

## POLICY BRIEF:

# Measuring Outcomes for Care Leavers



### BACKGROUND

All of us need similar things to thrive: a stable home, strong support and steady, loving relationships. Timely and appropriate support from corporate parents can help care leavers to enjoy happy, healthy lives and reduce the disadvantage gap. Gathering information about how care leavers are doing is an important first step in ensuring that support is in place when it is most needed, and this requires the use of meaningful outcome measures.

In England, the Department for Education (DfE) collects information from all local authorities on an annual basis about young people who have left care, through the SSDA903 return. Information is required about all care leavers aged 17-21; local authorities also provide information for care leavers aged 22-25 who have requested and received support. The statutory information that is specifically collected about care leavers' outcomes covers:

- **'In touch'**: Is the local authority in touch with this young person?
- **'Main activity'**: What is the young person's main activity (e.g. education, training or employment) and if they are not in any of these, is this due to illness/disability, pregnancy/parenting, or other reasons?
- **'Accommodation'**: What type of accommodation is the young person living in (e.g. supported lodgings, independent living), and is this 'suitable' accommodation (in the judgement of the local authority)?

This limited range of outcome measures does not capture the full range of successes and difficulties that care leavers experience, yet they are used to inform the development of policies and practices. Finding the 'right' set of outcome measures for care leavers can tell us not only how well services have done, but importantly, how well individuals are doing in different areas of their life. The publication in December 2023 of a new [Children's Social Care National Framework](#) and the accompanying [Children's Social Care Dashboard and indicators update](#) highlight the need for more meaningful measures that better capture care leavers' outcomes.

Better data collection has potential benefits for all care leavers, via:

- cross-departmental Government policy: e.g. through identification of specific needs around housing or employment; and
- local authority policy and practice: through commissioning of services to meet identified local needs at aggregate and individual levels, and enabling self-assessment of services and evaluation of interventions.

This project brought together researchers, care-experienced facilitators, representatives from national and local government teams, and charities supporting care leavers, to participate in a research-informed discussion of what these measures might look like. The following **recommendations** are based on this discussion:

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The DfE should expand the scope of their existing data collection to create a more meaningful reflection of the important aspects of the following areas of life. Crucially, this new data collection should centre the perspectives of care leavers, alongside the professionals working with them:
  - **'In touch'**
    - Do care leavers feel supported by their local authority – including emotionally?
    - Are they satisfied with the local offer for care leavers and the services they receive?
    - Do professionals value and respect their identity and culture?
  - **'Main activity'**
    - Are care leavers in the right education, training or employment to meet their goals?
    - Are those in further and higher education supported sufficiently to reach their potential?
    - Allow more than one 'main activity' option to be selected to reflect the diversity of roles that people inhabit while in education and/or training.
  - **'Accommodation'**
    - Do care leavers feel safe, secure and stable in their home?
    - Do care leavers themselves rate their accommodation as 'suitable'?
- The DfE should also work with other Government departments and local authorities to collect additional outcome measures that capture the following important areas of life for care leavers:
  - **Health:** How many care leavers have disabilities or a long-term health condition (including self-identified)? Do they have access to any physical or mental health services that they need?
  - **Relationships:** Do care leavers have a close and meaningful relationship with someone? Do they have someone they can rely on to offer support? How often do they feel lonely?
  - **Well-being:** How do care leavers feel they are doing?
  - **Leisure:** Do care leavers have opportunities to take part in a valued hobby or activity?
  - **Goals:** Do care leavers have clear goals and plans for the future?
  - **Voice:** Do care leavers feel included in decision-making processes? Do they feel their feedback is acted on?
- Develop specific outcome measures for care leavers with a disability or long-term health condition, those who are young parents, and those who are current or former asylum-seekers, to capture their unique successes, difficulties and support needs.
- Annual publications on care leavers' needs and outcomes should be broken down by:
  - Any disability or long-term health conditions, as well as other demographic characteristics and information on care history
  - Ages and stages, acknowledging that care leavers can struggle or face a 'cliff-edge' in support at key points of transition
- The timing of measures should be considered: well-being should be measured after periods of major change (as well as annually), for example graduation from university or following a change in accommodation.
- Ofsted should broaden the 'former relevant children pursuing further education or training aged 18-25' group in the Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework to include the evaluation of experiences of those who have completed a higher education qualification within the last 12 months, to provide insights into whether local authorities are adequately supporting the learning and employment opportunities of care leavers.

## METHOD

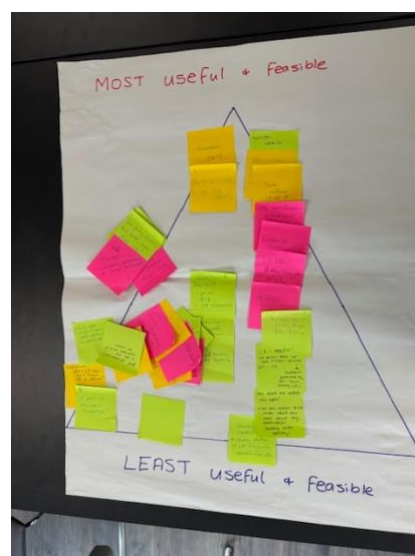
A workshop was held at the University of Oxford on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2024, led by care-experienced facilitators. Attendees included researchers, representatives from Government departments (DfE, DLUHC, DWP, MOJ), Ofsted, the Children's Commissioner's Office, local authority leaving care teams, and charities supporting care leavers. The aims of the workshop were to a) hear about what care leavers tell us is important to them and b) use this information to think about how care leavers' outcomes might best be measured, both locally and nationally.

The research team considered findings from six projects:

- [Bright Spots](#) presented by Julie Selwyn
- [New Belongings](#) presented by Claire Baker
- [Pathways to University from Care](#) presented by Katie Ellis
- [Care Experienced Graduates](#) presented by Zoe Baker
- [Future of Care](#) presented by Nikki Luke
- [Children's Information Project](#), North Yorkshire site presented by Lisa Holmes

The researchers spoke about findings from across the projects in relation to three themes that are touched on in the SSDA903 return (education, employment and accommodation) and three that are not, but are important markers of whether care leavers are 'doing well' (relationships, well-being and voice).

Workshop attendees worked in small groups to answer the question: 'What measures should be collected on care leaver outcomes?' Individual suggestions were written on Post-It notes, and each group then discussed the suggestions in terms of which would be most *useful* and most *feasible* to collect. Post-Its were arranged in a pyramid structure, with each group deciding on the suggestions from their table that were most useful and most feasible.



Care-experienced facilitators Amir, Jaymie, Cleo and (not pictured) Lucinda led the workshop

## FINDINGS

The research findings from speaking to care leavers fell under six themes which cut across the projects:

### **1. Education**

Educational experiences are linked to feeling positive about the future. Further and higher education must be tailored to fit individual interests and goals. It's important that young people know what opportunities and supports are available and that this information is shared early so that they can plan accordingly. New Belongings shared details about local authority 'opportunity brokers' who helped care leavers to find suitable courses and opportunities. The Pathways to University from Care and the Care Experienced Graduates projects both revealed that care leavers often experience disruption in their university education, and that support is often only offered up to the completion of the undergraduate level, meaning that progressing to postgraduate study is not financially feasible for many.

### **2. Employment and training**

Care leavers viewed employment and training opportunities as being desirable or 'good' if they provided financial security, enabled long-term stability, and promoted a positive sense of well-being. The Care Experienced Graduates and Future of Care projects showed that employment and training opportunities that provided this were likely to: be enjoyable and meaningful; be a personal choice, in line with the individual's interests; be stable (not zero-hours or very short-term contracts); pay a liveable wage; include opportunities for career progression; and promote a healthy work-life balance. The Care-Experienced Graduates project found that these features were present in workplaces that were open and inclusive, embedded trauma-informed practices, showed awareness and understanding of mental and physical health needs, and where leadership were transparent in their decision-making. However, the Pathways to University from Care project found that employment inequalities between care leavers and the general population are still an issue. New Belongings included examples of schemes to address this, including guaranteed interviews and ring-fenced apprenticeships. However, the Care-Experienced Graduates project found that such schemes did not always offer a liveable wage, or stable and longer-term contracts.

### **3. Accommodation and stability**

The research showed that many care leavers face instability around their accommodation. This can be exacerbated at particular life stages, for example the experience of uncertainty around their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, or upon completing their higher education which can lead to moves out of area and homelessness. There is a discrepancy between Government statistics on numbers in 'suitable' accommodation and findings from the Bright Spots project, which showed that more feel unsettled and unsafe. Accommodation needs to be affordable, but securing a deposit for rented housing can be a struggle. It is important that care leavers can make their accommodation feel like home, and this includes the option to have pets, which can help to manage loneliness and well-being.

#### 4. Relationships

The experience of being in care can break down important relationships. Both the Care Inquiry and the MacAlister Review have stressed the need to support young people in care and care leavers to develop and maintain important relationships. Care leavers in the Bright Spots, Future of Care, and the Care-Experienced Graduates projects talked about the importance of relationships with friends, family, romantic partners and other supportive adults, as well as with pets. The importance, quality and identity of relationships differs between individuals and over time, and should therefore be determined by care leavers, not the system.

#### 5. Well-being

Bright Spots shows that there is a drop-off in well-being after leaving care; and those with the worst sense of well-being were those with a disability or long-term health condition. A number of areas of life are particularly connected to care leavers' well-being: having trusting and supportive relationships, feeling safe or settled in accommodation, coping financially, feeling positive emotions and having lower stress levels, feeling positive about the future, being happy with physical appearance, and feeling treated equally to other young people.

#### 6. Voice

It is stark to note that the voice of care leavers is missing in national statistics, which rely only on professionals' judgements. How care leavers feel not only tells us how they are getting on, it is also the best measure of how services are doing. Having a voice is also important: care leavers want to be included in decisions, and this is linked to well-being. Yet there is also no metric on how well local and national government are doing on collecting voice.

The **group discussion at the workshop** drew on these research messages to suggest measures of care leaver outcomes. The most common suggestions across the groups for the outcomes that might be most useful and feasible to collect focused on:

- Mental health and well-being
- Relationships
- The care leaver's perspective on their accommodation

Other highly-rated suggestions included:

- Social support – do you have a strong social network who you can turn to when you need help?
- Employment – do you consider your job to be meaningful?
- Hobbies and activities – opportunities to participate in fulfilling activities.
- Pregnancy and parenting – successful parenting, support to keep parent and child together.
- Health – number of care leavers with a disability or long-term health condition.

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