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# The Care-Experienced Graduates' Decision-Making, Choices and Destinations Project

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## PHASE ONE REPORT

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## BACKGROUND

Children 'in care' refers to those who are removed from their birth parents by local authorities and placed in foster care, residential homes, or with relatives, usually as a result of abuse or neglect (Department for Education [DfE], 2020). In the Scottish context, this extends to children who are 'looked after at home', where they continue to live in the family home but with the involvement of social workers (Scottish Government, 2022). Individuals who have spent any length of time in the care system (including those who are 'looked after at home') are regarded as 'care-experienced' (Harrison, 2017).

Those with care experience are one of the most underrepresented groups in higher education, participating at a rate four times lower than non-care-experienced individuals at the age of 19 (Ellis & Johnston, 2019). Numerous factors have been identified to explain this, with the most commonly cited including: educational disruption (Sebba et al., 2015) leading to lower attainment (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007; Stein, 1994); the stigma associated with being in care (Stein, 2012); disability and long-term health issues which are overrepresented in the care-experienced population (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2007); and mental health issues arising from childhood trauma (Centre for Social Justice [CSJ], 2019; Harrison, 2017).

The level of underrepresentation of care-experienced people in higher education has led to a growing body of national and international research on this group's access to, and engagement with this level of study (Bengtsson et al., 2018; Harrison, 2017; Jackson et al., 2005; McNamara et al., 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020; Zeira et al., 2019). This has resulted in positive developments in the support available for care-experienced students in higher education. Such developments have included the extension of financial and practical support from local authorities in England and Scotland (see Children and Young Persons Act 2008; Children and Young People Scotland Act 2014; DfE, 2013; Scottish Government, 2013), and a significant increase in the amount and types of support provided by higher education institutions (Harrison et al., 2021).

Currently though, developments in support have not been implemented to the same level for care-experienced *graduates*. This is unsurprising, as despite the increased research focus on higher education access for those with a background of care, this has not extended beyond graduation aside from initial quantitative insights on graduate destinations (see Baker et al., 2021; Harrison et al., 2022). This is particularly important as care-experienced graduates are likely to face unique challenges when transitioning out of higher education as a result of their care background, and overrepresentation across other groups with lower graduate outcomes (Baker et al., 2021). Therefore, an in-depth *qualitative* understanding of care-experienced students' transitions into graduate life is now needed. This can help establish whether participation in higher education is transformative for mitigating background disadvantages that care-experienced people have often encountered. It can also aid in identifying any changes to policy and practice needed to ensure that care-experienced students have transitions to graduate life that are comparable to their non-care-experienced peers.



The *Care-Experienced Graduates' Decision-Making, Choices and Destinations* project is the first to provide this qualitative attention to care-experienced students' graduate transitions. This three-year longitudinal project, funded by the British Academy, is currently doing this by:

1. Exploring the influences that inform care-experienced graduates' decision-making and choices about their graduate pathways and destinations;
2. Identifying what enables and constrains care-experienced graduates' transitions out of higher education and into employment and/or further study;
3. Exploring what role care-experienced graduates perceive their care histories as having in their choices and decisions, as well as how these contribute to any enablements and constraints they encounter.

To accomplish this, semi-structured interviews are conducted with care-experienced graduates at three-time points: during their final year in higher education (phase one), then at six (phase two), and 12 months (phase three) after graduation. Participants are also provided with access to a secure online diary to record their experiences of their transitions out of higher education and into graduate life over the duration of the study.

Phase one, which is the focus of the present report, has involved interviewing 23 care-experienced final-year undergraduate and taught postgraduate higher education students in England and Scotland. These have explored: students' initial and longer-term decisions, choices and plans for graduate life; any structural constraints or enablements they are facing, or expect to face, when transitioning out of higher education; what role their care experience has played in these; and any key concerns about their upcoming transitions out of higher education. Participants have also been documenting their thoughts, plans, choices and decision-making in their secure online diaries throughout this phase.

## Structure of the report

This report presents the key findings from phase one of the project. These are presented thematically to reflect the chronological order of the transition out of higher education. The report, therefore, opens with an account of the influences, enablements and constraints when care-experienced students are making plans for graduation, and closes with those related to their thoughts on transitions into employment and postgraduate study. Recommendations for policy and practice, which intend to eradicate constraints and increase enablements when care-experienced students transition out of higher education, are proposed in each section; these are informed by the experiences and thoughts voiced by final-year care-experienced higher education students.



## GRADUATE PLANS



Care-experienced final-year higher education students were at various stages in making their plans for graduation at the time of interview. Although they had decided on what they would like their ideal careers to include, several participants explained that there was often little suitable advice and guidance to aid them in planning their first steps towards these. Being able to have conversations about their plans while in higher education was identified as being incredibly important, with participants explaining that their care-experienced backgrounds meant that they did not have family networks to draw upon for this support. Having these conversations can therefore help care-experienced soon-to-be graduates feel more confident in what actions they need to take to embark on their chosen careers.

I think it's that kind of *uncertainty* that I didn't like as a child and then when we were in care, it was never like how long you were there *for*. It was always like 'oh, you're here' and it's like, okay that's really helpful, but for how long? 'Oh, we don't know'...so it's always been like 'actually let's have a plan. Let's know what we're doing. If that doesn't work, then there's another plan that we can work out'.

**(Hannah, 30, Education postgraduate)**

### Influences for plans

After graduation, many participants hoped to progress to careers where they could help others and improve systems. Similarly to existing research on care-experienced students in higher education (see Harrison et al., 2021; Stevenson et al., 2020), participants cited their histories of being in care as a key influence for their investment in altruism, and in making systems more equitable for others. Having stable employment was also cited as important; participants explained how the absence of stability in childhood meant that this was a priority for them in adulthood. The desire for stability and concerns about precarity also influenced some participants' patterns of planning, with them setting out several contingency plans in case specific options were closed off to them. In line with this, common career choices included those in the public sector such as social work, education, healthcare, counselling or coaching, and roles connected to social policy.

## Access to information, advice and guidance

When considering how to accomplish their career plans after graduation, around a quarter of participants explained that they were unsure of what their next steps should be. Participants cited an absence of advice and guidance around planning their next steps for employment and/or postgraduate study, and expressed that 'more conversations' should have happened within their course to support them with this. This was regarded as especially crucial due to their care backgrounds, with some participants explaining that they had limited personal social networks (such as parents or other family) to ask for advice.

I think especially as a result of the pandemic there should have been definitely more conversations and more support in place to talk to people who are coming up to graduation, but there's just not.

**(Lilly, 36, Healthcare undergraduate)**

The majority of those that had accessed their institutions' careers services had regretfully not found this useful for their circumstances. Reasons cited for this included it being more useful for younger students who had not had as much employment experience, and not being provided with *practical* support to locate employment, such as curriculum vitae and application guidance. A minority of participants who did receive such practical support via their institutions' careers services found this valuable.





One of the strongest enablements to graduate planning cited by participants was being able to discuss their plans with others who either 'knew them' (such as informal networks of friends and partners), or had insider knowledge about their chosen career path (such as professionals encountered on work placements or via mentoring schemes). Discussing plans with these networks helped participants to identify their strengths and personal qualities that would be well-suited to particular roles. This also provided them with a trusted sounding board to consider their plans. For those who spent time in work placements as part of their degree course (typically those on health, social work, and education-related degrees), or who had located a mentor in industry, they explained that this had afforded them an in-depth understanding of what their immediate next steps should be following graduation. Additionally, this also enabled them to develop their knowledge of career progression which helped them to formulate longer-term plans.

Other enablements for graduate planning included having practical advice for locating work and information on the applicability of their degree to different job roles embedded into their course. For instance, participants expressed that knowing how their course content was relevant for different sectors and roles, as well as being advised of where to look for jobs (such as specific websites), would be beneficial. Importantly, participants highlighted that this information and advice should be delivered before their final term/semester, and ideally before their final year to provide them with more time to plan. As will be discussed in the following section, many care-experienced students were not only having to consider their next steps in terms of graduate employment but were also required to simultaneously negotiate concerns over locating housing, affording the costs of living after graduating, as well as the loss of support from their higher education institutions and local authorities.



## Recommendations

### **1. Higher education institutions at the level of individual degree courses to:**

- 1.1 Embed information on the applicability of courses to different roles, sectors and career options into taught course content. This should ideally be delivered before the final year of the course to enable enough time for planning.
- 1.2 Include practical job search advice (such as the names of specific job search websites relevant to the field) within taught course content.

### **2. Higher education student support services to:**

- 2.1 Ensure that institution careers services offer independent practical support, advice and guidance on: Curriculum vitae writing; writing effective job applications; and interview skills. This should be advertised transparently across the institution.
- 2.2 Institution careers services should facilitate discussions to assist students in making multiple plans for after graduation, rather than focusing on just one pathway. This ensures the needs of those without family safety nets are acknowledged and supported in their graduate planning.
- 2.3 Offer central mentoring programmes or similar which facilitate links between students and professionals in their intended field of employment. This is particularly useful for those who are unable to pursue work placements as part of their degree course.

### **3. Local authorities to:**

- 3.1 Incorporate graduate planning into care-experienced higher education students' Pathway Plans. This should identify and provide the requisite information, advice and guidance to support care-experienced soon-to-be-graduates in understanding what their immediate next steps should be.
- 3.2 Discuss housing needs with care-experienced higher education students well in advance of graduation via a Personal Advisor or similar, either as part of Pathway Planning or separately.
- 3.3 Signpost those in higher education to their institutions' careers services in advance of their final year of study.

# TRANSITIONING OUT OF HIGHER EDUCATION



When thinking ahead to completing their higher education, care-experienced students anticipated a financially difficult transition period. The loss of support from their higher education institution, the removal or reduction in support from their local authority, and an absence of 'safety nets' to help them through financial hardship all contributed to these concerns. This, understandably, also led to anxieties over being able to access housing after graduation.

## Financial concerns

Financial hardship was the key concern voiced by participants as they approached the transition out of higher education. This was often mentioned in conjunction with the loss of local authority support arising from: ageing out of this; their local authority being under-resourced resulting in the reduction of, or complete ceasing of support; or not meeting the legal definition of 'care leaver'<sup>1</sup>. For care-experienced students who had been completely or mostly unsupported by their local authorities during their degree studies, higher education institutions had often 'plugged the gaps' with the offer of bursaries and accommodation support. Hence, graduating from higher education presented a 'care cliff edge' for a number of participants.

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<sup>1</sup> *Care leavers* refer to those who have either entered the care system at age 16 or 17, or are still in care at the age of 16 and have been in care for three months or more since the age of 14 (Harrison, 2017).



In addition to support from their higher education institution, or in cases where this financial support was not sufficient, the majority of participants worked alongside their studies to afford their living costs and to save for the immediate post-graduation period. Participants expressed that it was challenging to balance this with their studies, especially during their final year when the academic demands of their course had substantially increased. Yet, they explained that working alongside their studies was a necessity to afford their current living costs and to have a 'safety net' to cover expenses as they transitioned out of higher education. The importance of creating these financial safety nets for themselves was also exacerbated by the cost of living crisis<sup>2</sup>. There were therefore unavoidable tensions about balancing work and study which, in turn, led to heightened levels of stress as participants were completing their degree courses.

An effective enablement for supporting a smoother transition out of higher education identified by participants was a graduation bursary from their institution. This helped to reduce feelings of anxiety about affording housing and living costs for a short period of time following the end of their studies, enabling them to focus on their next steps. However, only a small minority of participants (three participants) attended institutions that provided this.

I've been so stressed with the cost of my bills rising to about 1400ish a month that I've barely done any valuable reading or anything valuable with my time! I've literally just laid in bed and panicked.

**(Jade, 21, Politics undergraduate)**

I have secured rent tenancy for an apartment in (city) for September 2022. However, my bills and rent are expected to increase by at least a third upon moving, and my income will fall by up to two-thirds. So I am stressed about that.

**(Martha, 22, Sociology undergraduate)**

## Access to housing

The impending loss of or absence of financial support was unsurprisingly intertwined with concerns over affording and locating housing in time for graduation. Unlike many of their non-care-experienced peers, care-experienced graduates are unlikely to have the opportunity to undergo 'boomerang' or 'yo yo' transitions where they return to live in the family home after graduation (Bengtsson et al., 2018). This means that there is often an absence of financial and housing safety nets in the form of a family home for care-experienced graduates, resulting in an increased risk of homelessness. Participants explained how they were facing a difficult 'graduation to employment' gap in terms of housing, where they required a place to live immediately after completing their studies but needed income from employment to afford this.



<sup>2</sup> The cost of living began increasing in the UK in 2021, with the annual rate of inflation reaching 9.9% in August 2022 – marking an almost 40-year high (see Francis-Devine et al., 2022).

As noted in the previous section, some participants had managed to build personal savings during their time in higher education. This, as one participant commented, prevented them from being homeless in the immediate post-graduation period: 'It will just keep me from being in a worst-case scenario – out on the streets' (Waide, 21, Healthcare undergraduate). Though, without an income, participants were concerned about the likelihood of private rental applications being accepted. Further compounding this issue was being unable to locate a guarantor to support their application for private rented housing, with many care-experienced students not having a family network to draw on for this. One participant recounted how upon approaching his local authority to request a guarantor, he was advised to ask 'family and friends'.

To improve access to privately rented housing in the post-graduation period, having flexible landlords was identified as important. One participant described how he found some landlords and smaller independent letting agencies to be more flexible, which enabled him to bypass the need for a guarantor. Understandably though, being required to find landlords and letting agencies who are willing to grant this level of flexibility is likely to restrict the pool of potential housing options.

Such issues were not experienced by a small minority (three participants) who resided in social housing. For the majority of participants preparing to transition out of higher education though, accessing social housing was viewed as a difficult process<sup>3</sup>. Those who had explored this option with their local authorities were advised that they would need to leave their university towns and cities, and return to their local authority area to be eligible. Participants expressed how this would be problematic for several reasons, including the loss of supportive communities they had built whilst at university, having to return to an area where 'all their trauma happened' (Austin, 20, Social Work undergraduate), and there being limited job opportunities in these locations.

Unsurprisingly, an enablement identified by one participant was increasing the availability of social housing to provide care-experienced graduates with more secure and affordable housing options than the private rental sector. Additionally, being able to still receive support from their local authority to assist with living costs when moving out of the area was also identified. For instance, one participant who resided in social housing within her local authority area where the cost of living was high felt constrained from moving to a more connected location as she would no longer receive a council tax waiver.

I've got no home, so I would have needed to be employed because I haven't got a house to go to. I kind of need a job to have a house.

**(Becky, 21, Law undergraduate)**

I then went to my local authority and was like 'can I have a guarantor? What do I do? Where do I get one?' And they said 'no, we can't provide you with one. You're just going to have to ask some family or friends' and I was a bit like...who do you think I'm going to ask?

**(Austin, 20, Social Work undergraduate)**

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3 Only those who met the legal definition of 'care leaver' were able to approach their local authorities to discuss social housing, as those regarded as 'care-experienced' are not typically eligible for local authority support.



## Recommendations

### 1. Higher education institutions at the level of individual degree courses to:

- 1.1 Ensure that coursework extensions are easily accessible to care-experienced students, with the recognition that undertaking employment alongside their degree studies is often a necessity, and not optional.

### 2. Higher education student support services to:

- 2.1 Provide graduation bursaries as part of their package of support for care-experienced students.
- 2.2 Extend university-owned student accommodation contracts into the immediate post-graduation period, and encourage student-friendly private-sector landlords to do the same.
- 2.3 Implement a guarantor scheme to enable care-experienced graduates to access private rented housing in the immediate post-graduation period.

### 3. Local authorities to:

- 3.1 Implement a more inclusive definition of 'care-experienced' rather than the more restrictive definition of 'care leaver' or 'looked after child' when defining eligibility criteria for support. This inclusive definition should be shared across all local authorities. Where resource levels would prevent this, local authorities should consider a process whereby *care-experienced* graduates are eligible to undergo an assessment for support.
- 3.2 Implement guarantor schemes as part of their standard offer to enable care-experienced graduates to access private rented housing in the immediate post-graduation period<sup>4</sup>.
- 3.3 Remove area restrictions in the provision of housing support (including social housing, support with rent payments, and council tax relief) to enable care-experienced graduates to relocate with reduced risk of homelessness and/or financial hardship. This will increase graduates' access to employment opportunities and will help them to maintain contact with their communities and support networks.

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4 A small number of local authorities have successfully implemented guarantor schemes (for example *Kent County Council* and *Teignbridge District Council*), but this is not consistent across the sector.

## ACCESSING EMPLOYMENT



As explained in the '*Access to information, advice, and guidance*' section of this report, around a quarter of participants were unsure of their next steps following graduation. This was a result of insufficient access to information, advice and guidance being identified by participants as a constraint to graduate planning. Unsurprisingly, this overlapped with the theme of 'accessing employment'. The need for more information on the applicability of participants' degree content to different job roles and career pathways was particularly relevant to this. Considering that participants voiced the need for stability following the instability many had experienced in childhood, an understanding of the different career pathways that can be accessed with their degrees is likely to be reassuring for care-experienced students.

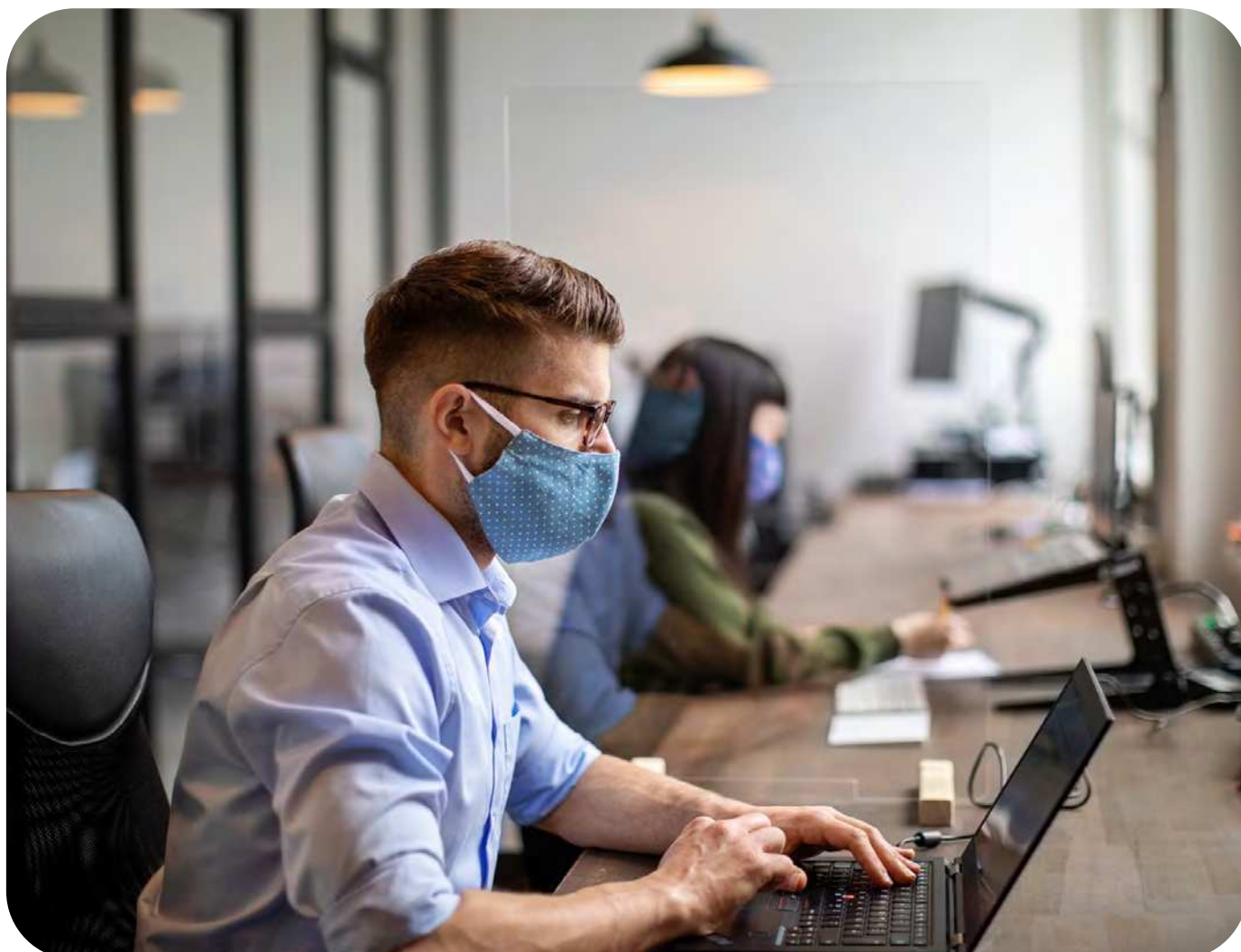
### Work placements and internships

The largest enablement identified by care-experienced students for accessing employment in this phase was the opportunity to undertake work placements on their degree courses. This not only provided opportunities for participants to receive valuable advice and guidance on career options from other professionals as discussed earlier, but also offered them the experience of working in professional environments in their field. Such experiences can provide an enhanced understanding of what aspects of these roles participants did or did not enjoy to help them formulate a more informed plan for their careers. Importantly, a small number of participants had been offered a role at their placements for when they graduated.

Similar benefits were also identified for paid summer internships provided by their higher education institutions. This simultaneously enabled participants to avoid the immediate 'graduate to employment' gap while also allowing them to gain professional experience in the already familiar higher education environment. Such opportunities were attractive to participants for these reasons. However, the timing of the start date for these roles could also act as a constraint, with those starting in line with the academic year (from September) being too late for care-experienced graduates to avoid the need to take on temporary 'stop gap' employment. This could potentially lead to inequalities in accessing these opportunities, with non-care-experienced students – who are more likely to have a family home to return to during such interim periods – being in a more secure position to apply. Coupled with previous experiences of instability in childhood and the anxiety that can arise from this, this immediate post-graduation period arguably holds a greater amount of risk for care-experienced graduates.

There's another job...it's for (graduates from my university), so I think I'm going to apply to that...The only problem is that you can't apply until September, and I'm going to need like a job and a house and rent and like all of those things by then, so I don't know if I'll be able to hold out long enough to wait to apply for that job.

**(Penelope, 21, Politics undergraduate)**



## Locating and accessing new opportunities

For participants who were aiming to find work outside of work placement opportunities and graduate internships offered by their higher education institutions, a minority were confident in being able to easily accomplish this. Such participants were studying degrees aligned with the public sector, such as social work and healthcare; they expressed how they were assured that the availability of roles in their field appeared to be plentiful. Those who intended to find work outside of these fields largely felt pressured to take 'any job' to meet their immediate living costs following graduation. As already discussed in the '*Access to information, advice, and guidance*' section, this was usually combined with the uncertainty of what employment options were available to them with their degree.

A small number of participants were also keen to become self-employed either soon after completion of their studies or in the longer term. They expressed that their motivations for this were having increased control over their work schedule, with one participant explaining that the absence of control over her life when she was in care made this particularly appealing to her. Others were keen to work independently, feeling that this suited them best. Additionally, one participant felt that the increased freedom and flexibility that self-employment would provide was needed to enable her to help more people: 'I want to be able to have the freedom and the independence to use the skills that I have to really help people at a different level' (Annabelle, 33, Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education). Some already had a history of self-employment prior to entering higher education and were therefore understanding of how to successfully pursue this. Those who had no experience had received support via their institutions which they had found valuable. Such forms of support included participating in mentoring schemes with businesses and attending relevant sessions offered by their institutions' careers services.

Even in such cases though, geographical constraints relating to the loss of support from local authorities should participants relocate, and the avoidance of specific locations due to birth family residing there were acknowledged by participants as playing a role in their access to employment. For some participants, such constraints were amplified by being unable to drive as they had previously not had the opportunity to learn due to circumstances arising from their care backgrounds. This, in turn, can limit the scope of employment opportunities that care-experienced graduates can access.



I hadn't been able to do some things because of where I've been and what I've been through. You know, I didn't, I didn't get stuff – I didn't learn to drive until last year, and passed my test last year.

(Michael, 32, IT undergraduate)



## Recommendations

### 1. Higher education institutions to:

- 1.1 Look to provide paid graduate internships with a start date in advance of the academic year.
- 1.2 Offer paid summer internships each academic year to provide opportunities for care-experienced students to formulate a plan for their future careers and next steps. An institution-wide effort should be made to offer these across multiple departments, faculties and teams to cater to different interests and career plans.
- 1.3 Provide extra consideration and guaranteed interviews to care-experienced applicants for such internships.

### 2. Higher education student support services to:

- 2.1 Offer workshops and/or programmes via the institution's careers service to provide information, advice and guidance on business start-ups and self-employment, as well as entrepreneurial skills development.
- 2.2 Ensure that opportunities are advertised to care-experienced students directly, ideally via a named contact/central point of contact.
- 2.3 Create an information resource for care-experienced students approaching graduation which includes signposting to relevant organisations that can offer support.

### 3. Local authorities to:

- 3.1 Offer a graduation bursary in addition to the Higher Education Bursary (England)/ Care Experienced Bursary (Scotland) to contribute to activities that promote access to a greater range of employment opportunities. This may include providing vouchers for driving lessons, travel grants to attend interviews or a place of work until graduates receive their first wage, or support to purchase essential items to facilitate job searching (such as a laptop).
- 3.2 Create a driving lessons scheme to support care-experienced people in obtaining a license. This, in turn, will help increase access to employment opportunities<sup>5</sup>.
- 3.3 Create and provide access to a repository of information to assist care-experienced graduates in accessing employment. This could include links to the Care Leaver Covenant opportunities pages<sup>6</sup>, charitable organisations that offer grants to help afford essential items<sup>7</sup> and employability-related schemes offered by charities<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Some local authorities are successfully running such schemes, including: *Barnet Council*, *Durham County Council* and *Lancashire County Council*.

<sup>6</sup> See [mycovenant.org.uk/for-care-leavers/care-leaver-opportunities/](https://mycovenant.org.uk/for-care-leavers/care-leaver-opportunities/)

<sup>7</sup> For example, the *Capstone Care Leavers Trust* (2022).

<sup>8</sup> For example, the *Rees Foundation's Careers Coaching* project.



#### **4. Employers to:**

- 4.1 Sign up to, and provide opportunities via the Care Leaver Covenant (England).
- 4.2 Provide opportunities that are relevant to higher education graduates (and offered at a commensurate starting salary) via the Covenant<sup>9</sup> (England).
- 4.3 Ensure that such opportunities offer progression routes, and the potential to move into a more permanent position from the initial role.

#### **5. The Department for Education (England) to:**

- 5.1 Encourage employers to provide graduate-level opportunities via the Care Leaver Covenant.
- 5.2 Extend the age limit for accessing employment opportunities, discounts and training via the Care Leaver Covenant beyond 25 in recognition that care-experienced people are more likely to attend (and therefore graduate) from higher education when older<sup>10</sup>.

#### **6. The Scottish Government to:**

- 6.1 Create a centralised space for employers to advertise job opportunities that are ring-fenced for care-experienced people in line with the Young Person's Guarantee<sup>11</sup>. This could be incorporated into the Young Person's Guarantee 'Opportunity Finder' web pages<sup>12</sup>.
- 6.2 Provide the necessary resources to enable Developing the Young Workforce<sup>13</sup> to deliver awareness training to employers on employing and supporting care-experienced people.

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9 Currently, the majority of paid opportunities advertised via the Care Leaver Covenant's opportunities pages are apprenticeships and positions suitable for non-graduates.

10 See Harrison (2020).

11 The Young Person's Guarantee was launched in 2020 to mitigate the labour market impact of Covid-19 on 16-to 24-year-olds in Scotland. This brings together existing programmes and policies which aim to help young people access employment opportunities (see Scottish Government, 2021).

12 See <https://opportunities.youngpersonsguarantee.scot/>

13 The Developing the Young Workforce programme began in 2014 to reduce the unemployment rate of Scotland's young people. See [www.dyw.scot/](http://www.dyw.scot/) for more information.

## BEING AN EMPLOYEE



Participants were still engaged in higher education during this phase and had therefore not entered graduate employment. This did not mean, however, that participants had no employment experience. As noted earlier, the majority of participants already held part-time work while completing their studies. Furthermore, those who had entered higher education as mature students had also been in employment prior to starting their studies<sup>14</sup>. Hence, employment demands and responsibilities were not new for most of the participants. Yet, many were thinking ahead to the realities of transitioning into *new* professional environments on a full-time basis.

### Fitting in with non-care-experienced people

When thinking ahead to accessing employment, one of the most commonly voiced concerns was around 'fitting in' with non-care-experienced people in professional environments. For instance, participants felt apprehensive that they may experience stigma, exclusion and negative judgements in the workplace. Some had already regretfully experienced this in their current and/or past employment when they had been open about their care identities; one participant reported that they were 'perceived not through the same lens as an ordinary person', 'excluded' and felt that they had to 'work twice as hard to get half the respect' (Jade, 21, Politics undergraduate). Others had listened to colleagues directly express negative perceptions of care-experienced people to them in the past: "Oh, you're a drain on society", "Your childhood has been paid by my taxes" (Annabelle, 33, Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education).

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<sup>14</sup> Typically service roles, social care, education, and self-employment (consultancy).

Even when participants had not encountered stigma, stereotypes, exclusion or negative judgements in employment, some recounted how they had experienced this before entering, and during their time in care. This had typically occurred in the education system, with teachers and other professionals having low expectations of them due to their care backgrounds. Occasionally, participants had been met with this in the home, with foster carers negatively judging aspects of their identity from their birth families, such as accents and appearance. Some participants also described how alienation and exclusion had played a role in the abuse they had endured before entering care. Several participants articulated a connection between these experiences and their concerns over stigma, exclusion, stereotypes and negative judgements in professional environments.



Contributing to concerns over fitting in with non-care-experienced people in employment were worries about how to interact with, and relate to, other professionals as a result of past experiences in care. As one participant explained, having professionals (such as social workers) involved in a caring capacity in her life as a child had led her to feel as though she did not 'match up' to, and that she was 'less than' other professionals in the workplace<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, those participants who had left care at a younger age felt as though they had gaps in 'life skills' including how to act and connect with others in professional environments, as these were not taught or modelled in childhood. These experiences led to feelings of self-doubt and low levels of confidence about fitting in with others in professional environments.

I've always felt hypersensitive to perceptions of me by other people that, to be fair, I think I can't help but carry to this day. Poverty Safari did an excellent chapter on the effects of abuse staying with you, of "hypervigilance becomes your default emotional setting... integrated fully into their personality, long after the threat of violence is gone".

**(Jade, 21, Politics undergraduate)**

<sup>15</sup> Similar statements have been echoed by care-experienced people in a small-scale research project undertaken by the Care-Experienced Young People's Network (2021).

## A less forgiving environment

Some participants also expressed worries about the professional working environment being 'less forgiving' than higher education in terms of support. This was mentioned most frequently when reflecting on long-term mental health conditions which were often associated with trauma from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Participants not only voiced concerns about being able to manage these conditions in employment, but also the perceived absence of safety nets in the workplace should they have a period of poor mental health. One potential enablement to help ease such concerns was related to practices that support good mental health in the workplace. This included flexibility around working hours and partial remote working, a change that the Covid-19 pandemic had made possible.

A further issue identified by participants was connected to the absence of safety nets if they discovered their employment was a bad fit, or if they wished to change careers. Hence, being 'stuck' in an unsuitable employment situation was a key concern. Understandably, this is unlikely to be exclusively experienced by care-experienced graduates. Though, as already noted previously in this report, the absence of family safety nets makes processes such as leaving unsuitable employment very risky.

You get so much like leeway with uni and you get sort of just protected, because like there's always someone there looking out for you...I feel like there's so much more expected of you (in work) that if you were to have like a bad time with your mental health or something, that you just – It feels like I don't know how I'm going to really cope in the world of work.

**(Penelope, 21, Politics undergraduate)**

I think as a care-experienced graduate or a care-experienced student, you can't just walk away. Because a lot of people will have financial support if they decide to do four years at uni and then change, or a lot of people will have support from their families if they decide to just seek alternative employment.

**(Carl, 23, Health Management postgraduate)**



## Recommendations

### 1. Employers to:

- 1.1 Treat care experience as a protected characteristic in dignity at work and anti-discrimination policies<sup>16</sup>.
- 1.2 Avoid making assumptions about someone's past experiences and/or ability based on the disclosure of care experience.
- 1.3 Create an open and supportive culture around mental health awareness and support.
- 1.4 Create Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) which include access to mental health support and services. These should include support and services suitable for long-term and complex mental health conditions, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- 1.5 Adopt trauma-informed approaches in workplace practices, policies and procedures. This will help in recognising, responding to and supporting those experiencing trauma as well as avoiding re-traumatisation<sup>17</sup>.
- 1.6 Embed autonomy and flexible working into day-to-day working practices to promote a healthy work-life balance, and help maintain good mental health.
- 1.7 Provide the option of a buddy and/or mentor who new members of staff can approach as an initial point of contact for questions and signposting. Such staff members should have a good understanding of workplace policies, processes, support (for example, via EAPs) and good mental health literacy.

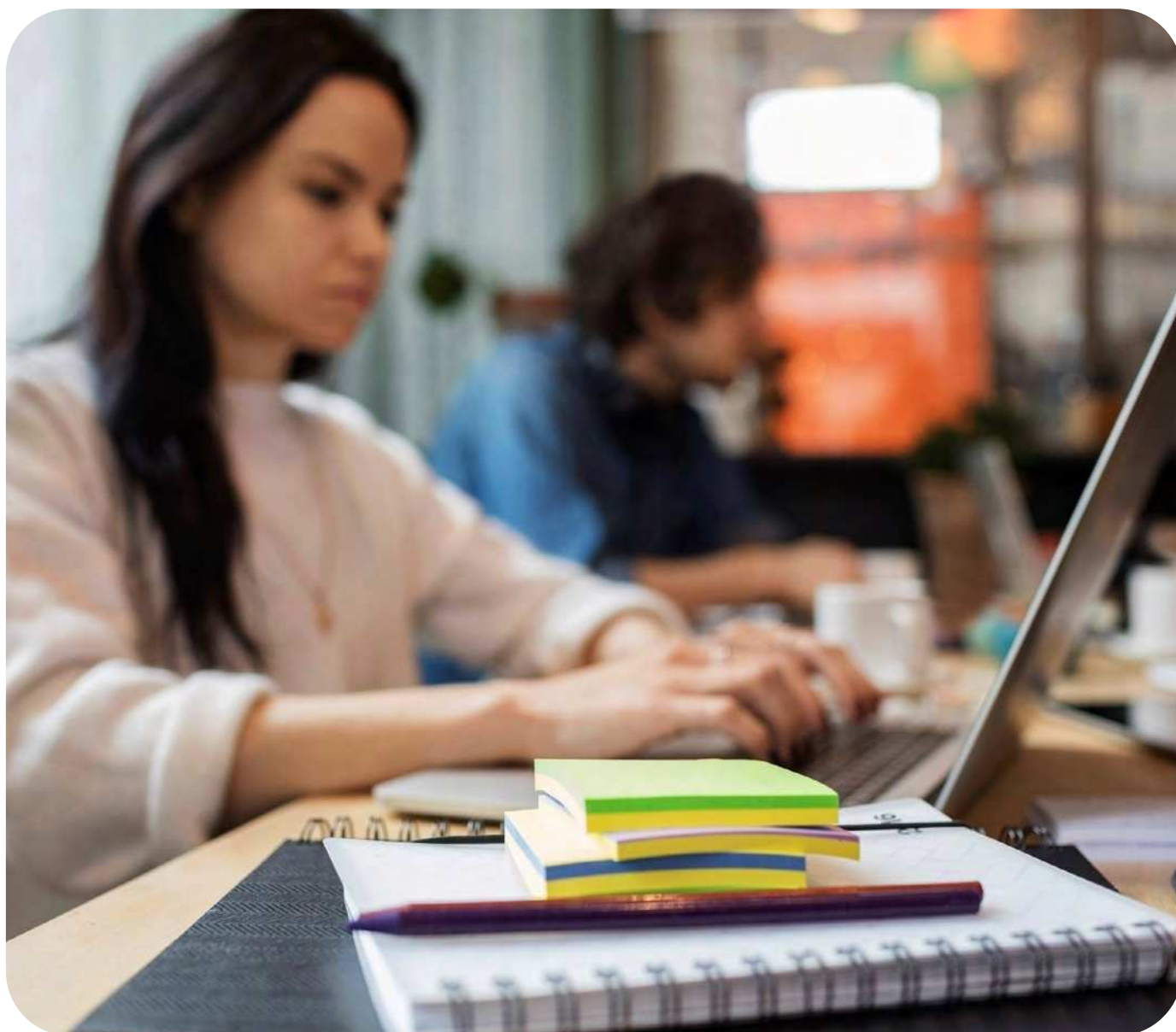
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<sup>16</sup> Recognising 'care-experience' as a legally protected characteristic under the Equality Act (2010) was one of the main recommendations put forward by The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (MacAlister, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> For more information on Trauma Informed Practices (TIP) in the workplace, see Choitz and Wagner (2021) and Positive Steps (2018).



## POSTGRADUATE STUDY



Recent quantitative research has found that care-experienced graduates are more likely to progress to postgraduate taught study in comparison to their non-care-experienced peers (see Baker et al., 2021). However, few participants (seven of the 19 undergraduate participants) in the present study planned to pursue this. For those who were actively making plans to undertake a taught postgraduate degree, their key motivations included: a postgraduate degree being necessary for their career plans (for example, a Postgraduate Certificate in Education to become a teacher, or a conversion degree); having more opportunities for career flexibility to avoid being 'stuck' in one field; and being intrinsically interested in their subject area. Yet, a larger number of participants who had considered and then rejected the possibility of progressing to a postgraduate degree cited financial constraints and the undergraduate support 'cliff edge' as their main reasons for this.

## The undergraduate support cliff edge

Those participants who had considered and then rejected potentially progressing to taught postgraduate study cited the loss of the support they received at the undergraduate level as a key factor in this decision. Participants explained how progressing to postgraduate study meant that financial support, the provision of academic and disability support, and access to a named contact from their higher education institutions would end. This was confirmed by one participant who had progressed to a postgraduate taught degree at her undergraduate institution, explaining that 'I get significantly less support for the postgrad than I did for my undergrad...(it) actually like made me *not* want to do my postgrad' (Jennifer, 24, Housing postgraduate).

For participants who were trying to assess if postgraduate study was financially feasible, most reported impending reductions in or complete removal of local authority support at the end of their undergraduate degree. Understandably, this led participants who had considered postgraduate study to conclude that this was financially out of reach for them in terms of living costs. While participants' main concern was paying for housing during postgraduate study, this was also exacerbated by the cost of living crisis<sup>18</sup>. Concerns over affording rent, bills and council tax were frequently reported.

## Stability as a pre-requisite

Those who were interested in obtaining a postgraduate degree but had decided against this due to the issues outlined above explained how stability (in terms of housing and their general living situation) was a necessary pre-requisite to pursue this level of study. Due to the undergraduate support cliff edge as well as the financial and housing instability arising from this, security and stability were viewed as needing to be created by some participants themselves before considering postgraduate study; participants explained how they intended to prioritise finding housing and employment to create a stable living situation before considering returning to higher education. Again, this sense of stability was required as a result of the absence of safety nets, such as a family home, that non-care-experienced graduates are more likely to have access to.

There's also the money side of it: Can I really afford to continue to do an MA? You wouldn't get the same level of support, like, financially.

(Penelope, 21, Politics undergraduate)

They (the local authority) said 'apply for scholarships. There's no more financial support now'. My easter holiday was the last holiday rent that they paid.

(Jade, 21, Politics undergraduate)

I sort of have a list of things that sort of each one needs to be sorted before I move on to the next one. So the first one is graduate uni, and then it's get a job...then it's pay off all my debts and be sort of financially stable there, and then masters would be next.

(Austin, 20, Social Work undergraduate)

<sup>18</sup> Concerns over affording housing during the cost of living crisis have also been cited by care-experienced people more widely (see National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, 2022).

## Supporting equal access to postgraduate study

Participants suggested that more availability of financial support at the postgraduate level would enable them to overcome the constraints associated with housing and other living costs. A continuation of financial support from higher education institutions and local authorities, as well as more availability of postgraduate scholarships to help cover living costs were suggested to make postgraduate taught degrees more accessible to care-experienced graduates. Some participants planned to undertake work-based taught postgraduate degrees in the near future funded by an employer to have financial stability during their studies. Understandably though, these opportunities are only available in specific fields, namely health care and social work, meaning that this option is not available to all.



## Recommendations

### 1. Higher education institutions to:

- 1.1 Collect data on care-experienced student status upon application to postgraduate programmes. This will help higher education institutions identify who to proactively offer a care-experienced support package to.
- 1.2 Ensure that Corporate Parenting strategies extend to the postgraduate level (Scotland).

### 2. Higher education support services to:

- 2.1 Offer a named contact for care-experienced students at the postgraduate level.
- 2.2 Create postgraduate scholarships for care-experienced students to assist with the cost of living.
- 2.3 Provide accommodation support to care-experienced postgraduate students that is comparable to the support offered at the undergraduate level.
- 2.4 Provide bursaries to care-experienced postgraduate students that are comparable to the support offered at the undergraduate level.
- 2.5 Provide access to disability support to care-experienced postgraduate students that is comparable to the support offered at the undergraduate level.
- 2.6 Relax age restrictions when devising eligibility criteria for the above support. This acknowledges that care-experienced students are more likely to commence their higher education studies when older<sup>19</sup>.

### 3. Local authorities to:

- 3.1 Extend summer bursary payments to cover the period between undergraduate degree completion, and the start of taught postgraduate studies.
- 3.2 Continue to support with living costs for postgraduate care-experienced students in a way that is comparable to that offered at the undergraduate level.
- 3.3 Relax age restrictions when devising eligibility criteria for the above support. Again, this recognises that care-experienced students are more likely to enter higher education when older.

### 4. Employers to:

- 4.1 Where applicable, offer sponsorship for postgraduate taught degrees alongside graduate roles. Such opportunities can be advertised to care-experienced graduates via the Care Leaver Covenant opportunity web pages.

### 5. Department for Education (England) to:

- 5.1 Reform the postgraduate funding system to provide support for living costs. This can be achieved through a combination of loans and grants, and awarded on a needs-assessed basis<sup>20</sup>.

### 6. The Scottish Government to:

- 6.1 Increase the amount of funding available from the Student Awards Agency for Scotland for postgraduate students' living costs<sup>21</sup>. Ideally, this should be offered as a combination of loans and grants; grants can be awarded on a needs-assessed basis.

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<sup>19</sup> See Harrison (2020).

<sup>20</sup> See Wakeling and Mateos-González (2021, p. 4).

<sup>21</sup> Currently, the Student Awards Agency for Scotland offer a living costs loan of up to £4500 to postgraduate students (Scottish Government, 2016).

## SUMMARY

This report has provided an overview of the key themes and findings identified during phase one of the *Care-Experienced Graduates' Decision-Making, Choices and Destinations* project. This phase of the project has explored final-year care-experienced higher education students': plans, decisions and choices for graduate life; the influences informing these; key concerns about their upcoming transition out of higher education; the structural enablements and constraints they have faced and expect to face during this transition; and what role their care-experience has played in these.

Care-experienced students' narratives of making their graduate plans, and their thoughts on transitioning to professional employment and/or postgraduate study, revealed several constraints arising from their backgrounds of care. These narratives also importantly revealed what has helped, or would help, to provide enablements to overcome or bypass these constraints. Close attention has been paid to the participants' accounts to formulate the recommendations for policy and practice proposed throughout this report. Collectively, these recommendations intend to eradicate constraints or, at the very least, provide opportunities for care-experienced graduates to overcome those they have faced, and anticipate facing, when transitioning out of higher education. In turn, the proposed changes to policy and practice hope to create more equitable transition experiences out of higher education for care-experienced graduates.



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