomes (Sebba et al 2015). It is essential therefore, that these networks around care-experienced young people are aware of some of the potential challenges they face and what can help overcome them, as one Y_NY research participant advised;

“Some understanding, which I think quite a lot of people don't have... to understand children in care, realise that they may have issues, you know mental health, and if you think they're not paying attention [in class] they might be worried about home”

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

An issue raised by staff meanwhile, was a tendency for care-experienced young people to be prevented from reaching their educational potential and abilities, which could result in low aspirations or ruling out possible opportunities. It was acknowledged that this could be exacerbated by a lack of accurate information about entitlements and routes into different options, and by the lack of a role model or motivating and informed support network.

“Young people say that to me themselves, 'Oh, I didn't get any qualifications' and 'I just couldn't concentrate on school because I was moving'. Some of them, the qualifications ... don't match their abilities... often because they're moved about. they'll move school, they'll move carers and just this interrupted education has that knock-on effect for them in that their outcomes don't really match their abilities”

(Y_NY staff interview, 2020)

The causes and impact of low levels of attainment during compulsory schooling (arising from placement movement or the legacy of trauma), can lead to reduced or delayed opportunities in post-compulsory education. Poor attainment can have a lasting impact on EET participation generally and this can be compounded by wider life circumstances post-care.

“My personal situation ... so mentally I wasn't in the place, well to do my A levels or go into University. And the options that were available...when I left my placement, were to basically go into another accommodation”

Staff noted that, without support to catch up, identify alternative routes or realise their abilities, there may well be limited HE pathways later.

“One of the things I think puts people off university is a lot of care leavers say I didn't get very good GCSE's so how could I go to University?’ Sort of seeing that as a major barrier, ‘I didn't do my standard GCSE's or A levels so that's me counted out’, and not kind of realising that admissions teams take all that into account and that there's access courses and various different routes into education”

(Y_NY staff interview, 2020)

Wider structural factors may also play a part, such as HE grade requirements, access to local education, training and work opportunities generally, and the financial costs of FE and HE. Although an increasing number of FE and HE institutions (including the Universities of York and York St John) offer a range of access support (including contextual offers), research indicates a lack of parity in access routes across some HEIs, which can amount to exclusionary admission processes for those without traditional qualifications (Baker 2019).

As care leavers tend to enter HE later than their peers, usually once they have settled into independence, more support is needed to keep them there (Styrnol 2021, Ellis et al 2019). Financial support packages in England are currently age restricted and although support is there for care leavers who start their course before their 25th birthday, many have limited options, especially if they have their own tenancy and need to financially sustain their independent status.

“Not all of our young people are ready to go to school, to do GCSEs, A levels, and into University. A lot take a bit more time out, take longer to adjust and to decide. Quite a lot go through Access course routes, which is great, but it's hard for them in terms of financially managing either on benefits, or if they're older and... by the time they do get to University sometimes University packages and finance are age-limited”

(Y_NY staff interview, 2020)

In addition to attending HE later, care-experienced students have on average, lower continuation rates compared with other students (87% compared with 92% for 2018 entrants). Statistics also suggest that care experienced students have lower rates of achieving a first or upper second-class degree. In 2019, the attainment rate was 12.1 percentage points lower than the attainment rate of students who had not been in care (Office for Students 2019). This demonstrates a need for individualised support whilst attending University from tutors, designated student support workers and from student wellbeing services.

“I think Colleges and Universities are very isolating and professionals in these sectors rarely get to know their students... and this needs to change. At every other stage in a young person's life they have a clearer assigned advocate, but I think uni and college need to better support their students in general but especially care leavers, to change attrition and drop-out rates”

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

Recommendations by Ellis et al (2019) emphasise the importance of on-going support for care-experienced students, to minimise dropout and difficulties.

A further obstacle that was highlighted during interviews was the mental health needs of care-experienced young people. A particular issue for young people was getting the right support at the right time. This could be difficult due to waiting lists for counselling or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), or reaching 18 and having to transfer to adult services. Young people noted however, that they had been able to obtain emotional support from a range of other services including wellbeing services within their educational setting and through leaving care services.

“All the hurdles that have been are my own mental health, my own issues and obviously I still have that now, it is something that I need to get through. I've got my leaving care worker and [education worker] are providing like counselling and things like that... phone me actually just to see how I'm doing...which I think that's quite good, and I can just kinda chat to her”

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

“My carer kind of saw that my mood was dipping and so she took me to the GP... and from then referred me onto CAMHS and I was there for quite a while, up until my 18th

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

“I think quite a lot of people were accessing [CAMHS]it took quite a while to get in contact with the counselling teams about referral over and that took about a month and a half or even a bit more. I mean for me I think it took a bit longer than I would have wanted”

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

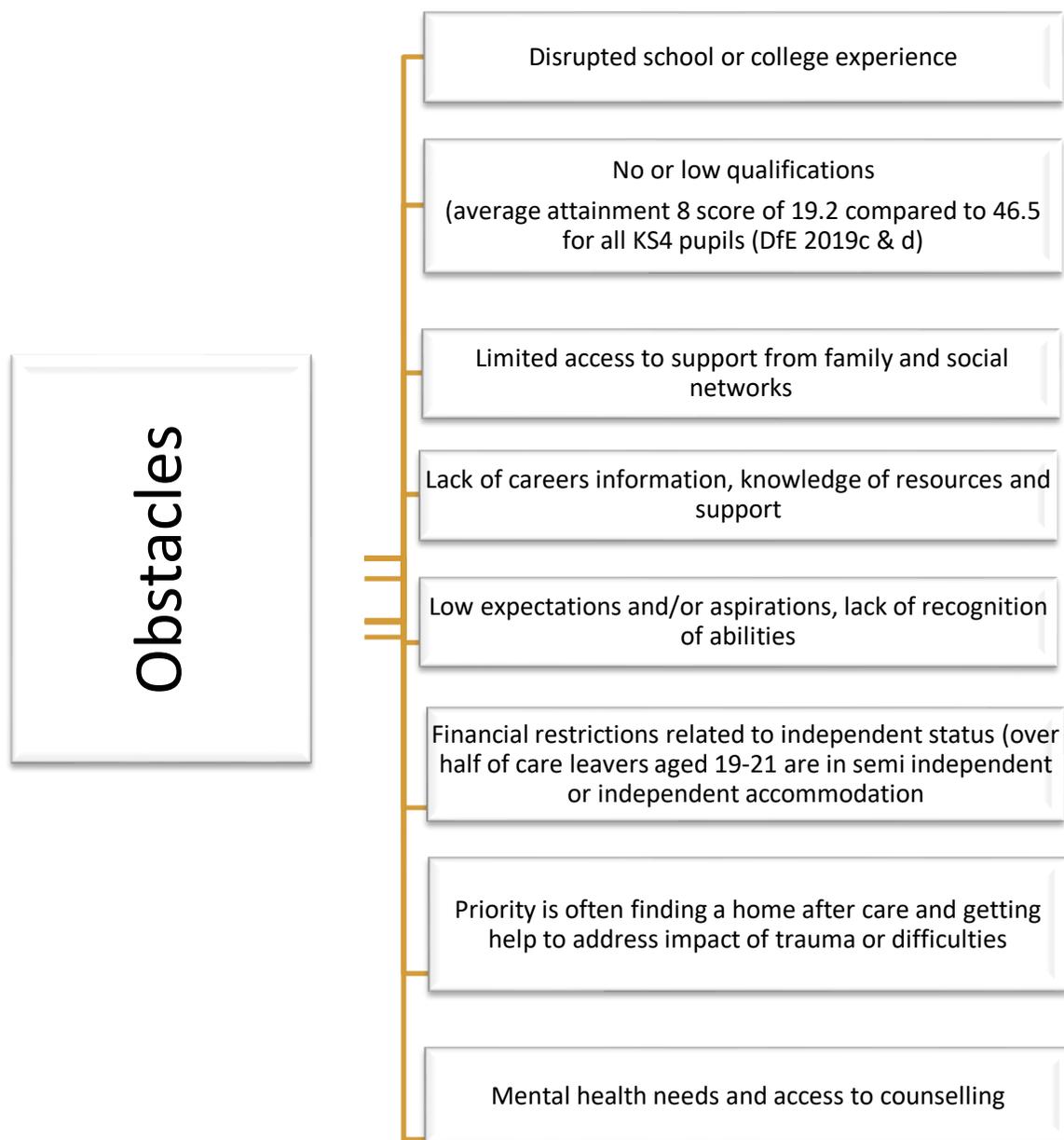
Staff acknowledged the impact of past-experiences on young people's confidence, mental health and coping mechanisms, which could deter them from pursuing HE options.

“ I'm speaking to a lot of people who have spent time in care and the biggest thing is probably emotional and mental health problems, that could be just kind of feeling overwhelmed, having low confidence or low self-esteem. It could be that they have experienced a lot of trauma in their life already, so very anxious about things or feelings about being overwhelmed that they've got so much going on, you know education almost takes a back step because they're just getting through the day and [it] is difficult enough without even considering things like University”

(Y_NY staff interview, 2020)

As indicated above, a broad range of obstacles and risks to post-18 education participation were identified within the data gathered during interviews with Y_NY young people and staff.

Figure 7 Obstacles to Education Participation (Y_NY data)



b. What helps - young people's views

Individualised and 1-to-1 support

Providing additional individual support at the time of moving into care and throughout young people's education, from teachers, the Virtual School, via 1-to-1 tuition and from wellbeing workers in schools featured within comments from those interviewed. This type of support was identified as being a positive and motivating factor to remain in education. For one young person, the support they received from their worker enabled them to attend their course and ensured they were financially able to manage throughout.

“I received loads of support with regards to the course. if I hadn’t been in care I wouldn’t have been able to maybe do my level 3. My worker...got onto the case ... sorted it all out so without him I probably wouldn’t have got onto the course”

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

The positive impact of the virtual school was particularly evident in the journeys of two of the care-experienced young people interviewed in this research. Targeted and tailored 1-to-1 support had been particularly welcomed by one young person, who described an intensive programme of support that got them through their exams at a difficult time.



“We will meet I think every once a week or every two weeks and just kind of go through things... she would talk to me and say kind of ‘with what you’ve got going on, can I help you with any Maths English, Science or anything?’ So we worked quite a lot, I found it good, just nice to talk to someone about what I’m learning, I mean in my summer holidays it was me and... the virtual school worker, and she was there if needed, so it was quite good to help me study”

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

There was some concern, however, that such targeted support was not available in equal measure for all care-experienced students, particularly for those who appeared less able or were struggling. Young people acknowledged that this could be a resource issue or could be because some young people were not ready to engage. Nevertheless, they felt that support should be available for those who needed it most.

“For me what I’ve come to realise is that that kind of ... offer isn’t there for everyone, ...they don’t support everyone and they work with those who have the potential, and like I get that, but I feel like... there are some children who they don’t tackle and who are struggling”

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

Other positive examples of 1-to-1 support included access to regular careers advice, to broaden knowledge of the available options.

“I’ve talked to the careers adviser and she was saying you know ‘please keep in contact with me’, which I thought was really good as opposed to having like a 30 minute session and then be like right that’s you, do you know what I mean? The careers adviser is really supportive she sent me a few links over of places I can apply to, or things that I think in terms of that, you know, I have been supported”

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

Personal drive and aspirations

Young people's own agency and determination to achieve their goals was also highlighted as an enabling factor. For some, this reflected a perceived necessity to be self-reliant. It is important, that carers and staff help their young people to develop personal motivation and aspirations.

"You have to be quite active when you've been in care. You have to kind of take care of yourself and work for it because you haven't got a mum or dad saying here's this for that and you know kind of pushing you in the right direction or telling you what you should or shouldn't do. You kind of have to work that out for yourself"

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

"To me education has always been really important...education was kind of the only thing that I felt I could control and I had that sort of power over... and it was something for me you know what I mean and I have my own autonomy to do that"

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

"One of the main things that children in care do is they either worry a lot or they don't care... and part of that is due to how they are feeling about themselves ... but I think obviously that needs to be kind of tackled, thinking what do you want in the long run... if that means going back to school or to college, ... realistically it is never too late"

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

Inspiring and informed carers and support networks

Comments from young people confirmed the crucial role that carers, support workers and social networks had played in encouraging them in their EET journeys. Related to this was the importance of making sure that these key people themselves had access to information about the range of EET opportunities and how to access them, so that they could facilitate the best outcomes for their young people.

I think carers need to ensure that they have appropriate level of knowledge regarding how school, colleges and HE facilities function to ensure that carers can properly advocate for young people and ensure that they are getting everything they need...[some] carers haven't been to college...or Uni... some don't understand the new number system of grading at secondary school. Also I think that social workers and PAs need to understand more about education, the support available or application processes"

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

"So, I think more support as well needs to be given to the kids obviously in care that are also going through it but maybe also foster parents to know that they can't be making decisions [about placement moves] like that off a whim, you know cause mentally and physically and everything it has a massive impact on the child"

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

“More [support] for carers to feel empowered to be involved in children’s education and future aspirations”

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

c. What helps - professional views

The views of the staff who took part in interviews, echoed the points raised by young people. They talked of a range of support to address the variety of needs and challenges and to empower young people to access opportunities. Staff were mindful of the impact of trauma and uncertainty in young people’s lives and the importance of early and holistic interventions that promote resilience, confidence and positive relationships, as well as more practical support.

“[Participation] does fall down to [young people’s] commitment, their resilience, their motivation. So without dealing with those things first, they’re not going to progress. So this is where the pathway worker comes in and keeps chipping away with support”

(Y_NY staff interview, 2020)

“Opportunity brokers will start working with young people] as early as possible to identify what their plans are and what they’d like to do, and we don’t just focus on education, we will look at anything...get involved to identify if somebody needs some confidence-building or some self-esteem raising and get them on specific activities that will help with that , starting really back to basics”

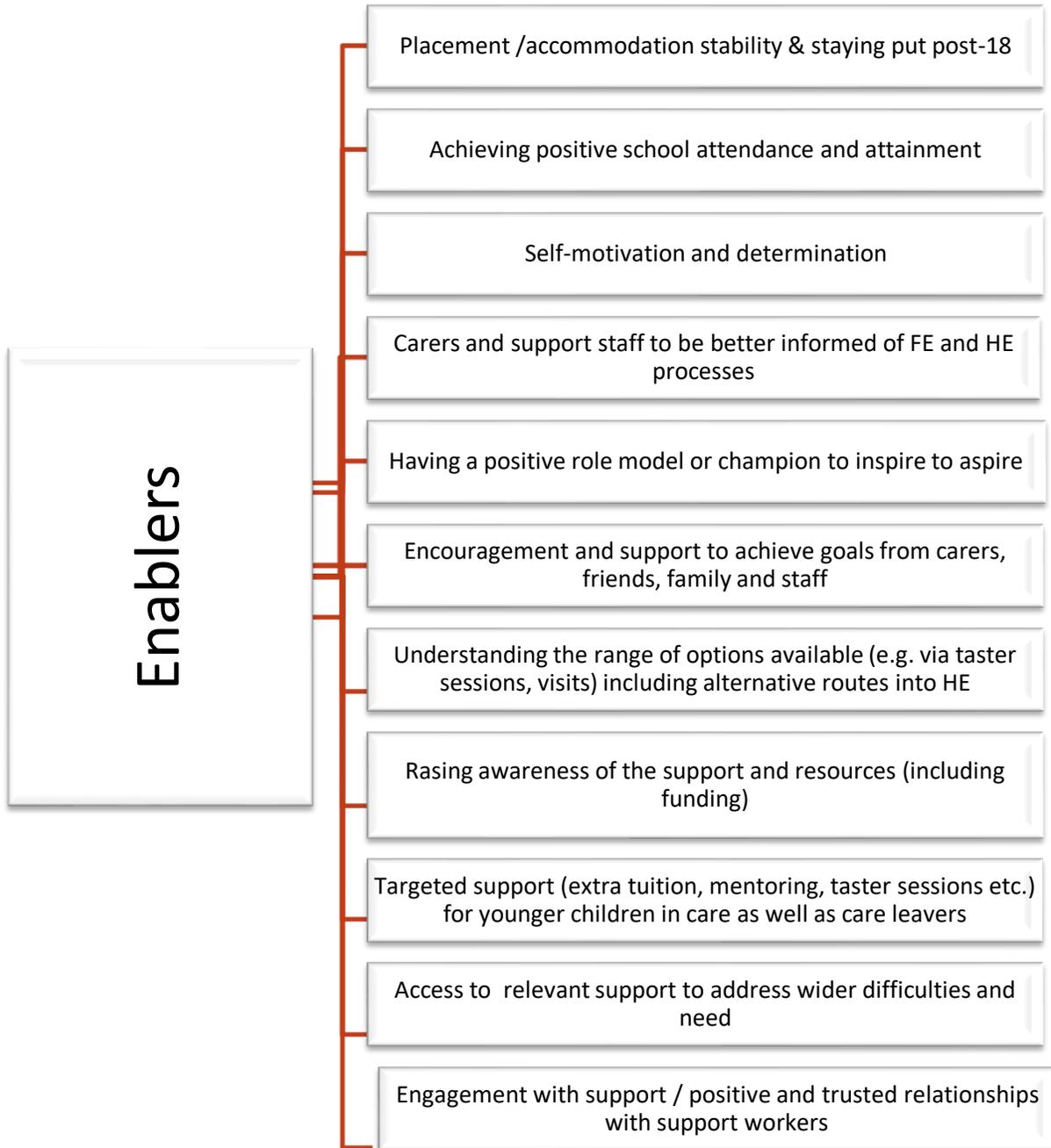
(Y_NY staff interview, 2020)

“We’ve got [workers] who do direct work with young people, so helping them find a course, taking them to open days, liaising with the care leaver contact in the University”

(Y_NY staff interview, 2020)

Information from the interviews with young people and staff reflected some of the key enablers and protective factors, identified in existing evidence. Of note was the emphasis on generating information and increasing knowledge about the range of options and support to access them, and the benefits of having positive and trusted support staff and networks

Figure 8 Enablers for EET Participation (Y_NY data)



d. Illustrative case studies

Case Study A. What helped Ash to maintain education participation and achieve their goals?

Ash was an undergraduate student in their 20s at the time of interview. They had entered care aged 14, an age that research suggests can bring an increased risk of education disruption and poorer outcomes after care. For Ash, however, education and care were mutually protective factors for their journey towards achieving their goals. *“Luckily, I did get my grades. Obviously, it means quite a lot to me that everyone came together...[to support me] teacher and social care came together”.*

Ash was performing well at school when they entered care and this was sustained with help from their social worker and the Virtual School, who ensured that they were able to remain in the same school to avoid disruption to their education and preparation for GCSEs; *“they did ask me if I wanted to move [school], but I said no, I was stable where I was so I continued there... So it didn't affect my education, obviously with that kind of support from education and then recognising that that was a good place for me to stay, not having too much change at one time, coz if I was to move in [to care] and then if I was to move to a different school it would have been too much”.*

Ash felt that being in care and the support that came with it from the Virtual School, had a positive impact on their education. They explained; *“it was quite good that I came into care. It was a big safety net for me, obviously I still had issues, but you know I was still able to continue on but intensive support from the virtual school... when I was doing my GCSE's I was getting support from the Virtual School, my academics had never really been that affected by [care]”.*

Having a settled foster placement and the opportunity to remain with their foster family after the age of 18, had provided Ash with stability, which enabled them to focus on education; *“... still living at my placement, two years after I turned 18, to me that was because of the stability provided for me, ..., for me that was really, really positive... not having to worry about right well I've got a big [educational] change coming up and then I've also got to kind of move out on my own”.*

Continuing their education journey was important to Ash, who noted that education had always provided them with reliability and familiarity during difficult and uncertain times in their life *“to me education is always been really important and before I came into care and obviously things were kind of not great, education was kind of the only thing that I felt I could control at the time and I had that sort of power over”.*

In considering what can help other young people, Ash recommended having support from someone who has awareness of the impact of care on young people *“there needs to be some understanding there... understand what that means to be in care and of what support [is] needed, just have more focused work, maybe more one to one tuition if people are really struggling, things like that”.*

Ash also felt that it was important for young people to plan and set their own goals;

“kind of enlighten themselves and say look this is what I am wanting to work towards trying to create a plan you know thinking what do you want, and I know that it is so tough, because obviously if you're feeling really bad about yourself, you just equally just don't care at that time”

Case Study B. What helped Taylor overcome early challenges to achieve their goals?

After leaving school with low grades, Taylor returned to study in further education aged 21, whilst also working full time. Since completing their FE course, Taylor had continued to work but this had been affected by Covid-19 restrictions at the time of interview.

Taylor first entered care aged 5 and had “loads” of foster placements. After leaving foster care aged 16 they had been homeless for a short time before moving into semi-independent supported accommodation. From there, they moved to independent accommodation. Research shows that placement instability in and after care is a risk factor for education disruption and disengagement. Taylor felt that their care circumstances had negatively affected their education. They described how they felt that they were “*treated differently because I was in care*”. Taylor explained that they had “*misbehaved at school*” due to what they had been through, but that they had been treated as naughty rather than being offered support from the school to deal with their difficulties; “*sometimes it felt like it was my fault [but] the reason I went into care was not my fault*”. They felt that moving placements meant that they focused on where they were going to sleep that night, rather than school; “*obviously when you’re in school you need a stable, safe environment and not not knowing what’s gonna happen, like ... where am I gonna sleep tonight? Am I gonna be safe?*”.

Taylor left school with low grades, and was concerned that going to college and finding a job was going to be difficult “*...so people were saying to me, you won’t get a job*”. Not having a family for support added further challenges during difficult times; “*a lot of people live with their mum and dad, but I don’t have that, I don’t get that support...like everyone else has company, financial help...*”.

What made a difference?

Taylor explained that going to live with supported carers aged 16 had been a turning point and had helped them in their education and their journey to adulthood; “*they taught me everything*”. Taylor described feeling settled and said that they owed everything to their supported carers, who helped them develop important life skills as well as providing stability “*...it wasn’t until [they] said that I could stay there permanently when I felt relief...*”. Being offered practical and emotional support and forming a trusted relationship with their carer at such a crucial time appeared to have finally provided Taylor with a settled base from which to focus on education and work. Taylor believes that without help and encouragement from the supported carers, local housing project and the leaving care team, they might not have been able to go to college; “*[they] got me through the door*”. Taylor also described a sense of determination and commitment, evident in being able to study alongside working despite having to move accommodation and deal with homelessness. They felt that their own common sense and resilience had helped them to find a job despite low grades and difficult early circumstances; “*because I wanted better in life. I didn’t want to go through any more, I just wanted my life to get better do you know?*”.

Taylor’s advice for helping care-experienced young people with their education journeys is to;

“Give them more support, whether its financial or one-to-one support...even just a chat, just knowing that there is someone there that you can talk to. Especially if [young people] don’t know how to approach people about their situation... if they have someone who keeps an eye on them, they will feel better”.

(Interview with Y NY care-experienced young person 2020)

4. Concluding messages and suggestions

What can services do to improve participation?

- It is important to understand the experiences of young people in and from care, in order to meet their individual needs and to develop supportive and engaging interventions to address any challenges they face. Equally, information, advice and guidance (IAG) about the range of support and EET options is essential for informed choices and access to the right support at the right time
- More staff at school or in EET setting who understand and can advocate for care-experienced young people
- Increase young people's knowledge of rights and entitlements in FE and HE
- 1-to-1, individualised support from a trusted and consistent adult
- Early and easy access to careers advice to raise awareness of the range of options
- Improved knowledge and wider awareness raising of the local offer
- More opportunities for carers and children's services staff to increase their understanding of the range of EET options, access routes and application processes so that they can better support their young people
- More targeted support projects. [Future HY's 'On Track'](#) outreach programme provides a good example, targeting care-experienced young people from Year 6 upwards to offer a structured series of age-appropriate interventions that will allow them to sample FE and HE campus life and lessons. It will also help them develop the tools and skill set that will enable young people to stay 'on track' with their education and career goals. Additional events and information will also be provided for foster carers and key support staff. On Track runs in parallel with the York Cares Starting Blocks career pathways programme



For some young people, school was the only stable and familiar element in their lives whilst in care. Building on this and recognising key points in the care and education experience, can positively impact on education outcomes and those in other life areas:

- Maintain stability at school as well as in care
- Minimise the impact of going into care and leaving care on school/college attendance and attainment
- Early planning to avoid placement moves during exams
- Recognising and nurturing strengths and interests
- Extra tuition to catch up or provide additional support during difficult times
- Post-16 and post-18 interventions (practical, financial, emotional support) to facilitate engagement in EET

Suggestions for supporting and preparing young people for FE and HE participation:

- More joined up working between the local authority, FE and HE providers, improving shared understanding of the young person's pathway plan (education section), PEP and shared knowledge of local authority offers for young people studying outside their area
- Implementing low-cost IAG interventions to promote a clear understanding of the costs and benefits of FE or HE (e.g. designated websites, such as Become's Propel website for looked after children and young care leavers) and for exploring packages of support at different HE and FE institutions such as Spectra First's [CareLeaverCovenant](#)
- Better publicity of contextualised offers and financial support for care-experienced young people considering HE (provided earlier in their education journey (e.g. pre-KS4), such as the Universities of York and York St John's widening participation and outreach programmes and Future HY's On Track programme
- Better mental health and wellbeing support in FE and HE, ringfenced for care-experienced young people (e.g. direct access)
- Removing or reducing age-limited support for those returning to education later. For example, Scotland now offers guaranteed undergraduate places to care leavers regardless of age or duration of time in care, as well as providing the Care-Experienced Bursary (a non-income assessed, non-repayable grant of £8,100 per year for Scottish domiciled students in full-time FE or HE). The University of York is exploring opportunities for their care leaver offer to apply to a wider range of care-experienced applicants

“Not dismissing a young person’s capabilities or potential just because of their experiences. It’s a kind of downplaying of potential, this is the same when considering next steps (college, apprenticeship etc)... helping ensure that children are on a level playing field with peers regarding education so that their early life doesn’t dictate their future”

(Y_NY care-experienced young person, 2020)

A review of studies of participation interventions carried out by Styrnol et al (2021) for TASO, found that more evidence is required to understand the effectiveness of support aimed at improving participation. The review found:

- Mentoring activities can be a useful vehicle for providing positive role models and building a sense of belonging. More evidence is needed to understand the impact of mentoring
- ‘limited but promising’ evidence from research in Sweden and the USA, on integrated, early interventions that focus on building resilience and social capital
- Many studies had highlighted the importance of a social network to provide support, guidance and advice to care-experienced students when they are considering entering HE
- Advantages of having a trusted adult or mentor to provide encouragement towards academic and personal goals, and emotional support on the journey into and through HE.

For example, interventions that can help build trusted relationships with support figures, were particularly important for vulnerable young people who may have developed a mistrust of adults due to past experiences

Examples of interventions reviewed by [TASO](#) include, multi-intervention outreach, financial support, mentoring, counselling, role models, information, advice and guidance (IAG), summer schools, campus visits and Virtual School early intervention projects.

Targeted EET support packages such as widening participation programmes, work experience and designated support workers can help build confidence and skills:

- Programmes and interventions can be enhanced through prior consultation with care-experienced young people to understand what they would like and find most useful and engaging (Children in Care Councils and Care Leaver groups provide useful forums, however, it is important to find opportunities to reach young people who are less engaged and rarely consulted)
- Peer support and mentoring can help to engage young people in support, identify new interests and opportunities, and integrate them with their local communities
- Area-based projects with expert local knowledge of the local employment, training and education landscape and the range of opportunities on offer, can increase the relevance, take-up and success of participation activities (e.g. York Cares Starting Blocks)
- Providing early and multiple opportunities to test out different options (e.g. work experience, behind the scenes visits, campus tours with student ambassadors etc.) can raise aspirations. The value of early work experience opportunities was emphasised in research by Mann et al (2016), which reported that young people who had four or more encounters with an employer whilst in education, were 86% less likely to become NEET

Finally, when considering the suggestions for enabling participation, the comments of one young person on what had helped them to access post-18 education, sums up the type and level of support that can make a difference to every young person;

“I had [a] stable community of people looking out for me and actively encouraging me to pursue education. I had extra lessons in my final year of school, I had a great and committed pastoral worker at school, my social worker really engaged in listening to me, I had an inspirational independent visitor and a stable loving home with my foster carer. Everyone around was actively enabling to have the optimal learning and loving environment with which I could use as a secure base throughout my educational journey”

(Recommendations from NY_Y care experienced young person, 2020)

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General data sources

- **Care-experienced young people** – characteristics and outcomes
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2018-to-2019>
- **Education outcomes** for children in care
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884758/CLA_Outcomes_Main_Text_2019.pdf
- Education data sets for all pupils and students (including the **National Pupil Database**, **Individualised Learner Records** and Higher **Education Statistics Agency**)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-pupil-database>
- **Further education and skills:** Learner participation and achievements in England (August to October 2020).
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/further-education-and-skills-january-2021>
- **Association of Colleges** – key facts (student characteristics) 2019-2020
<https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/AoC%20College%20Key%20Facts%202019-20.pdf>
- **Labour Force Survey** (Educational status and labour market status for people aged from 16 to 24 years (not seasonally adjusted)
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/educationalstatusandlabourmarketstatusforpeopleagedfrom16to24yearsnotseasonallyadjusted>

Resources and information

Resources and information on education, employment and training for care-experienced young people

- Propel (Become)
<https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/for-professionals/propel/>
- National Network for the Education of Care leavers (NNECL)
<https://nnecl.org/>
- Young People’s guide to education (Coproduced by young people with Jade Ward)
<https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/media/2720/education-and-care-1.pdf>

Information

This briefing was commissioned by Future HY, York and North Yorkshire's Uni Connect partnership, as a result of a need identified by the York and North Yorkshire Care Experienced Network. The network is made up of education providers, local authorities and charitable organisations who are keen to collaborate in order to improve the progression outcomes for care experienced young people.

For further details on the Uni Connect programme contact: futurehy@yorks.ac.uk

The research was carried out independently by students and researchers from the Child Welfare Research Group at the University of York. For further information contact jo.dixon@york.ac.uk

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An executive summary is available [here](#).

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