



Deposited via The University of Sheffield.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/240980/>

Version: Published Version

Article:

Ellis, K., Johnston, C. and Lewis, S. (2026) 'The door closes and that's it': experiences of leaving care and turning 18 in education. The British Journal of Social Work. bcag053.

ISSN: 0045-3102

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcag053>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

‘The Door Closes and That’s It’: Experiences of Leaving Care and Turning 18 in Education

Katie Ellis ^{1,*}, Claire Johnston ², and Shirley Lewis ¹

¹School of Allied Health Professions, Pharmacy, Nursing and Midwifery, University of Sheffield, 358-362 Mushroom Lane, Sheffield S10 2TS, UK

²Not currently affiliated to an institution

*Correspondence author. School of Allied Health Professions, Pharmacy, Nursing and Midwifery, The University of Sheffield, 358-362 Mushroom Lane, Sheffield, S10 2TS, UK. E-mail: k.ellis@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract

Leaving care marks an important change for young people. This article considers the journey from leaving local authority care to becoming a ‘care leaver’, using data from research with 234 care experienced university students. Although this cohort is celebrated as representing sector success, their narratives reveal that they struggled at key points, particularly around their eighteenth birthday. Participants noted that there were challenges in becoming a care leaver, namely, staying in or securing new accommodation, adjusting to new financial arrangements, changing relationships with social services and securing long-term support. These difficulties were often distressing and, for some, shortfalls in support led to significant upheavals, including homelessness. Entering university was felt to offer a reprieve due to more certain finances and predictable housing. Focusing on the pre-university period, this article highlights the ways in which systemic issues, including service cut-offs and financial hardship, impact on young people leaving care. Our findings suggest that support was often lacking and that educational success was often achieved *in spite of* the additional barriers that they faced as care leavers. The article concludes with recommendations aimed at improving care-leaving transitions to better protect and support young people’s continued educational journeys.

Keywords: leaving care; personal advisors; social workers; students; support; transitions to independence.

© The Author(s) 2026. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of
The British Association of Social Workers.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative
Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in
any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Accepted: March 2026

Introduction

Attending university can significantly increase job opportunities, improve earning potential and lead to improved health outcomes in adulthood (Liu et al. 2024). Yet, statistics from the Department for Education (2025) show that 13 percent of young people in care and care leavers progress to higher education compared to 46 percent of all young people. The government's commitment to widening participation, such as increasing the age young people are expected to remain in education or training to 18 (DfE 2024b), further supports these aspirations. Research confirms that although care-experienced students sometimes take nonlinear routes to university, they achieve similarly positive outcomes to other graduates (Harrison et al. 2022).

In a recent review in which considerations of 'success' were explored by academics and care-experienced consultants, it was suggested that whilst being in higher education is measured in government care leaver statistics, factors such as emotional well-being and support are not measured (Kelly et al. 2025). Hence, transitioning from care to university highlights only one pathway available to young people leaving care. On 31 March 2024, there were 83,630 children and young people living in state care in England, 27 percent of whom were aged 16 and over (DfE 2024a). There were 33,620 children who left care during the year ending 31 March 2024; 39 percent of those changed status from 'Looked after Child' to 'care leaver' when they turned 18, 16 percent remained with *their current* carers and 13 percent moved into supported independent living (DfE 2024a). Although local authorities are expected to prepare children and young people to live independently, research has shown that young people feel unsupported when making this transition (Dixon et al. 2006; Stein 2012; Woodgate et al. 2017; Cameron et al. 2018; Ellis and Johnston 2020; Field et al. 2021).

Research reports that typically, young people are staying with their families for longer and receiving increased financial support (Hill et al. 2017; Kalmijn 2024). For those living away from their families and without familial support, housing conditions are precarious and further complicated by the lack of opportunities for secure employment, work contracts and wages (Bell and Blanchflower 2013; Ellison 2017). Research indicates that those with care experience are also likely to encounter difficulties with their mental health (Baker et al. 2019; Roberts et al. 2021). A survey of 1,804 care leavers found that about a quarter had low wellbeing compared to 3 percent of the general population (McGrane et al. 2024). The same study reported that loneliness and a lack of trusted relationships or

friendships contributed to low wellbeing. Against this background, the 'cliff edge' experienced by young people transitioning from care is even more stark (Field et al. 2021), potentially denying important liminal space between childhood and adulthood, in which mistakes can be made, and independent living skills can be practiced (Glynn 2021).

Leaving care is complex; while a young person's care order ends at the age of 18, some will leave care at 16 or 17. Research suggests that some young people feel rushed into leaving care (Ofsted 2022), often due to a lack of suitable accommodation (Ellis and Johnston 2020). The transition to adulthood is planned for children in care and care leavers through the Pathway Plan which is undertaken when they turn 16 (The Children Act 1989: V3). Whilst the number of young people staying with their carers after they turn 18 is increasing, there remains a significant number of young people who leave care under the age of 18. In the year ending 31st March 2024, 7 percent of seventeen-year-old care leavers were living in accommodation considered unsuitable and the living circumstances of 28 percent of seventeen-year-old care leavers was unknown (DfE 2024a). Becoming a care leaver before the age of 18, or upon turning 18, means that significant changes occur in a young person's care plan. At this point, local authorities are no longer required to provide a social worker to support young people's care plans, but instead must assign a leaving care 'personal advisor'. Personal advisors provide advice and support, revise Pathway Plans when necessary, support young people to attend services and stay informed of young people's progress and wellbeing (DfE 2025).

'Staying Put' arrangements were brought in by the DfE in 2014 with a view to alleviating the 'care cliff' for those in foster care. A staying put arrangement refers to a situation in which a young person aged 16 or 17 who has been 'looked after' for a total of at least thirteen weeks since the age of 14, is able to stay living with their foster carer (where both the carer and young person agree). Those taking part in the Staying Put scheme are still considered 'care leavers' but the legal nature of the relationship with the foster carer changes. In staying put arrangements the carer becomes a 'former foster carer' whose home the young person is still living in. Alongside this change in status, foster carers also experience a drop in income. Staying put may reduce the risk of homelessness for care leavers (Picker et al. 2024) and those who 'stay put' are significantly more likely to be in full-time education at the age of 19 than those who do not take part in the scheme (Van Breda et al. 2020). Yet staying put is not available to all young people and favours those with less complex histories (Van Breda et al. 2020), has been inadequately funded by central government, and can be further compromised by the drop in income experienced by foster carers (Picker et al. 2024), as our research emphasizes.

International comparisons of care leaver outcomes are fundamentally complex due to a lack of global consensus around what constitutes a 'care leaver', largely because countries have different welfare systems and

different understandings about transitions to adulthood (Strahl *et al.* 2021). A survey of thirty-six countries found that only 47 percent had legislation related to support for care leavers, and only 22 percent had legislation that was well-developed for care leavers (Strahl *et al.* 2021). The survey found disparity between the legal provisions for support and the level of practical support offered, with 75 percent of countries offering some form of education and employment support to care leavers (Strahl *et al.* 2021). However, almost all countries surveyed were in agreement that employment, followed by education, housing and poverty were the biggest challenges faced by care leavers. Studies in Australia (McNamara *et al.* 2019) and Finland and Germany (Cameron *et al.* 2018) reported that care leavers are less likely to go on to higher education than their peers. An Austrian study demonstrated that lack of educational achievement can also be compounded by low expectations of care leavers held by professionals, despite care leavers being motivated and capable of accessing higher education (Groinig and Sting 2019). Whilst this article focuses on those leaving care in England and Wales, research from international scholars suggests that these findings are applicable to young people leaving care globally.

This article shares findings from research conducted with care-experienced students about their transitions to university from care. Research shows that transitioning to university can be challenging for all students, causing anxiety, stress and loneliness due to accommodation concerns, relationship transitions and academic challenges (Hughes and Smail 2014). Yet, research shows that parental support can help students to successfully negotiate and overcome challenges (Benito-Gomez *et al.* 2022). This article considers the experiences of those transitioning to university from care to highlight the barriers and enablers that these educationally high-achieving young people experienced in their leaving care journey. Through this exploration, we make a critical contribution to address significant gaps in research regarding the lived experiences and support needs of care-experienced young adults accessing higher education. In doing so, we highlight important gaps in support that must be addressed to help more young people to access higher education in the future.

Methods

This article shares select findings from the Leverhulme-funded research project 'Pathways to University from Care'. The project was supported by a steering group of three care-experienced students, who were employed by the University of Sheffield as researchers and provided insight and advice on all stages of method design, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Ongoing engagement with our steering group enabled continual

reflection within the research process, ensuring that the research and its outputs emphasized the voices of those with care experience.

Throughout the project we used the term 'care experienced' to refer to those who have spent any length of time in care as a child, with the intention of including the experiences of those who fall outside of the statutory definition of 'care leaver'. [The Children \(Leaving Care\) Act \(2000\)](#) defines a 'care leaver' as someone who has spent thirteen weeks or more in care, covering the period of their sixteenth birthday. The term 'care experienced' is widely recognized as a more inclusive term ([Hugman et al. 2019](#)).

The Pathways study comprises data from 234 care-experienced students in universities across England and Wales. Data were collected via in-depth qualitative interviews with 42 students from four universities and qualitative survey responses from a further 192 students from 29 universities. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection from the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee.

In the first phase, we conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with forty-two care-experienced students to explore their experiences of being in care and subsequent transitions to university life. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 26, three were studying for foundation level degrees, thirty-eight were studying at an undergraduate level, and one was studying for a postgraduate qualification. We interviewed 26 female and 16 male students and most ($n = 29$) indicated that foster care had been the main form of care placement they had experienced, though five had been primarily in kinship care, five primarily in residential care, and three had been adopted. We used an appreciative inquiry method of interviewing to explore the complexity and diversity of experiences by investigating positive aspects of their experiences ([Liebling et al. 1999](#)). Since the research explored sensitive issues, we sought to work alongside participants, focusing on their strengths and positive experiences, thus providing an important contrast to existing narratives in this area. Students were invited to take part in the research via their university's widening participation team. Students who opted into the study and contacted the research team were sent an information sheet, consent form and interview invitation. Participants were assured that taking part was voluntary, and that they could withdraw freely prior to data analysis, without explanation or judgement.

Audio interview files were transcribed and anonymized before being uploaded to NVivo for analysis. Findings were initially coded deductively according to the themes explored in interviews, for instance, 'going into care', 'placement changes', 'leaving care', and 'practitioner relationships'. Each of the codes generated was then subjected to further manual thematic analysis, producing a series of sub-themes; for example, the code 'practitioner relationships' contained sub-themes such as 'supportive relationships', 'difficult relationships', and 'bureaucratic process'.

In the second phase, data were collected from a larger sample of care-experienced students through an online qualitative survey, designed to ask students about their experiences of university support. The survey was shared via Widening Participation teams at twenty-nine universities across England and Wales. One hundred and ninety-two students responded and confirmed their consent by ticking a box at the beginning of the survey. Over two-thirds of survey respondents were female (71 percent). Over 80 percent were undergraduate students, 13 percent were undertaking a foundation year, and 4 percent were studying at a postgraduate level. Sixty-three percent of our sample were aged between 18 and 21, 30 percent were aged 22–25, and 7 percent were aged over 26.

The survey generated qualitative data, collected via free-text boxes, which were subject to deductive thematic analysis using the codes generated during phase one. Closed-ended questions were used to gather basic demographic information and descriptive data around arriving at university and university supports. Students were not asked to share sensitive information in the survey.

Findings in this article are based on qualitative interview data and supplemented by basic background information collected via the survey. Findings have been compiled from data analysed under the themes of ‘leaving care’ and ‘practitioner relationships’, focusing on participants’ experiences of the transition from care. Other outputs describe findings relating to participants’ early educational experiences (Ellis and Johnston 2024) and experiences of transition and settling into university life (Ellis and Johnston 2024). All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity. This article explores three themes relating to leaving care, which were discussed during in-depth interviews: changing financial support, changing relational support and the importance of informal support networks. Whilst participants varied in age, this article focuses specifically on their reflections of leaving care and transitioning to independence between the ages of 16–19.

Becoming a ‘care leaver’: changes in status and financial support

It has been documented that care-experienced students sometimes take nonlinear routes to university (Harrison 2020) and in line with this, some of our sample left care several years before becoming a student. In this section we share participants’ reflections of leaving care, their changing relationships with professionals and the financial implications of transitioning to independence.

In common with most young people leaving care, participants experienced different routes to becoming a ‘care leaver’. Some participants had lived independently or semi-independently from the age of sixteen, some remained in care until their eighteenth birthday and others stayed with

their current carers under 'staying put' arrangements. Despite these differences, one of the main changes that young people experienced upon becoming a 'care leaver' was a significant drop in their finances. Those participants who lived in independent or semi-independent contexts from the age of sixteen expressed a sense of regret at having to 'grow up' at a young age, and a need to manage alone, as they received little financial support and limited contact from key services.

I did like the children's home, I didn't want to leave til I were 18. I did think 'oh it's time to grow up now' ... I had my own house, it felt good in that way but then I think you're a bit gutted as well because you are leaving your home—that's what it is—your home, behind. (Jayne)

For those who remained in care until their eighteenth birthday, the transition from care was approached with similar trepidation. Although many teenagers look forward to their eighteenth birthday as a cultural milestone, for a significant number of our participants turning 18 became a source of anxiety. In common with several participants, Ada highlighted reductions in financial support as a particular area of concern:

I think once you're 18, the support drops a whole lot, drastically, then it's like 'oh wow, you're an adult now, you've got to figure it out' (Ada)

Having a birthday earlier in the academic year was considered a disadvantage and meant that support would reduce whilst participants were at school or college, still working towards their A-levels:

I turned 18 in October whereas some people might not turn eighteen till the following July, so they'll get that support until their birthday. (Charlotte)

For Charlotte, turning 18 meant that her foster carers received less financial assistance to support her, which in turn meant that she had to apply for welfare benefits between leaving college and starting university. For others, like Jayne, reductions in finance meant that the benefit of attending school or college was measured against its cost in immediate financial terms:

[Transport] was like £4 a day ... if I knew college weren't going to be productive that day ... I'd rather save £4. (Jayne)

Having to make a choice about whether to attend college could have a significant impact on young peoples' educational outcomes and life chances. This could be particularly challenging for those participants who lived independently, who experienced a significant drop in the financial support they had previously received as a 'looked after' child. There was an expectation that they should become more financially self-sufficient. Working to cover monetary shortfalls during school or college courses was reported as incredibly stressful:

I had to leave [work] because it was too stressful ... they were basically pushing me to do full time, during doing full time college, like ten hour shifts. It was horrendous (Dawn)

The UK government now requires all sixteen to eighteen year olds to be in some form of education or training. Yet, managing this is difficult for care leavers who are living independently and expected to manage their own finances. Participants who remained with their current carers under the 'staying put' scheme were not immune from financial struggles and reported that they were often expected to make up for financial shortfalls experienced by foster carers when transitioning to 'staying put' arrangements. Participants accounted for these shortfalls by working or claiming welfare benefits:

When you turn 18, your support stops ... they was like 'yeah, but we're not getting paid for you now ... I had to pay them money. (Ben)

Financial shortfalls were experienced by several of our participants as being detrimental to the relationships that they built with their carers. Difficult conversations surrounding changes in financial support were felt to highlight the transactional nature of care, which could be challenging to come to terms with. Charlotte describes the detrimental impact that these financial changes had on her confidence:

At first, I was kind of like, 'if you care about me so much you wouldn't make me claim Jobseeker's', but obviously I know it's not their fault. If they're not getting money for you then they've got no money to give you ... at the time I felt really worthless. (Charlotte)

Conversely, for Chaman, her experiences of 'staying put' confirmed her suspicions that her foster carers were financially motivated in their care for her. This reflected the view of many participants who saw their care as contingent and commodified, rather than unconditional:

They'd been very sugar and sweet right up until I turned 18 and then they just didn't give a crap ... they were in it for the money. I guess it was a learning curve for me as well so it kind of pushed me to be more independent. (Chaman)

For those not able to stay with foster carers, securing alternative housing could be challenging. A minority of interview participants reported that they had become homeless while seeking to make the transition from being in care to becoming a care leaver:

They pass you from one person to another ... I was homeless for a few days ... I didn't have a hostel ... I didn't literally have anywhere to stay ... I didn't have many friends ... I went to the Job Centre and ... they just give you a number ... no one really cared that much. (Gulru)

Despite the challenges highlighted above, there were instances of best practice, where appropriate support was given in key moments. For

instance, Peter demonstrates the value of pathway planning and shares how it later aided him in accessing financial support, through maintaining institutional memory:

I rang up social services to ask about a guarantor and that's when they were like 'oh we'll reopen your case and we'll help you'... they pay my rent now. (Peter)

This section highlighted the different financial challenges faced by young people transitioning from care whilst in education. Our data show that despite utilizing different pathways for leaving care, young people faced similar barriers in securing financial security to enable them to prioritize their education and to transition smoothly between further and higher education. Similar issues were faced by those living independently as well as those remaining with their foster carers. Participants also noted challenges in accessing emotional support, which we discuss in the following sections.

Relationship transitions: from social workers to personal advisors

The journey to becoming a care leaver signalled significant transitions in participants' relationships with their local authorities, as their support was handed over from social workers to personal advisors. Emotional and practical support was variable within and between local authorities, with service received dependent on the individuals responsible for delivering care and the structural aspects which determined caseloads, allocations and staff movements. Some participants recounted positive experiences of social work relationships that supported them as a child in care before they transitioned to becoming a care leaver:

I've had quite a positive experience of the care system ... I saw all the good they were doing with me ... they've helped me get to a place I never thought I would be in. (Gabriella)

Other participants reported that the support they received in care was less positive, suggesting that not all professionals offered the same level of care:

There was one and she was like an angel ... she was awesome, she actually tried really hard and genuinely cared about us. The others I just don't think really gave a shit, I think they kind of just done what they were told to do by their superiors and nothing more. (Arlo)

While support experienced as a child in care was variable, there was a marked negative change in the support offered by local authorities as young people were transitioned into becoming a 'care leaver'. Some participants expressed confusion about what support was available after turning 18:

I've got my social worker, my leaving care worker or whatever they call it. I don't know ... you can speak to them until you're 25 but they don't fund you after 21. (David)

Participants who left care at 16 also described receiving less practical and emotional support from social care professionals. Kamran recalls living with others who were clearly struggling but were not offered appropriate support:

When I was 16 I used to get one call [per month] from social services [asking] how I am. I was living in a shared accommodation house with four of us in the same position. I'm sure some of them were not coping ... like the[ir] room is dirty, for example or [they] don't have food ... when I was 16 I realised I should not ever rely on them. (Kamran)

As the age in which people leave home is rising (Pereira 2024), findings that participants as young as 16 were struggling to manage independent living alongside full-time education were disappointing. Furthermore, relationships with professionals in leaving care services were described less positively than their previous social workers and participants reported receiving minimal support from their local authorities. Participants described these interactions as performative or lacking care:

They said that if something goes wrong you can call us ... you just never would, because you know it would take them four months to get back to you. (Julia)

Participants described the process of switching from being supported by a social worker to being supported by a personal advisor as confusing and poorly managed. Some felt sharply cut off from relationships that they had come to rely on:

The second I got to university, [they said] 'don't ring your social worker no more, don't ring your care worker no more, don't ring none of them no more'. That was it, I've not heard from them since. (Marcus)

Participants reported experiencing huge transitions in early adulthood, such as moving house, leaving carers behind and becoming financially independent. Due to this, the leaving care period was felt to be the time that support was *most* necessary. Yet some participants described feeling 'abandoned' when support was withdrawn. Furthermore, the personal advisor relationship was different to a social work relationship and care leavers did not feel adequately prepared for this change. For those young people who have experienced trauma, feelings of abandonment may be heightened (McCormack and Issaakidis 2018), this was reflected in our findings:

The social worker leaves when you're 18, so the PA is there for those three years after when it's all really crucial and the social worker's

abandoned you ... they'll help you go to the Job Centre, sort out benefits, set up bank accounts and different things like that. (Jill)

Although local authorities and social workers had played a key part in young people's pathways to university, at the point of turning 18, young people often felt like they were dropped suddenly. At the point of transitioning to leaving care services many felt unsupported, these feelings were exacerbated by the transient workforce that made their 'leaving care' support patchy and inconsistent:

Well, they [Personal Advisor] changed loads, like four, five times. The one I've got at the moment, she's OK. I've met her once, but I guess I'll never meet her again. (David)

Participants described being reluctant to spend time investing in relationships with their personal advisors when they did not know if they would meet the same one again in the future. Some participants were sceptical about the use of personal advisors, and saw the transition to personal advisor support as indicative of an overstretched service:

[Personal advisors] are not qualified social workers ... they'll get rid of [them] soon ... it's all to do with cuts ... you're not going to get a good service. (Ben)

Others felt that personal advisors were not appropriately trained and were left inadequately equipped to do the job they were given:

I was seen by two on-call personal advisers, they both said different things. (Kiran)

As with previous care relationships, the level of support received seemed to depend on the luck of the draw. A minority of participants felt that their personal advisor offered them an important lifeline, above and beyond what was expected:

My personal advisor has been the only person I know that I can speak to about anything without judgement. She fights my corner in every matter ... she deals with the financial side of things ... even though that is someone else's job ... I don't think I would have went to university if it wasn't for her. (Heather)

For those participants who felt that they did get a good service from their personal advisor, this support was invaluable and a stark contrast to the feelings of abandonment reported by others:

We'll go and have lunch and we'll have a lovely time. I see her eight weekly and when I see her, we're discussing how uni's going, what I need to do, we do my pathway plan, we're sorting out me getting a work experience and we're working towards an end goal that is eventually going to get me where I need to go. She also tells me off if I've not done something. She's the only

one that's actually felt like a corporate parent. Forget the corporate ... she's the first person I call. (Jill)

Nonetheless, changing social work relationships could mean that promises made under previous care plans were unfulfilled, as practitioners that had worked with participants previously had changed and were now no longer in contact, meaning that institutional memory was lost. Michael gave an example of this:

The council said that they'd pay my fees. Then when it came to that day, it was 'Oh no I never said that'. (Charlotte)

Participants who felt unsupported by their personal advisor found support in more informal relationships, which the next section explores.

Informal influences

Informal support was rated highly and appreciated by participants. It was common for participants to report that they had fallen out of touch with foster carers, social workers and others who had provided care and support during their childhood. In fact, 41 percent of those who took part in our survey reported that by the time they were at university, they were no longer in touch with any of their carers. Sometimes this was by choice, with participants feeling the relationship had run its course, or that they wanted a fresh start. However, for some, ties were cut by others. In these cases, the impact of losing contact could be devastating for feelings of wellbeing and stability:

You have all these people in your life, you get attachments, and then ... you can't have nowt to do with them again so it's like grief ... another person who's just going to go. (Jayne)

Some participants maintained strong relationships with previous carers even after leaving care. For these participants, foster carers went above and beyond what was expected of them in times of need, even after their official duty of care had ended:

If it hadn't been for that foster carer, I'd have been on the streets ... she said 'you get on a train and you come to me and we'll sort you out'. (Jill)

For participants who were unable to develop meaningful long-term relationships within the care system, informal support could be invaluable:

[My friend's mum] just fully supported me ... there was no obligation at all for her to look after me, or even care ... she were going out of her way to help me. (Harry)

These informal relationships could offer an important lifeline when young people were experiencing distress. While not everyone had informal

networks that they could draw on, those who did appreciated the huge difference that they made:

I was living out of halls at £111, plus gas and electric a week, so stupid ... I ended up crying to my boyfriend's parents and I was like, 'I just can't do this anymore; it's really stressing me out' ... They were like, 'You're coming to live with us'. (Lydia)

In these cases, informal support networks acted as a replacement for the formal leaving care services that young people are entitled to. However, as participants recognized, this did not always detract from the need for support from the local authority:

I live with my boyfriend's family and they're very supportive ... but, the way you kind of transition out of care, if that's the right way to put it, I don't think that's as helpful as it could be ... I wish there was just a bit more support. (Willow)

This section has shown the importance of informal connections from friends and previous foster carers. Nearly half of participants were not able to maintain relationships with previous foster carers, but for those that did, these relationships were an important lifeline during times of difficulty.

Discussion

This article explored the perspectives of young people who successfully transitioned from care to higher education, showing that participants succeeded in circumstances where they often felt unsupported, both emotionally and financially. It is important to reiterate that our findings highlight the barriers faced by those who are celebrated by care services as having 'made it'. Through highlighting these barriers, our findings help to illuminate why fewer care-experienced adults go on to higher education than their non-care-experienced peers, despite research suggesting that those who do attend achieve similar outcomes to other graduates (Groinig and Sting 2019; Harrison et al. 2022).

Findings align with wider research that notes that poverty is a challenge faced by care leavers internationally (Strahl et al. 2021; Palmer et al. 2022; O'Kane and Brady 2025). Whilst the positive examples of individual support from carers, social workers, and personal advisors are not to be minimized, our overarching findings were of a system in which care leavers felt unsupported financially, practically and emotionally. As noted by others (Adley and Jupp 2017; Bengtsson et al. 2020), young people's experiences of 'in care' and 'leaving care' support varied drastically. Kamran notes, 'if you get a good person, you're sorted' and this seems to be repeated across all our data. It is the individuals working to deliver services that have the most impact on the lives and experiences of young people in

care. While this has been noted elsewhere (Winter 2009; Gaskell 2010), we can see that despite the challenges facing professionals and services, a certain few are able to inspire the confidence of those that they are working to support. While we applaud the work of these professionals, we do so with the caveat that support for children in state care should not be dependent on the personal motivations of professionals who are able to deliver above and beyond what is expected of them by their employer.

The absence of long-term formal support was felt keenly by participants, who were well engaged in full-time education and committed to their goal of attending university. Lack of formal social service support was in part due to transitions when changing from being supported by a social worker to receiving support from a leaving care personal advisor. Participants lacked clarity about where support could be accessed and noted an overall lack of dissatisfaction about the levels of support provided. Despite expectation from the DfE to remain in full-time education until the age of 18, it was clear from participant narratives that the cliff edge of care is still felt very strongly. Indeed, findings illustrated that participants sometimes turned 18 before completing necessary qualifications to attend university. Those in our sample were fortunate that they could either stay with foster carers or receive unofficial support from their personal networks. Yet, a minority revealed that they experienced homelessness in the transition between leaving care and going to university. Despite the implementation of 'Staying Put' seeking to bridge this gap (Picker *et al.* 2024), our findings illustrate the use of personal networks which may account for some of the young people who are living in situations which are reported as being 'unknown' (DfE 2024a).

The need to enhance the support networks of children in care and care leavers has been highlighted by Lifelong Links, the Family Rights Group initiative that aims to re-engage supportive networks whilst children are still in care, and for that support to continue into adulthood (Porter and Fowler 2024). Indeed, when other support was perceived to be lacking, participants turned to informal support networks such as their former foster carers, and friends' family. Whilst helping care leavers to develop their own informal support networks is important, it does not negate the need for formal support. While assistance offered by external networks could be life changing, it was often also offered on conditional terms that coincided with participants' own relationships with friends and partners their own age. For example, Lydia was invited to live with her boyfriend in his family home. While support was appreciated, we caution that such support also renders young people vulnerable and potentially bound to relationships that they may not wish to continue (Coy 2009; Ellis 2019). Therefore, as well as being supported informally, young people transitioning from care must also have access to more formal and unconditional channels of support. Indeed, research shows that those who struggle most

when leaving care are those who also have gaps in formal support during their transition to becoming a 'care leaver' (Prendergast et al. 2024).

Participants who reported positive relationships with social workers and personal advisors highly valued those relationships and the support that they received. However, positive relationships with practitioners can only go so far and it is vital that policy and legislation are robust to ensure that professionals are adequately equipped to provide appropriate resources (Strahl et al. 2021). As corporate parents, the state has a duty of care to children in care and care leavers. Researchers have remarked on perceived gaps in leaving care provision over many years (Aldgate 1994; Gaskell 2010; Adley and Jupp Kina 2017; Field et al. 2021) and yet similar struggles are still being reported by young people leaving care. Whilst our sample is made up of those who attended higher education, it is highly plausible that other young people facing these challenges struggled to achieve their education goals due to lack of support. These findings are in direct contrast to government aims of ensuring that all young people remain in some form of education or training until the age of 18 (Education and Skills Act 2008), and the statutory duty for different parts of the local authority to work together to support care leavers to remain in education or training (DfE 2024b). It is important to note that our participants were university students and that as a cohort, they are often considered to represent sector success, yet despite this, these participants describe difficult transitions through education, which are exacerbated by financial loopholes and changing expectations.

To address these challenges, local authorities must provide greater clarity and support to help young people understand changes in finances and supporting relationships during key transitions. While these conversations are supposed to happen already, participant responses suggest that information is not provided in a meaningful way that is properly understood by young people. There is a stigma around claiming welfare benefits (Baumberg 2016) and this undoubtedly adversely affected those who were encouraged to claim them while still in full-time education. Furthermore, being asked to contribute to household expenses or to access benefits highlighted the perceived transactional nature of state care. To mitigate this, we generated a series of recommendations for local authorities, to aid transitions from care (Ellis and Johnston 2020) and called on social workers and personal advisors to work with young people to support transitions, making clear *why* financial changes occur and helping young people to secure finance through appropriate channels. Although going to university is celebrated as being a 'successful' outcome for those leaving care, we caution that there are many ways to measure success that do not result in higher education (Kelly et al. 2025). So, whilst going to university should not be the only way that we consider success, for those who aspire to go, it is important there is appropriate support to facilitate this transition.

Conclusions

This article highlights the achievements of care-experienced university students, exploring the barriers and enablers that impacted them on their transition to higher education. The study explored the views of care-experienced students through qualitative interviews and an online survey. Our findings illustrate that whilst some young people reported good relationships with personal advisors and smooth transitions to university, for most, transitions were extremely difficult due to reductions in the levels of financial and emotional support that they received from carers and their local authority. Young people who left care before the age of 18 reported challenges in continuing their education, whilst balancing work or benefits. Those who remained in 'staying put' placements felt inadequately prepared for the associated changes to their finances and the subsequent impact that this might have on their relationships with carers. These findings therefore illustrate some of the barriers that impact care leavers, who otherwise may be motivated to go on to higher education (Groinig and Sting 2019). While creating significant distress to young people preparing to leave care, these issues could be readily overcome through close collaborations between social workers, foster carers and personal advisors, working together with young people to facilitate transitions. In addition, local authorities must help young people understand the reasons for changing financial circumstances and provide support to maintain positive relationships between carers and young people.

Our findings have highlighted that care leavers are resilient and have overcome significant challenges to attend university, achieving success in spite of, rather than because of, the care system. However, there is a need for equity to boost care leavers' chances and support them to thrive.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the students who participated in this study and generously shared their time and their experiences.

Conflicts of interest. None declared.

Funding

This research was funded by The Leverhulme Trust as an Early Career Fellowship. Grant number ECF-2015-614.

References

- Adeley, N. and Jupp, V. (2017) 'Getting Behind the Closed Door of Care Leavers: Understanding the Role of Emotional Support for Young People Leaving Care', *Child & Family Social Work*, 22: 97–105.
- Alldgate, J. (1994) 'Graduating From Care – A Missed Opportunity For Encouraging Successful Citizenship', *Child and Youth Services Review*, 16: 231–54.
- Baker, C., Briheim-Crookall, L., Magnus, L. and Selwyn, J. (April, 2019) Our Lives Beyond Care: Care Leavers' Views on Their Well-Being in 2018. *Coram Voice*.
- Baumberg, B. (2016) 'The Stigma of Claiming Benefits: A Quantitative Study', *Journal of Social Policy*, 45: 181–99. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279415000525>
- Benito-Gomez, M., Lee, G. Y., McCurdy, A. L. and Fletcher, A. C. (2022) 'If I Hadn't Had that Support System, I Think I Would Have Dropped Out by Now': Parental Support in College and its Implications for Student Adjustment', *Journal of Family Issues*, 43: 3373–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X211044490> (Original work published 2022)
- Bell, D. N. F. and Blanchflower, D. G. (2013) 'Underemployment in the UK Revisited', *National Institute Economic Review*, 224: F8–F22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002795011322400110>
- Bengtsson, M., Sjöblom, Y. and Öberg, P. (2020) 'Transitional Patterns When Leaving Care–Care Leavers' Agency in a Longitudinal Perspective', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 118: 105486.
- Cameron, C., Hollingworth, K., Schoon, I., VAN Santen, E., Schröer, W., Ristikari, T., Heino, T. and Pekkarinen, E. (2018) 'Care Leavers in Early Adulthood: How Do They Fare in Britain', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 87: 163–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.02.031>
- Coy, M. (2009) 'Moved Around Like Bags of Rubbish Nobody Wants': How Multiple Placement Moves Can Make Young Women Vulnerable to Sexual Exploitation', *Child Abuse Review*, 18: 254–66.
- Department for Education. (2010) 'Children Act 1989: Statutory Guidance and Regulations', in *Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers*, Vol. 3. London: The Stationery Office.
- Department for Education (2024a) 'Children Looked After in England including Adoptions'. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2024>, accessed 6 Nov. 2025.
- Department for Education (2024b) 'Participation of Young People in Education, Employment or Training Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities'. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/660e971663b7f8001fde187f/Participation_of_young_people_in_education__employment_or_training.pdf
- Department for Education (2025a) 'Widening Participation in Higher Education'. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2023-24>
- Department for Education (2025b) 'Children Act 1989: Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers Volume 3: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities on Helping Care Leavers Aged 16 and 17 Prepare for Adulthood'. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-act-1989-transition-to-adulthood-for-care-leavers>

- Dixon, J., Wade, J., Byford, S., Weatherly, H. and Lee, J. (2006) *Young People Leaving Care: A Study of Costs and Outcomes*. York: Social Work Research and Development Unit, University of York.
- Education and Skills Act (2008) 'Chapter 25'. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/25/contents>, accessed 20 Oct. 2025.
- Ellis, K. (2019) 'Blame and Culpability in Children's Narratives of Child Sexual Abuse', *Child Abuse Review*, 28: 405–17.
- Ellis, K. and Johnston, C. (2019) *Pathways to University from Care: Findings Report One*. Sheffield: The University of Sheffield. <https://doi.org/10.15131/shef.data.9578930.v3>
- Ellis, K. and Johnston, C. (2020) *Pathways to University - The Journey Through Care: Findings Report Two*. The University of Sheffield. <https://doi.org/10.15131/shef.data.13247639.v3>
- Ellis, K. and Johnston, C. (2024) 'Resilience, Higher Education and Widening Participation: Generating Change for Care Experienced Students', *Higher Education*, 87: 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00985-8>
- Ellis, K. and Johnston, C. (2024) 'Care and Education: Instability, Stigma and the Responsibilisation of Educational Achievement', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 156: 107319.
- Ellison, M. (2017) 'Through the Looking Glass: Young People, Work and the Transition Between Education and Employment in a Post-Brexit UK', *Journal of Social Policy*, 46: 675–98. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279417000356>
- Field, A., Sen, R., Johnston, C. and Ellis, K. (2021) 'Turning 18 in Specialised Residential Therapeutic Care: Independence or a Cliff Edge?', *Children & Society*, 35: 784–98.
- Gaskell, C. (2010) 'If the Social Worker had Called at Least it Would Show they Cared'. Young Care Leaver's Perspectives on the Importance of Care', *Children & Society*, 24: 136–47.
- Glynn, N. (2021) 'Understanding Care Leavers as Youth in Society - A Theoretical Framework for Studying the Transition out of Care', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 121: 105829. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105829>
- Groinig, M. and Sting, S. (2019) 'Educational Pathways in and out of Child and Youth Care. The Importance of Orientation Frameworks That Guide Care Leavers' Actions Along Their Educational Pathway', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 101, 42–9.
- Harrison, N. (2020) 'Patterns of Participation in Higher Education for Care-Experienced Students in England: Why Has There Not Been More Progress? ', *Studies in Higher Education*, 45: 1986–2000. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1582014>
- Harrison, N., Baker, Z., and Stevenson, J. (2022) 'Employment and Further Study Outcomes for Care-Experienced Graduates in the UK', *Higher Education*, 83: 357–78.
- Hill, J. M., VAN DER Geest, V. R. and Blokland, A. A. J. (2017) 'Leaving the Bank of Mum and Dad: Financial Independence and Delinquency Desistance in Emerging Adulthood', *Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology*, 3: 419–39. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40865-017-0058-5>
- Hughes, G. and Smail, O. (2014) 'Which Aspects of University Life Are Most and Least Helpful in the Transition to HE? A Qualitative Snapshot of Student Perceptions', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39: 466–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2014.971109>
- Hugman, C., Ellis, K., Baker, C., Stein, M., Fitzpatrick, C., Murphy, S., Haworth, S., Ward, N., Selwyn, J., Holmes, L., Harrison, N., Canning, R., Hadi, J., Edwards, D. and Devereux, R. (2019) *The Conference for Care Experienced People Research and*

- Academic Group Report*. Liverpool: Liverpool Hope University. https://704c1ef3-b156-4576-ba4b-ac46791ae6e2.filesusr.com/ugd/7773fa_50c89fc726cf4681982b48952a5a21a8.pdf, accessed 6 Nov. 2025.
- Kalmijn, M. (2024) 'Parents' Socioeconomic Status and Support to Adult Children Across the Life Course', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 86: 7–29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12928>
- Kelly, A., Luke, N., HydeDryden, G. and Williams, T. (2025) *Success–Whose Definition Counts? A Co-designed Framework by and for Young People Leaving Care*. Oxford: Rees Centre. https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/11/Success_whose_definition_counts_Final_report.pdf, accessed 6 Nov. 2025.
- Liebling, A., Price, D., and Elliott, C. (1999) 'Appreciative Inquiry and Relationships in Prison', *Punishment & Society*, 1: 71–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14624749922227711>
- Liu, B., Ji, S., and Zhu, Z. (2024) 'Does Higher Education Matter for Health in the UK?', *SSM - Population Health*, 25: 101642. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2024.101642>
- McCormack, L. and Issaakidis, G. (2018) 'Complex Trauma in Childhood; Psychological Growth in Adulthood: Making Sense of the 'Lived' Experience of Out-of-Home-Care', *Traumatology*, 24: 131–9. <https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000139>
- McGrane, J., Selwyn, J., and Baker, C. (2024) 'The Development and Psychometric Validation of a Survey to Measure the Subjective Well-Being of Care Leavers', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 158: 107462.
- McNamara, P., Harvey, A., and Andrewartha, L. (2019) 'Passports Out of Poverty: Raising Access to Higher Education for Care Leavers in Australia', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 97: 85–93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.07.015>
- Ofsted (2022) 'Ready or Not': Care Leavers' Views of Preparing to Leave Care. Online. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ready-or-not-care-leavers-views-of-preparing-to-leave-care/ready-or-not-care-leavers-views-of-preparing-to-leave-care#fn:7>, accessed 20 Oct. 2025.
- O'Kane, E. and Brady, E. (2025) 'What Happens After Care? Investigating the Post-Care Housing Pathways and Experiences of Adult Care Leavers in Ireland', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 171: 108181.
- Palmer, A., Norris, M., and Kelleher, J. (2022) 'Accelerated Adulthood, Extended Adolescence and the Care Cliff: Supporting Care Leavers' Transition from Care to Independent Living', *Child & Family Social Work*, 27: 748–59.
- Pereira, R. (2024) *Our Changing Population Is There for all to See*. Office for National Statistics. Online. <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2024/04/12/our-changing-population-is-there-for-all-to-see/>, accessed 20 Oct. 2025.
- Picker, V., Hirneis, V., and Sanders, M. (2024) 'A Quasi-Experimental Evaluation of the Staying Put Intervention for Reducing Homelessness Among Care Leavers', *European Journal of Homelessness*, 18: 83–103.
- Prendergast, L., Davies, C., Seddon, D., Hartfiel, N., and Edwards, R. T. (2024) 'Barriers and Enablers to Care-Leavers Engagement with Multi-Agency Support: A Scoping Review', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 159: 107501.
- Porter, R. and Fowler, N. (2024) 'Evaluation of the Lifelong Links Trial in Scotland'. Online. <https://frg.org.uk/lifelong-links/impact-of-lifelong-links/>, accessed 13 Oct. 2025.
- Roberts, L., Mannay, D., Rees, A., Bayfield, H., Corliss, C., Diaz, C., and Vaughan, R. (2021) 'It's Been a Massive Struggle': Exploring the Experiences of Young People

- Leaving Care During COVID-19', *YOUNG*, 29: S81–S99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11033088211025949>
- Stein, M. (2012) *Young People Leaving Care: Supporting Pathways to Adulthood*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Strahl, B., van Breda, A. D. P., Mann-Feder, V., and Schröer, W. (2021) 'A Multinational Comparison of Care-Leaving Policy and Legislation', *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, 37: 34–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ics.2020.26>
- The Children (leaving care) act (2000). London: The Stationery Office. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/35/contents>
- van Breda, A. D., Munro, E. R., Gilligan, R., Anghel, R., Harder, A., Incarnato, M., Mann-Feder, V., Refaeli, T., Stohler, R., and Storø, J. (2020) 'Extended Care: Global Dialogue on Policy, Practice and Research', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 119: 105596.
- Winter, K. (2009) 'Relationships Matter: The Problems and Prospects for Social Workers' Relationships with Young Children in Care', *Child & Family Social Work*, 14: 450–60.
- Woodgate, R. L., Morakinyo, O., and Martin, K. M. (2017) 'Interventions for Youth Aging Out of Care: A Scoping Review', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 82: 280–300. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.09.031>