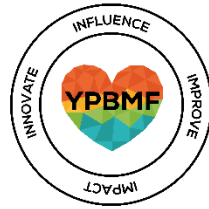




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National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum / Catch22 Children's Wellbeing & Schools Bill – Committee Briefing January 2025

Background

National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF), part of **Catch22**, is a forum of 133 local authority leaving care teams in England working together to share good practice to improve services and support for young people leaving care. The Young People's Benchmarking Forum (YPBMF) is made up of care experienced young people and is at the heart of our work.

NLCBF welcomes the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (CWSB) and its measures to improve the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. This briefing sets out a number of recommendations which NLCBF believes will help the CWSB to better meet the needs of care-experienced young people, based on both their own experiences and those of our local authority leaving care teams membership.

NLCBF recommendations to strengthen the CWSB for care leavers and to address barriers to opportunity they face:

- 1. Extension of corporate parenting duties to other government departments and public bodies**
- 2. Staying close: Entitlement beyond local authority assessment (clause 7)**
- 3. National offer for care leavers (clause 8)**
- 4. Entitlement for care leavers for Lifelong Links support (clause 7/8)**
- 5. Dedicated care-experience aware mental health support for care leavers (clause 8)**

1. Extension of corporate parenting duties to government departments and public bodies.

NLCBF is extremely concerned that the CWSB does not include the extension to corporate parenting duties; an extension also proposed by the Department for Education's (DfE) in its [Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive](#) policy statement

in November 2024. Local authorities and care experienced young people tell us many of the barriers they face to effective support are outside of the remit of their local authority and the Department of Education.

Our recent In Their Own Words survey of over 200 care experienced young people showed that:

- 77% struggle to buy food at least some of the time; 75% said that the cost-of-living crisis had affected mental health ([NLCBF May 2024](#))
- 45% said it is difficult to get an assessment for neurodiversity ([NLCBF Sept 2024](#))
- 25% had been advised to make themselves homeless to move to a more appropriate home ([NLCBF June 2024](#))

Such findings are also confirmed by our local authority leaving care team members: “We’ve reviewed just under 300 young people’s plans this quarter – Cost of living is a barrier in everyone’s planning.” (Leaving Care Manager, Jan 2025)

Such experiences, such as poor financial wellbeing, pose significant barriers to opportunities to staying connecting, engaging with education, being and staying in employment or housing, and improving physical and mental wellbeing. This requires, for instance:

- A national offer around health
- Better housing options that ensure affordable accommodation, which is safe, well maintained, and meets their needs.
- Fairer Universal Credit entitlement for care experienced young people

However, such changes are outside of the remit of local authorities and the Department for Education alone, and require the extension of corporate parenting duties to other government departments and public bodies.

While we acknowledge the legislative and other complexities involved in this type of cross-departmental arrangement, it should not be left up to secondary legislation or guidance alone to implement such changes.

NLCBF thinks that the CWSB should mandate for the extension of corporate parenting duties, and list the government agencies and public bodies this duty would apply to.

2. Staying Close: Extend entitlement beyond local authority assessment (clause 7)

Following their successful pilot, we welcome that clause 7 of the CWSB mandates for both the national roll out of Staying Close and the extension in age eligibility up to 25. Clause 7 would require local authorities to assess the need for Staying Close support for care leavers and to provide such support if needed.

However, clause 7 is insufficiently clear about a) the assessment criteria, and b) the definitions of Staying Close support. While we acknowledge that the DfE may wish to create flexibility, also in light of budget restrictions, NLCBF is concerned that the current wording in the CWSB will lead to significant local variation and rationing of support determined by financial considerations.

NLCBF therefore calls for clause 7 to be create a stronger legal entitlement of Staying Close support for all care leavers, except for when this in not required or the young person opts out.

3. National Offer for Care Leavers (clause 8)

We welcome the strengthening of the local offer in clause 8 of the CWSB, as initially mandated via section 2 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017. Currently benefits of the local offer remain limited for many young people leaving care who tend to experience regional variation.

Currently the local offer varies significantly across local authorities, creating a 'postcode lottery' as the [Care Leaver Local Offer website](#) demonstrates or, as Professor Mike Stein described it in his submission to the Independent Children's Social Care "[territorial injustice](#)". The extension in clause 8 of the CWSB does not sufficiently address such inequalities in essential provision and support for care leavers in their transition to adulthood and independence.

To level the playing field and ensure a more equitable provision for young people leaving care, NCLBF calls for the CWSB to mandate:

- A National Offer for Care Leavers to be incorporated in the Children and Social Work Act 2017;
- For this national offer to address the barriers care leavers face to stay connected with friends and family, engage with education and employment, afford daily living costs, and being able to access stable accommodation and appropriate health care provision.

As [research](#) has shown, an effective National Offer for Care Leavers would replicated elements of parental support, including free transport, WiFi, prescriptions, and council tax exemption. To address living costs, we would further urge the entitlement to the over-25 rate of Universal Credit for 18-25-year-old care leavers.

We note amendment NC40, as tabled by Ellie Chowns MP, in the amendment table, which we fully support.

5. Entitlement for care leavers for Lifelong Links support (clause 7/8)

The CWSB focus on promoting family relationships through family group conferencing and kinship care is commendable. However, this focus must continue for care leavers.

- Our research shows that only 52% of care experienced young people feel somewhat or very connected to their community, with older age groups feeling less connected ([NLCBF, 2024](#)).

The [Lifelong Links approach](#) works alongside local authorities to ensure that young people leaving care develop and maintain lasting, positive relationships and network to support their transition into adulthood, local support networks, and belonging. Developed by the Family Rights Group, Lifelong Links [evaluation](#) has proven to be cost effective in significantly improving children's sense of identity, mental and emotional wellbeing, and risk of homelessness.

Lifelong Links entitlement should be introduced as part of the National Offer for Care Leavers and/or Staying Close, as set out in sections 2 and 3 of this briefing.

5. Dedicated, timely, care experience aware mental health support for care leavers (clause 8)

In NLCBF's health and mental health survey of over 200 care experienced individuals across the UK, mental health concerns and difficulties accessing appropriate support were identified as a key concerns. Our research showed that:

- 62% care experienced individuals find it difficult to get the mental health support they need ([NLCBF, 2024](#))
- Leaving care professionals at local authorities tell us that mental health is a significant barrier to young people's engagement with education, training and employment, as well as to staying connected and managing their lives.

Care experienced individuals asked for dedicated and timely mental health support that is trauma informed and care-experience aware. As many have suffered adverse childhood experiences and struggled with (often undiagnosed or untreated) PTSD, access to [Operation Courage](#), specialist mental health provision for armed forces veterans,

NLCBF thinks that the significant mental health provision gaps for care leavers underlines the importance of extending corporate parenting to health bodies, as mentioned in section 1 of the briefing.

At the very least, care experienced young people should have the option to access Operation Courage type specialist mental health provision as part of the National Offer for Care Leavers.

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