

Drive Forward Foundation's Submission of Evidence to the Policy Connect and the Skills Commission

Earning or Learning: A New Agenda for Youth NEET Reduction

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Care-experienced young people represent the UK's most disadvantaged group in employment outcomes, with a **39% NEET rate - three times the national average**. Since 2010, Drive Forward Foundation has worked with over 5,000 care-experienced young people in London, developing an evidence-based model that achieves sustainable employment outcomes.

The Challenge:

- 13,000 young people leave care annually
- Government loses **£145 million yearly** in tax revenue from poor care leaver employment outcomes
- The Skills Commission's ambition for the UK to have the lowest NEET rates in the OECD cannot be achieved without addressing care leavers' disproportionate outcomes

Proven Solutions:

Drive Forward Foundation's evidence demonstrates that targeted interventions work:

- **Civil Service Care Leaver Internship**: 880 roles offered, 80% conversion to permanent employment
- **Integrated counselling support**: Eleven-fold return on investment
- **Wraparound employer support**: 80% of outcomes sustained for 13+ weeks

Key Policy Recommendations

1. Scale Successful Models Nationally

- Extend the **Civil Service Care Leaver Internship** model to all public bodies receiving new Corporate Parenting duties
- Create **3,500 ring-fenced NHS roles** (0.3% of workforce) following the successful Civil Service model
- Establish a **National Statutory Care Leaver Offer** with minimum support standards

2. Reform Benefits and Financial Barriers

- **Fix the Supported Accommodation Benefits Trap**: Reform the interaction between Universal Credit and Housing Benefit that creates financial disincentives to work.
- Provide **apprenticeship wage top-ups** for care leavers to address financial disincentives
- Improve awareness and uptake of the £3,000 Care Leaver Apprenticeship Bursary

3. Leverage the Growth and Skills Levy

- Enable flexible use of levy funds for **shorter, targeted courses** suitable for care-experienced young people
- Fund **Foundation Apprenticeships** to address qualification gaps

- Support trauma-informed training for employers and apprenticeship providers

4. Address Systemic Discrimination

- Make **care-experience a protected characteristic** under the Equality Act 2010
- Provide specialist support addressing intersectional discrimination (75% of Drive Forward's London cohort are from ethnic minorities)
- Mandate trauma-informed training for line managers in organisations employing care leavers

Expected Impact

Drive Forward Foundation's London-based model demonstrates these interventions are immediately scalable across the UK. If implemented nationally, these recommendations could:

- **Halve the care leaver NEET rate** from 39% to match national averages
- Generate **£145+ million annually** in additional tax revenue
- Create **sustainable career pathways** for the most marginalised young people
- Establish the UK as a **global leader** in supporting care-experienced youth into employment

These evidence-based interventions offer immediate, scalable solutions that align directly with the Skills Commission's ambition while addressing the needs of young people who have already overcome significant adversity and deserve the state's support as their Corporate Parent.

1. EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT AND PROMOTING YOUTH HIRING

1.1. Which aspects of the current employment support system are working well for young people and need to be continued/expanded? Which aspects need reform?

1.1.1. Expanding support for Care Leavers

Care leavers face significantly worse employment outcomes than their peers, costing the Government an estimated £145 million annually in lost tax revenue alone¹. The Skills Commission's ambition to have the best youth employment rate among the OECD countries cannot be achieved without addressing the **39% NEET rate among care leavers**. Since Drive Forward's inception in 2010, the NEET rate for care leavers has remained stubbornly high, hovering around 40% for the past generation. We know from our own experience at Drive Forward Foundation, that it takes a whole systems approach to unpick the barriers to employment for care-experienced young people.

There is a growing recognition of the need to support care-experienced young people into employment, education and training with targeted interventions², recently illustrated with the

¹ PWC & Home for Good, (2021) The Investment of a Lifetime: Delivering Better Outcomes for Children in Care. Available at: <https://www.pwc.co.uk/government-public-sector/assets/documents/investment-of-lifetime-delivering-better-children-care-outcomes.pdf> (Accessed 10 September 2025)

² Harrison et al 2023, *CARE LEAVERS' TRANSITION INTO THE LABOUR MARKET IN ENGLAND*. Rees Centre Oxford University. Available at: <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CareLeaversLabourMarket.pdf> (Accessed: 13 August 2025)

Care Leaver Trailblazer Pilot being undertaken in London as part of the Government's Youth Guarantee commitment³.

1.1.2. The case for increasing support for Care Leavers

There are over 80,000 children in the care system and around 13,000 young people leave care each year⁴. The state has a unique relationship with these young people as their *Corporate Parent*. However, children with care experience have significantly worse outcomes compared to their peers, indicating systematic failings from the state as their Corporate Parent:

- For 19- to 21-year-old care leavers, almost **two fifths (39 per cent) are not in education, employment or training**. This is three times the 13 per cent of all other 19- to 21-year-olds⁵.
- By the age of 27, **only 22 per cent of care leavers are in employment**, compared to 57 per cent of non-care leavers⁶.
- **50% of children in care meet the criteria for a mental health disorder** compared to 20% of all children and young people aged 8-25⁷.
- **1 in 3 care leavers become homeless** in the first 2 years after they leave care⁸.
- **24% of the adult prison population has previously been in care** and nearly 1 in 10 Black children in care have served a custodial sentence before they are 18 – compared to less than 1% of children in the general population⁹.

The argument for increasing support for care-experienced young people is evidenced in the above statistics, and the powerful stories we hear from the young people we work with. However, there is also a financial cost associated with the disproportionate outcomes care leavers experience. According to *Delivering Better Outcomes for Children in Care*, the government forgoes tax revenue of approximately **£145 million each year** related specifically to the poorer education and employment outcomes for care leavers¹⁰.

³ London Councils, 2025, *London Get Britain Working Trailblazer*. London Councils. Available at: https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-05/GBW%20London%20Trailblazers%20-%20Summary%20%281%29_0.pdf (Accessed: 08 September 2025)

⁴ Department for Education (Nov 2024) *Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK* (Accessed: 10 September 2025)

⁵ Department for Education, (2024) Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2024> (Accessed: 10 September 2025)

⁶ Civitas, (2023) *Breaking the Care Ceiling: How many Care Leavers go to University?* Available: [How many care leavers go to university?](#) (Accessed 10 September 2025)

⁷ Barnardo's, (2024) *Supporting Journey's to Independence*. Available: <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Care%20Leavers%20Reception%20Event%20booklet%20-%20FINAL.pdf> (Accessed: 10 September 2025)

⁸ Barnardo's, (2024) *Supporting Journey's to Independence*. Available: HYPERLINK "https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Care%20Leavers%20Reception%20Event%20booklet%20-%20FINAL.pdf" <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Care%20Leavers%20Reception%20Event%20booklet%20-%20FINAL.pdf> (Accessed: 10 September 2025)

⁹ Civitas, (2023) *Breaking the Care Ceiling: How many Care Leavers go to University?* Available: [How many care leavers go to university?](#) (Accessed 10 September 2025)

¹⁰ PWC & Home for Good, (2021) *The Investment of a Lifetime: Delivering Better Outcomes for Children in Care*. Available: <https://www.pwc.co.uk/government-public-sector/assets/documents/investment-of-lifetime-delivering-better-children-care-outcomes.pdf> (Accessed 10 September 2025)

1.1.3. Specialist Intervention – Drive Forward Foundation

At Drive Forward Foundation, we bring together the voluntary, corporate, and public sectors to create meaningful opportunities that meet the needs of care-experienced young people, helping them to achieve sustainable careers and financial security. Our service model is built around three key elements:

1. **tailored 1-1 employability support**, equipping young people with the skills, confidence, and guidance they need to secure sustainable employment
2. **strategic partnerships with employers**, policymakers, and other stakeholders to facilitate opportunities, challenge barriers, and drive systemic change
3. **a focus on community building**, fostering a supportive network where care-experienced young people can connect, share experiences, and create new peer networks.

We are currently undertaking a **Randomised Controlled Trial** with the support of Youth Futures Foundation and Kings College London and are confident that the results of the RCT will prove the efficacy of our model of support adding to the growing evidence base for targeted interventions and specialist support for care-experienced young people trying to access employment, education and training opportunities.

1.2. Are there particular employment support interventions that have shown positive outcomes for young people in your region or with groups that are particularly marginalised?

1.2.1. Example Intervention – The Civil Service Care Leavers Internship Scheme¹¹

Our partnership with the **Department for Education** on the original pilot and continued delivery of the **Civil Service Care Leavers Internship Scheme** is an example of best practice which has produced consistently positive outcomes for the care-experienced young people.

Key features:

- **Access:** Paid 18-month roles across central government, with potential for permanent employment.
- **Eligibility:** Care leavers up to age 30 can apply (beyond the statutory age of 25), recognising disrupted education and extended barriers to work.
- **Wraparound support:** Drive Forward has supported 200+ young people to enrol and sustain roles, providing mentoring and ongoing careers guidance alongside and beyond internship.

Proven outcomes:

- **880+ roles offered nationally** since inception.
- **~80% conversion into permanent jobs** – demonstrating long-term sustainability and progression¹².
- Drive Forward participants report higher completion rates and stronger progression when combining the internship with mentoring and wraparound support.

¹¹ Department for Education, (2025) Civil Service Care Leaver Internship Scheme. Available: [Civil Service Care Leavers Internship Scheme | Civil Service Careers](#) (Accessed: 10 September 2025)

¹² Department for Education, (2025) Civil Service Care Leaver Internship Scheme. Available: [Civil Service Care Leavers Internship Scheme | Civil Service Careers](#) (Accessed: 10 September 2025)

Learning & opportunity:

- Structured internships with built-in support and progression routes are highly effective for care-experienced young people.
- The public sector could play a greater role by creating **ring-fenced roles for care leavers**.
- With Corporate Parenting duties due to extend under the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, there is a **golden opportunity** to legislate for ring-fenced posts.
- Example: If the **NHS ring-fenced 0.3% of its workforce**, this would create **3,500 new jobs for care leavers** – aligning with the target identified by Minister Josh MacAlister in the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2022)¹³.

1.3. What incentives or support would encourage more employers to offer opportunities to young people?

1.3.1. Wraparound employer support

Employers we work with are often keen to support young people into the workplace but may lack the **confidence, resources, or specialist knowledge** to do so effectively. This is especially important when working with care-experienced young people, who have additional barriers to employment compared to their peers. In our experience, the most effective incentives for employers, are not just financial, but practical and relational.

At Drive Forward Foundation, we provide a **comprehensive package of support** that makes this possible:

- A dedicated team member providing **consistent communication and continuous support** to employers throughout the entire hiring cycle and beyond.
- We provide **training to senior leaders as well as line managers** who directly support care-experienced young employees and for staff who wish to act as mentors.
- We **work intensively with our young people** to ensure they are ready and prepared to succeed in the role.
- Employers also have opportunities to join our events throughout the year, connecting with peers and **sharing good practice**.

1.3.2. Extending Corporate Parenting duties

As Corporate Parenting responsibilities are extended through the **Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill**¹⁴, there is an opportunity to expand programmes such as the already successful Civil Service Care Leaver Internship scheme to a greater range of public bodies and corporate organisations such as the NHS or British Rail.

In practical terms, extended duties could mean **offering tailored paid placements, flexible working policies, and financial support with essentials** like transport, clothing, or technology covered by employers, ensuring care leavers have the resources and support needed to succeed in the workplace. The extension of Corporate Parenting duties offers the sector a unique

¹³ MacAllister (2022) Independent Review of Children's Social Care. Department for Education. Available: [Independent review of children's social care - final report](#) (Accessed: 08 September 2025)

¹⁴ Community Care, (2025) Corporate parenting duty to be placed on government departments and public bodies. Available: [Corporate parenting duty to be placed on government departments and public bodies - Community Care](#) (Accessed: 10 September 2025)

opportunity to establish a developed model of support for care leavers seeking to access employment, training and education.

1.3.3. Ensuring the Growth and Skills Levy benefits Care Leavers

The new **Growth and Skills Levy** represents a chance to reset the skills sector, boost growth and directly benefit marginalised groups at the same time. For care leavers, who are disproportionately likely to be NEET, this is an opportunity to increase and diversify routes into training and employment. By broadening how levy funds can be used, it can support a wider range of training, including shorter, targeted courses and foundation apprenticeships that are often more suitable for young people who have experienced disrupted educations such as care-experienced¹⁵.

A recent report published by the Fabian Society and Youth Futures Foundation surveyed employers and asked for their views on the Apprenticeship Levy and the forthcoming Growth and Skills Levy:

- **Two thirds** of levy-paying employers support the principle of the Levy to increase employer investment in training.
- There is strong demand for the Growth and Skills Levy **to enable employers to have more flexibility** on the type of training they can use their levy funds on.
- **70%** of respondents said they wanted individual employers to be able to use levy funding to invest in other forms of accredited training that meets their needs.

Employers are asking for greater flexibility with how they spend their levy, and the greater flexibility could benefit care-experienced young people who often require building up skills and confidence through shorter accredited training courses before embarking on longer training programmes such as apprenticeships.

2. APPRENTICESHIPS AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

2.1. What can be done to improve young people's access to apprenticeships and vocational training and their preparedness for these activities? What improvements could be made to better support them during the duration of these activities?

By providing training alongside paid work, apprenticeships can be an effective route into sustained employment and career development for care-experienced young people. However, care-experienced young people face greater barriers to accessing apprenticeships compared to young people who have not been in care.

2.1.1. Access to Apprenticeships for Care Leavers

Due to a higher likelihood of disruptions during their schooling, **only 19.9% of care leavers achieve A* to C in GCSE English and Mathematics**, compared to 62.4% of the general population.¹⁶ Lacking "Good" passes in GCSE English and Maths, many care-experienced young

¹⁵ Fabian Society, (2025) Levying Up: How to make the Growth and Skills Levy Work. Available: [Policy-report Levying-Up-How-to-make-the-Growth-and-Skills-Levy-work Fabian-Society Aug-2025-PDF.pdf](#) (Accessed: 10 September 2025)

¹⁶ Harrison et al, 2023, *CARE LEAVERS' TRANSITION INTO THE LABOUR MARKET IN ENGLAND*. Rees Centre Oxford University. Available at: <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CareLeaversLabourMarket.pdf> (Accessed: 13 August 2025)

people cannot access apprenticeships, studies, or jobs which require these qualifications. We welcome the government giving employers more flexibility on Maths and English requirements,¹⁷ as this may open the door for care-experienced young people without these qualifications to complete apprenticeships.

Between 2016 and 2024 Level 2 apprenticeship starts decreased from 261,000 to just over 71,000. Meanwhile, higher level apprenticeships (Level 4 – 7) increased from 37,000 starts to nearly 122,000.¹⁸ As many care-experienced young people lack the necessary qualifications to access higher apprenticeships, increasing the number of Level 2 apprenticeship starts could greatly benefit this marginalised group. We welcome the recent introduction of **Foundation Apprenticeships**,¹⁹ as these can provide a valuable route for care-experienced young people to gain work experience and qualifications needed for further progression.

2.1.2. Apprenticeship wage

As of April 2025, the minimum hourly wage for an apprentice regardless of age is £7.55. The national minimum wage £10 for those aged 18-20, and £12.21 for those aged 21 and over.²⁰ Care-experienced young people are more likely than their peers to be living independently, and less likely to be able to rely on financial support from family. Care-experienced people are thereby financially incentivised to stay in low-paid jobs with minimal prospects of career development, rather than taking on an apprenticeship through which they can gain a qualification and increase their future earning potential. Pay levels for apprenticeships in relation to the cost-of-living act as a disincentive to engage with work-based training, and the government should provide **additional ‘top up’ funding to enable care leavers to participate in apprenticeships** without being financially disadvantaged.²¹

2.1.3. Care Leaver Apprenticeship Bursary

The government offers a £3,000 bursary to care leavers under the age of 25 who are undertaking an apprenticeship.²² However, research done by the Learning and Work Institute indicates that take-up of the apprenticeship bursary is low, meaning that many apprentices with a background in care cannot benefit from this support.²³ There must be a concerted effort to **raise awareness**

¹⁷ Department for Education, *10,000 more apprentices as government slashes red tape to boost growth*, GOV.UK, 11 February 2025, last updated 18 February 2025

¹⁸ Martin. (2025) *Unlocking apprenticeships for marginalised talent*, ReGenerate: The Good Jobs Project. Available at:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5dc83c44e8c8347aab55a36a/t/67aa4b2a790074229e65f733/1739213611926/Regenerate+-Unlocking+apprenticeships+for+marginalised+talent+-February+2025.pdf> (Accessed: 13 August 2025)

¹⁹ Department for Education (2025) *DfE Update further education: 21 May 2025*. GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfe-update-21-may-2025/dfe-update-further-education-21-may-2025> (Accessed: 15 August 2025)

²⁰ Gov.uk. (2025). *National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage rates*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates> (Accessed: 13 August 2025).

²¹ Harrison et al, *CARE LEAVERS' TRANSITION INTO THE LABOUR MARKET IN ENGLAND*.

²² Department for Education, *Apprenticeships bursary for care leavers* (GOV.UK, 23 June 2020, last updated 12 June 2025), accessed 1 September 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeships-bursary-for-care-leavers/apprenticeships-care-leavers-bursary-policy-summary>

²³ Jones and Davies, *Exploring the funding and support for apprentices with additional support needs* (Learning and Work Institute, April 27, 2018), accessed 1 September 2025, <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/exploring-the-funding-and-support-for-apprentices-with-additional-support-needs/>

of the bursary among care leavers, training providers, and employers, so that more of those who are eligible can benefit from it.

2.1.4. Support for care-experienced apprentices

Wraparound trauma-informed pastoral support from employers and apprenticeship providers is crucial, as care-experienced apprentices are more likely to be dealing with unstable housing and mental health or wellbeing challenges than their peers. Care-experienced apprentices should be provided with a trusted mentor who can support them to adjust to the workplace and manage their apprenticeship coursework, as they may not have access to family support. Finally, **training and guidance for employers** to increase their understanding of care-experience can help them create a supportive work-environment, allowing care-experienced apprentices to succeed and remain in apprenticeships.²⁴

2.2. What outcomes and metrics should we use to measure the quality of vocational training beyond completion rates? (e.g., progression, youth satisfaction, and alignment with aspirations)

To measure how well apprenticeships are delivering for care-experienced young people, there needs to be accurate data on the number of care-experienced young people who undertake apprenticeships. There is no available data on the exact number of care-experienced people that go into an apprenticeship, but a report by Civitas showed that 4% of children looked after had an apprenticeship or work-based learning destination at the end of Key Stage 4, compared to 7% of all children.²⁵

- The government should set a target that the proportion of care-experienced people who commence apprenticeships should be equal or greater than that of the general population.
- The government should set a target for care-experienced apprentices to have apprenticeship progression and completion rates that are equal or greater than those of all apprentices.
- Care-experienced apprentices should have equal or higher satisfaction with their training providers and employers compared to the general population of apprentices.

3. EARLY INTERVENTION

3.1. Have you or your organisation developed any strategies to engage young people who are at risk of becoming NEET between 16-24?

Over the past 15 years, Drive Forward Foundation has developed a proven model to engage and sustain care-experienced young people in education, training, and employment. Central to this is building **stable, trusted relationships** that recognise the impact of trauma and disrupted childhoods, through:

²⁴ Jones and Davies, *Exploring the funding and support for apprentices with additional support needs*.

²⁵ Young and Lilley, *Breaking the Care Ceiling: How many care leavers go to university?* (Civitas, September 2023), accessed 4 September 2025, <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Breaking-the-care-ceiling.pdf>

- **Specialist workforce:** All staff receive expert training in trauma, psychology, and counselling approaches (psychodynamic, solution-focused), enabling deep understanding and effective support.
- **Holistic service model:** Trauma-informed practice, multi-agency collaboration, and long-term partnerships with Local Authorities (LAs), who are our primary referral source.
- **Co-location – our “Hub model”:** Careers Specialists are embedded within Local Authority leaving care teams, enabling earlier engagement, joint casework with Personal Advisors, and rapid responses to safeguarding or wider needs. This integrated approach leads to stronger engagement and more sustainable outcomes.
- **Scale & reach:** In 2024, we engaged 1,016 care-experienced young people across all programmes, including 724 through our Employment Programme — making us the largest dedicated employability provider for this group.

Our programmes are designed to prevent NEET outcomes:

- **Personalised careers support:** Intensive 1:1 guidance tailored to each young person’s goals, delivered by Careers Specialists.
- **Practical skills & confidence:** From construction courses to Microsoft Office workshops, CV clinics, interview prep, and public speaking training.
- **Mentorship:** Young people are carefully matched with professional mentors, ensuring ongoing support and guidance.
- **Community programmes:** A broad offer fostering belonging, voice, and peer networks, including advocacy via our Policy Forum, job fairs, social events, and cultural outings.
- **Ring-fenced opportunities:** Partnerships with **40+ corporate partners** across industries (construction, law, finance, marketing, etc.) secure placements, internships, and in-kind support.
- **Tailored counselling:** Specialist counsellors provide therapeutic support to address emotional and personal challenges that can prevent progression.

Impact (2024/25):

- **1,016 care-experienced young people engaged** across all programmes.
- **47%** of Employment Programme participants achieved one or more EET outcomes.
- **218 jobs** started.
- **80% of employment/education outcomes sustained** for at least 13 weeks, demonstrating both stability and progression.

4. HEALTH BARRIERS

4.1. Have you or your organisation implemented any interventions or programmes to support NEET young people with mental health challenges, physical health conditions, disabilities, or addiction issues?

4.1.1. Counselling support integrated into Drive Forward's Employability Programme

Care-experienced young people are disproportionately affected by poor mental health, with studies showing that **almost half of care leavers experience a diagnosable mental health condition** compared to around one in five of their peers²⁶. This creates a significant barrier to education, training and employment, leaving many at heightened risk of becoming NEET. Recognising this challenge, Drive Forward Foundation introduced a dedicated counselling offer which can be accessed whilst they're on our Employability Programme to help care-experienced young people address mental health needs that often undermine their journey into sustainably employment.

Young people are offered up to 12 free sessions, with an additional follow-up one month after their final appointment to support transition. In 2023 alone, our counselling partners delivered over 700 therapeutic sessions to 56 young people. One of our providers also offers a low-cost continuation service, further subsidised by Drive Forward Foundation, ensuring longer-term support remains accessible.

The benefits are tangible: pre- and post-counselling surveys evidence significant reductions in psychological distress, while analysis of employability outcomes suggests an eleven-fold return on investment. Demonstrating the critical role of integrated mental health interventions in supporting NEET care-experienced young people into sustainable careers.

Feedback from participant:

"I did the 12 free sessions with Richard. I am now doing a further 12. He is amazing, in these 12 sessions he has helped me so much and I feel like I have changed and become myself. I suggest him to everyone, and I completely believe Drive forward should continue referring him not only to young people but to everyone. Thank you so much for your services."

5. ADDITIONAL BARRIERS

5.1. Are there current policies or practices (e.g., benefit rules, school exclusions, apprenticeship funding, a lack of support for transition periods) that unintentionally push young people toward NEET status?

Care leavers are failed by the state through a combination of bad policies and under resourced support services, which have resulted in the unintended consequence of care leavers experiencing disproportionate life outcomes across a range of key measures²⁷, including being three times more likely to be NEET than their peers. The section below highlights the key policy issue we'd like to see addressed, as it affects a significant number of young people we support.

²⁶ Barnardo's, (2024) Supporting Journey's to Independence. Available: <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Care%20Leavers%20Reception%20Event%20booklet%20-%20FINAL.pdf> (Accessed: 10 September 2025)

²⁷ Civitas, (2023) Breaking the Care Ceiling: How many Care Leavers go to University? Available: [How many care leavers go to university?](#) (Accessed 10 September 2025)

5.1.1. Supported Accommodation Benefits Trap

It's estimated that several thousand care-experienced young people live in **supported accommodation** currently²⁸. It is a common path for care leavers to take upon turning 18 and transitioning out of children's services, where they might have been staying in a foster placement or children's residential home.

Supported housing is designed to help young people build the skills and confidence needed to live independently, with a key focus on improving their employment prospects. By offering stability and tailored support, it can provide a crucial stepping stone toward long-term work and financial independence. **Yet the current configuration of benefits for people in supported housing has created a clear disincentive for them to take up work or progress in employment**²⁹. People in supported housing receive Housing Benefit for their rent and can claim Universal Credit for their living costs. But the way these two benefits interact creates a trap, where young people can become worse off as they increase their hours at work³⁰.

The policy issue³¹:

- When a young person starts working, their UC is reduced by 55p for every £1 they earn. This is called the UC taper.
- While any amount of UC is still being paid, Housing Benefit continues to cover their rent in full.
- But once their UC has been fully tapered down to £0, Housing Benefit then starts to be reduced – and at a steeper rate, 65p for every £1 earned.
- This creates a 'cliff edge': the moment UC ends, rent support starts falling away rapidly.

This can often result in care-experienced young people in supported accommodation being financially worse off when working compared to in receipt of welfare³². Care leavers often have to spend extended periods of time in supported accommodation due to the lack of social housing available, resulting in extended periods out of work, due to the highlighted benefit trap, which can result in 'scarring effects' for the young person which contribute to difficulties when trying to enter employment in the future³³.

²⁸ House of Commons Library, (2024). Support for Care Leavers. Available: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8429/CBP-8429.pdf> (Accessed: 10 September 2025)

²⁹ Centrepont, (2025). Making Work Pay in Supported Accommodation. Available: <https://centrepont.org.uk/research-reports/making-work-pay-supported-accommodation> (Accessed: 09 September 2025)

³⁰ Centrepont, (2025). Making Work Pay in Supported Accommodation. Available: <https://centrepont.org.uk/research-reports/making-work-pay-supported-accommodation> (Accessed: 09 September 2025)

³¹ Centrepont, (2025). Making Work Pay in Supported Accommodation. Available: <https://centrepont.org.uk/research-reports/making-work-pay-supported-accommodation> (Accessed: 09 September 2025)

³² Centrepont, (2025). Making Work Pay in Supported Accommodation. Available: <https://centrepont.org.uk/research-reports/making-work-pay-supported-accommodation> (Accessed: 09 September 2025)

³³ The Learning and Work Institute, (2025). Young people who are not in education, employment, or training – what does the data tell us? Available: https://learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/LW_NEET_data_briefing_April2025.pdf (Accessed: 9 September 2025)

Centrepont found that if the Housing Benefit taper rate was reduced to 55% and the earned income disregard was increased to £57 for everyone in supported housing, £13 million could be saved in the first year alone³⁴.

5.2. Are there barriers to education, employment and training specific to particular marginalised groups. Are there policies that can help to support NEET young people within these specific groups?

5.2.1. Extended and strengthen statutory entitlements for Care Leavers

All young people who grew up in care must be able to access the support they need to thrive in early adulthood. To help address the inconsistency of support available to care leavers across the country, a **new National Statutory Care Leaver Offer** should be created in collaboration with care-experienced young people; setting minimum standards of support that should be available to a young person irrespective of where they live, ensuring care leavers have the stability required to access training, education and employment opportunities³⁵.

Such an offer could include but is not be limited to:

- Free prescriptions and bus travel
- Help with rent deposits and guarantors
- Dedicated mental health support between 18-25 years old
- For those in need of welfare support - eligibility for the over 25 rate of Universal Credit (recognising that unlike many other young people, they will not have access to a 'bank of mum and dad')
- Greater support for care leavers who go to university

³⁴ Centrepont, (2025). Making Work Pay in Supported Accommodation. Available: <https://centrepont.org.uk/research-reports/making-work-pay-supported-accommodation> (Accessed: 09 September 2025)

³⁵ Barnardo's, (2025). Barnardo's Written Evidence: Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee. Available: <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Barnardo%27s%20written%20evidence%20to%20the%20Children%27s%20Wellbeing%20and%20Schools%20Bill.pdf> (Accessed: 10 September 2025)

6. CONFRONTING DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND TRAINING

6.1. What types of discrimination (e.g., based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, etc.) are most observed in employment, education, and training contexts for NEET young people? In what form do they present?

6.1.1. Making care-experience a protected characteristic

The **Independent Review of Children's Social Care** states that care-experienced people face stigma, discrimination, and negative assumptions in their day-to-day lives. Care-experienced children and adults are viewed as '*damaged*', and assumptions are made on their capability to do well in education, in the workplace, and to parent children of their own. This discrimination is of a similar nature to other groups, which are legally protected under the **Equality Act (2010)**. Despite this, care-experienced people do not currently have any legal protection against discrimination due to being care-experienced.

- The government should provide this protection by **making care-experience a protected characteristic**, as per the recommendation of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.
- Making care-experience a protected characteristic will put the onus on employers, public services, and policy makers to implement policies and programmes which promote better outcomes for care-experienced people and give them legal protection against direct and indirect discrimination.³⁶

Intersections between care-experience and other protected characteristics

29% of children in care are from non-white ethnic groups,³⁷ and as such may face discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. In London the proportion is much higher – **75% of the young people that we support at Drive Forward Foundation are from an ethnic minority background**. Young people from ethnic minorities experience large disparities in labour market and education outcomes – they're more likely to be in low-paid, insecure employment, are less likely to be awarded the highest degree classification, and when they achieve good education outcomes these are less likely to lead to secure, well-paid jobs compared to young people from a white background.³⁸

³⁶ MacAlister, *The independent review of children's social care: Final report*, Independent Review of Children's Social Care (government-sponsored body), May 2022, archived at The National Archives Web Archive, 8 March 2023, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122535mp_/https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf, accessed 2 September 2025.

³⁷ Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoptions* (Explore Education Statistics, 14 November 2024), published statistical release covering year ending 31 March 2024, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2024>, accessed 2 September 2025.

³⁸ Learning and Work Institute, *Minority Ethnic Youth Employment Outcomes: Rapid Evidence Review* (Leicester, 2022), <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Minority-ethnic-youth-employment-outcomes-REA.pdf>, accessed 9 September 2025.

About 13% of care leavers are recorded as having a disability, but research by Coram suggests the true number could be even higher, with over a quarter of care leavers (27%) reporting that they are affected by **a disability or long-term health problem**.³⁹ **More than half of children in care have Special Educational Needs**, compared to 18% of all children.⁴⁰ There are large gaps in employment, education, and training outcomes for those with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities compared to those without. A longitudinal study showed that those with SEN(D) were less likely to attain degree-level qualifications and spent significantly less time in employment, education, or training compared to those without SEN(D).⁴¹

- The intersections between care-experience, ethnicity, and SEN(D) means that many **care-experienced people experience multiple types of discrimination and disadvantage**, hampering their ability to succeed within education and the labour market.
- Measures to lower the NEET-rate for care-experienced young people also need to consider other factors which may influence their experience in education and the labour market, such as ethnicity and SEN(D).

6.2. Has your organisation or community taken any specific actions to confront discrimination in employment, education, or training? Please describe the types of initiatives, their target groups, any notable outcomes and provide any documentation available.

6.2.1. Forward On Racial Equality (FORE)

Forward On Racial Equality (FORE), established by Drive Forward Foundation after the killing of George Floyd, amplifies the voices of ethnic minorities and provides a space to address workplace discrimination. It gives young people direct access to senior management, ensuring concerns are dealt with at the highest level. Together with FORE members, Drive Forward created **a protocol treating race-related incidents as safeguarding issues**. These are reported to the Safeguarding Lead, discussed with senior management and the employer, and supported by a DFF staff member if the young person attends meetings. The young person is kept informed, offered counselling, and asked for feedback after one and six months. This protocol ensures incidents of racial discrimination are handled consistently and effectively.

6.2.2. Care to Career Movement

In 2024, Drive Forward Foundation launched the Care to Career Movement, which aims to bring in strategic partnerships to the organisation and increase the number of ring-fenced job

³⁹ Baker and Briheim-Crookall, *Disability, disparity and demand: Analysis of the numbers and experiences of children in care and care leavers with a disability or long-term health condition* (Coram Institute for Children / Coram Voice, October 2024), accessed 4 September 2025, https://www.coram.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Coram_Disability-Report.pdf

⁴⁰ Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, *Over half of school-aged children in care have special educational needs* (Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, accessed 4 September 2025), <https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/data-tracker/over-half-of-the-children-in-care-have-special-educational-needs-sen>

⁴¹ Parsons and Platt, *Special educational needs and disability: a lifetime of disadvantage in the labour market?* (CLS Working Paper 2022/4, London: UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies, May 2022), <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/CLS-Working-Paper-2022-4-Special-educational-needs-and-disability-a-lifetime-of-disadvantage-in-the-labour-market.pdf>, accessed 9 September 2025.

opportunities for care-experienced people, as well as raising awareness of the discrimination and barriers to employment that care-experienced people face.

6.2.3. Training with Line Managers and Mentors

A key part of the Drive Forward Model is providing training to line-managers at organisations which have partnered with us to provide mentoring to care-experienced young people and/or hire care-experienced young people. **Line managers and mentors receive trauma-informed training** on what it means to be in care, and how this may impact young people's experience of the workplace. This enables line managers and mentors to provide better support to care-experienced young people, thereby increasing the likelihood of sustained employment outcomes. Since the inception of the Civil Service Care Leaver Internship, we have trained over 200 Civil Service Managers, demonstrating our ongoing commitment to the success of the internship scheme.

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