

Written evidence submitted by Drive Forward Foundation

Evidence for the Education Select Committee – Further Education and Skills

Executive Summary

At Drive Forward Foundation, we have seen firsthand both the immense potential of care-experienced young people and the systemic barriers that prevent them from thriving. **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-olds. This number has remained stubbornly high for a generation, and we are determined to work with partners to address the disproportionately worse outcomes care experienced young people face.

Since 2010 we have been working towards our collective ambition to ***equalise NEET rates for care-experienced and non-care-experienced young people***. As part of that mission, we are committed to supporting care experienced young people to thrive in higher & further education and develop skills, which will set them on a path to financial security and fulfilling employment.

We see a massive amount of potential in the Government's introduction of Skills England, and we welcome the opportunity to provide evidence and potential partnership working in the future. **In this submission, we will focus on how Apprenticeships and Higher & Further Education can be leveraged to empower care-experienced young people into the workforce and contribute to the equalisation of the NEET rates for care-experienced young people.**

About Drive Forward

Drive Forward Foundation is a charity dedicated to supporting care-experienced young people aged 16–26 in London into sustainable and fulfilling employment, education, and training. As we approach our 15th year anniversary, we have empowered close to 5,000 young people to take charge of their futures by building meaningful careers.

Our services are specifically designed to meet the unique needs of this group, offering personalised 1-2-1 support, intensive employability training, professional mentoring, and a bespoke counselling service. Exclusively working with care-experienced young people, we enable them to gain the skills, confidence, and resilience needed to thrive in the workplace. Over the past decade, we've built a strong network of employer partners, offering exclusive training, work placements, and employment opportunities. Together, we are driving social mobility and creating more inclusive working environments that unlock the potential of care-experienced young people.

Care Leaver Outcomes in the UK

There are over 80,000 children in the care system and around 13,000 young people leave care each year¹. 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:

- 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-olds².
- By the age of 27, only 22 per cent of care leavers are in employment, compared to 57 per cent of non-care leavers.
- 1 in 3 care leavers become homeless in the first 2 years after they leave care³.
- 50% of children in care meet the criteria for a mental health disorder compared to 20% of all children and young people aged 8-25⁴.

Create secure, fulfilling and sustainable employment opportunities for care experienced young people

Make **apprenticeships** accessible and sustainable for care-experienced young people

For marginalised groups of young people, such as Care Leavers, apprenticeships can provide highly effective routes into sustainable employment. Nationally there has been a general trend of decreasing level 2 apprenticeships starts between 2016 – 2024. From 261,000 starts to just over 71,000 (-73%), while Level 4, 5, 6 and 7 apprenticeship starts have more than tripled, from about 37,000 starts to nearly 122,000 (+230%)⁵. This means that over 2023-24, there were over 70% more higher-level apprenticeship starts than Level 2. For vulnerable groups, the level 2 apprenticeships offer a route into a career without requiring significant educational qualifications. Instead, we see far more middle management apprenticeships being used to skill up a workforce already in place⁶. We welcome the recent announcement from the DfE to remove the need for adult apprentices to complete Level 2 Maths and English qualifications as part of their apprenticeships⁷. This will significantly benefit disadvantaged young adults, such as care leavers, who are more likely to have experienced disrupted education during childhood. We hope further reform is announced this year with the Growth and

¹ Statistics from the Department for Education (Nov 2024) [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

² Ibid <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2024>

³ Barnardo's (2024) [Care Leavers Reception Event booklet - FINAL.pdf](#)

⁴ Civitas (2023) [How many care leavers go to university?](#)

⁵ Regenerate (2025) [Unlocking apprenticeships for marginalised talent](#)

⁶ Ibid (2025) [Unlocking apprenticeships for marginalised talent](#)

⁷ Further Education Weekly (2025) [Apprentices: English and maths pass rule for adults scrapped](#)

Skills Level redesigned to encourage more level 2 apprenticeship starts, which will impact marginalised groups, such as care-experienced young people, the most.

Care leavers face significant barriers to employment. Employers can also take the initiative by implementing schemes to increase sustainable employment for care leavers. By earmarking specific positions or programmes for care leavers, organisations not only recognise the unique challenges these individuals have overcome but also provide them with a pathway to gain valuable work experience, develop essential skills, and build professional networks⁸. These ring-fenced apprenticeship schemes offer care leavers a supportive environment where they can receive tailored guidance and mentorship, helping to bridge the gap between education or training and sustainable employment. Moreover, such initiatives signal a commitment from employers and society at large to address the disparities faced by care leavers in the job market, promoting inclusivity and diversity while unlocking the potential of a talented and resilient workforce.

Example – Care Leaver Apprenticeship Model

Apprenticeships offer the opportunity to begin a career that can result in lifelong fulfilment and financial stability⁹, however they begin with lower pay than the national minimum wage, even if the young person is 21 (An apprentice aged 21 in the first year of their apprenticeship is entitled to a minimum hourly rate of £6.40)¹⁰. For care leavers, who are significantly more likely to be independent as a young adult, the pay difference can be the deciding factor between starting an apprenticeship or taking a low-paid role without career prospects. Increasing Apprenticeship completion among marginalised groups can significantly contribute towards the government's growth ambitions and should be considered a significant tool in their Skills Strategy¹¹. However, to accomplish this, the underlying reasons care experienced young people are unable to utilise apprenticeships requires intervention.

A recent survey of London local authorities, undertaken by the London Innovation and Improvement Alliance, discovered only 2.5% of the total proportion of care leavers in an EET outcome were enrolled in an apprenticeship in 2022 in London. Removing the financial barriers to accessing apprenticeships is the fastest route to increasing the proportion of economically inactive care leavers completing apprenticeships, but much more can be done to support care experienced young people. Below are a range of policy positions that if implemented, would support care experienced young people and would form the basis of a *best-practice model* that could be replicated across the country:

- National government should provide additional 'top up' funding for care leavers to participate in apprenticeships to ensure that they are not financially disadvantaged overall compared to other young people. Care leavers are likely to live independently and cannot afford to pay for essential living costs on a low-paid apprenticeship.

⁸ LGA (2025) [Supporting care leavers: A whole council approach | Local Government Association](#)

⁹ YFF (2024) [YF Apprentice YouthEmploymentToolkitUnwrapped Employers Jan2024-1.pdf](#)

¹⁰ Gov (2025) [National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage rates - GOV.UK](#)

¹¹ Regenerate (2025) [Unlocking apprenticeships for marginalised talent](#)

- Create a contextual attainment offer for care experienced young people. Many care experienced young people will leave school without qualifications due to the disrupted childhood experiences they've had. Providing greater flexibility, such as reducing the amount GCSE's a care experienced applicant is required to have, will support more care leavers into enrolling.
- Increase the income threshold for young people on apprenticeships before they start paying for supported accommodation. Supported accommodation is a barrier to accessing employment, the current benefits rules disincentivise care leavers from working
- Free/reduced public transport for care experienced young people. Travel costs to and from the apprenticeship can be the difference between a care leaver taking on a low paid role and enrolling on an apprenticeship which can provide the foundations for a career.
- Financial support for essential equipment and clothing required to undertake an apprenticeship.

Accessing Further and Higher Education

Children with experience of care are likely to have experienced trauma, moved schools more frequently than their peers and lived in multiple homes by the time they turn 18¹². According to new research published this week by the Rees Centre at the Department of Education, four times fewer care leavers and others with experience of children's social care enter higher education by age 22¹³. Given this context and many other additional factors, gaining qualifications is significantly harder for care experienced young people. Children in care begin school behind their peers and each key stage, fall further behind¹⁴. It is imperative higher and further education opportunities are not excluded for care experience young people due to their challenging childhoods and flexibility is baked into further and higher education for care experienced young people.

Resit Policy

The resitting of GCSE Maths and English is a significant issue. Around 175,000 young people every year do not achieve level 4 in their GCSE Maths and that increases to just over 180,000 for level 4 English. The vast majority are forced to re-sit those GCSEs within further education, however the structure and format of learning is delivered in exactly the same way, and it is not surprise that only a minority achieve the required level at their next attempt (only 17% go on to achieve a level 4 in Maths and 21% in English¹⁵).

¹² Civitas (2023) [Breaking-the-care-ceiling.pdf](#)

¹³ Rees Centre (2025) [Latest Rees Centre research reveals proportionally fewer young people with experience of children's social care enter and progress through higher education](#)

¹⁴ Ibid (2023) [Breaking-the-care-ceiling.pdf](#)

¹⁵ Joint Council for Qualifications

This re-sit policy is clearly not working, and indeed when in opposition Angela Rayner vowed to scrap the policy¹⁶. Maths and English hold the key to accessing further and higher education, but as previously demonstrated care leavers are more likely to lack the qualifications needed to access further and higher education opportunities, reinforcing educational disparities that have been entrenched since pre-school age. Improved policies and interventions are required at all stages of a care experienced person's journey through education to readdress the disproportionate outcomes they experience, but to ensure they have a fairer chance at accessing further and higher education the resit policy needs to be reconsidered.

*Recommendation **Require Functional Skills, or a similar more practical application of Maths and English, to be offered to applicants of level 4 courses who did not attain level 4 Maths and English in the first instance.***

¹⁶ Further Education Weekly (2018) [Labour would scrap GCSE English and maths resits policy](#)