

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Capturing the views of 200+ care
experienced individuals from around
the UK.

May 2025



Forewords

Foreword - Harlie Crolla (National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum & Young People's Benchmarking Forum Legend)

"At the Heart of the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum is the young people's forum...the beating heart of the forums work, the part that reminds professionals and carers why they do what they do and the importance of getting it right. Lives are at stake...our lives. The strength of the forum is the collaboration and co-production between young people and professionals, it takes time and resource, preparation and sometimes difficult conversations.

We wanted young people's first hand views and opinions from across the country of all leaving care ages; on topics they felt affected them on a day-to-day basis. We then collated the 'In Your Own Words' consultation and survey. The consultation looked at key issues facing care leavers and offered first hand experiences of the struggles our care leavers go through, financial setbacks, isolation, mental health issues - just to name a few.

We spent time working with young people to make sure their voices were captured, we then took this to the 'In Their Own Words' event, where we shared our findings to local authorities and organisations working with care experienced individuals in a hope they would take our findings back and start to make change. This consultation means a lot more care experienced individuals are going to see change and an improved system for more young people"

Foreword 2 - Hannah McCowen (NLCBF National Manager)

"This is such a powerful collection of reports and paints a clear picture of the realities of what life is like in 2024 for care experienced individuals. It also demonstrates the power and potential in co-producing solutions, with care experienced young people. I'd like to thank everybody who took part in the survey and in the process of co-producing the survey, event and report.

We have an opportunity with a new government, together with the highest public awareness and empathy around care experience that we've ever had, to really make a difference. There's an urgency to ensure that we can make a difference for care experienced young people today, as well as those who will leave care in the future. I invite you, as you read these reports. to think like a good parent would and consider: What can I do? "

Co-production model

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Within the Forum and in our work with partners and stakeholders we are committed to ensuring that co-production is at the heart of our approach to improving outcomes for care experienced individuals as they leave care.

Young People's Benchmarking Forum (YPBMF) was launched in 2008 as the care experienced participation group within the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF). Over a 15-year history YPBMF has developed from a place of consultation led by the priorities of professionals, to becoming a collaborative partner within the Forum. Our YPBMF Champions and Legends work with leaving care professionals to set strategic priorities and co-deliver projects including events, reports, workshops, and campaigns.”

Nat O'Brien (NLCBF Co-production & Engagement Lead)

“

A strong collective voice for care leavers.”

“

YPBMF is positive and solution-focused with real co-production and inclusivity at its heart.”

from YPBMF Impact Review 2021

“Our YPBMF Impact report from 2020 gathered the views of care experienced individuals, professionals and stakeholders on how YPBMF could improve its influence and impact. One of the key recommendations was for YPBMF to find ways to communicate experiences and views to senior policy and decision makers.

This led to the creation of our first ‘In Their Own Words’ event in July 2022, which was held online. We worked with care experienced individuals and partner organisations to select five priority areas from the NLCBF workplan. This included LGBTQ+ support, mental health support, and support to young parents. We invited senior policy and decision makers from local authorities, national government, third sector organizations and other stakeholders with an interest in the area. The event was powerful and received lots of great feedback from attendees on the day. It was followed by further interest and conversations including speaking about health, mental health, and support for care experienced parents at the governments cross ministerial board.

The first ‘In Their Own Words’ was powerful but we knew improvements could be made to the approach, preparation, and delivery. These changes can be understood through four areas of the Lundy Model of Participation:

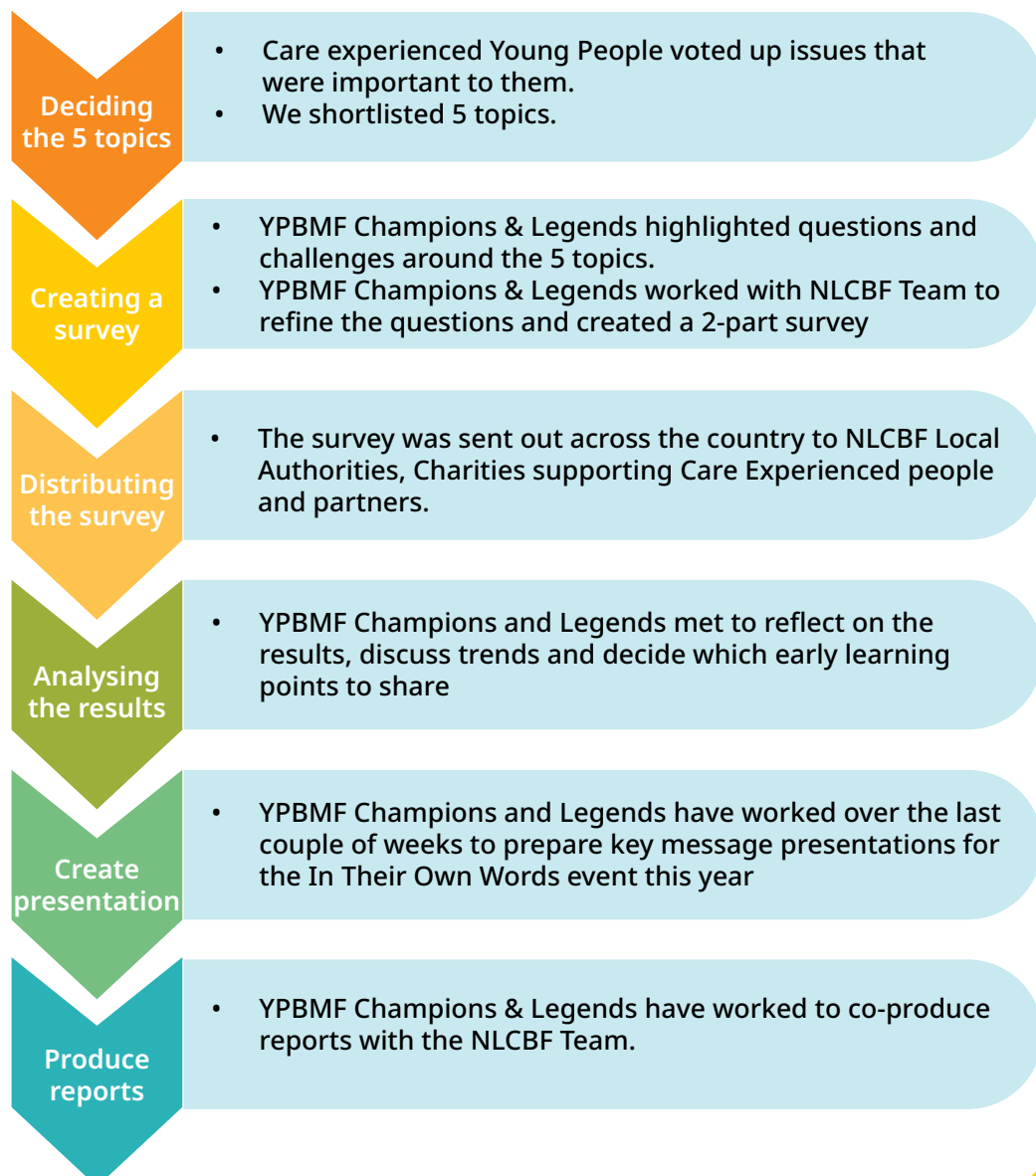
- **Space** – Children must be given safe and inclusive spaces to express their views.
- **Voice** – Children must be facilitated to express their view.
- **Audience** – The view must be listened to.
- **Influence** – The view must be acted upon.

In a post pandemic world, participation work is often a blend of in person and online activities. Our work is no different and our national reach means most of our participation activities take place online with in person meetings taking place in final preparation for events. Rapport and relationship building is at the core of our approach alongside good planning and flexibility, which creates supportive and inclusive spaces for care experienced individuals to share their views.

During the 2024 ‘In Their Own Words’ events and workshops, we knew from feedback that we wanted to improve space and voice within our work. Throughout the preceding year we used in-person events to establish an understanding of the aims of the organization through workshops and induction meetings with YPBMF while also building relationships through time socializing e.g. meals out. This benefitted the online meetings where we devised surveys, as YPBMF Champions and Legends understood the aims and had bonded with each other. Using a range of digital platforms to compliment and record decisions ensured that meetings were engaging and accountable e.g. polling software, digital whiteboards. This report details the areas we decided to look at, summarizes who we were able to engage, what we heard, and key messages for senior decision makers that YPBMF decided were important to share.

A midway point for this project was to share early findings from the survey with senior policy and decision makers. We worked collaboratively to create a format that helped our YPBMF Champions and Legends to deliver information comfortably, incorporated clear and achievable goals, and optimized the attendance and participation of our audience. We also ensured that volunteers presenting the findings of the reports met on a short residential prior to the event, ensuring that they were fully prepared and supported for their role on the day.

The team ensured that senior policy makers were “in the room” to hear and respond to findings. We confirmed attendance of care leavers service leads, Department for Education policy leads and invited guests such as the Local Government Association to the live event in Leeds. The event was live-streamed with virtual break-out workshops for targeted policy makers who could not attend in person – so that they could still feel the powerful impact of care experienced voices being delivered by care experienced advocates. Following five 10-minute presentations on the chosen areas we held roundtable discussions encouraging delegates to share best practice and policy opportunities that they were aware of. Workshops led into pledging sessions where delegates shared reflections on what they would go away from the event to do, helping us to understand the potential influence of the project.



Following the event, our YPBMF Champions and Legends worked with the NLCBF team to further analyze the results of surveys, create reports and share their reflections on the reports in forewords and blogs which are included in this summary and the connected themed reports. Importantly, the reports include solutions, key asks and examples of pledges that were submitted at the 'In Their Own Words Takeover' event. As a team, in collaboration with our care experienced sessional staff and volunteers, we are now creating opportunities to share our findings and promote solutions. We have already been invited to follow up meetings with senior policy makers. In previous years we have seen 'In Their Own Words' key messages lead to the development of Care Leavers Hubs' and 'Baby Box Projects' across the country, helping to close the postcode lottery in services for care experienced individuals. We hope that all the inspiring efforts of our care experienced staff and volunteers in collaboration with the NLCBF team, local authorities and partners within the sector will lead to positive change based on the Local and National Asks made throughout our reports.

We hope you can be part of that change."



Cost of Living – Executive Summary



...for care experienced young people costs are still increasing and benefits or wages not keeping up with today's prices and we have limited support networks to fall back on when times are tough... I hope this report helps you understand what it would be like to walk in our shoes and helps you think about what you can do to help change our lives..."

from Mark YPBMF Champion

Full foreword available at: [In Their Own Words – Cost of Living report](#).

Key findings:

77% struggle to buy food

75% said the Cost of Living Crisis had affected their mental health

Challenges

A large majority of care experienced individuals, including those in employment, are struggling to buy food and over half are worried about their debt. However, less than half have accessed additional financial support from their Local Authority in the last year. This increases the risk to young people, forcing them to make difficult choices - 58% of those that are struggling to buy food have found themselves in a vulnerable position when trying to pay for essentials. Given these concerning findings, it is not surprising that so many felt their mental health had been impacted by the Cost of Living Crisis.



Everything is a struggle, my wage is just enough to live on, but not enough to do things I actually want, just to live."

It's vital these challenges are addressed as throughout this survey we have seen how financial pressures and mental health affect all areas of life, from finding a [Safe and affordable home](#), to engaging with [Communities of support](#).

What can help?

Make everyday living costs manageable through regular financial support and provide affordable options for food, housing, utilities, and transport. Many care experienced individuals are living and supporting themselves independently at a younger age than the general population and don't have others to turn to for financial support and advice. They need access to funding that can be used flexibly for essentials and emergencies alongside guidance for understanding and managing their budget.

What we are asking for

- Give the Over 25 rate of Universal credit to care experienced young people from the age of 18.
- Extend the Household Support Fund, and ensure it is ring-fenced with care leavers recognised as a priority group for Cost-of-Living support across all local authorities.
- Don't assume support will look the same for everybody - offer flexibility in how support can be accessed and used. Think about how financial needs of particular groups differ and ask individuals what would help them.

Read the full report for the complete foreword, list of findings, examples of best practice, and local or national asks. [In Their Own Words – Cost of Living Report](#). Scan QR code below.



Mental Health & Health – Executive Summary

“...listening to the voices of care experienced individual is crucial to creating a system that can begin to address the gaps in health and mental health support for care-experienced young people and ensure they receive the care they deserve, allowing them to lead healthier and more fulfilling lives...”

from Nathan YPBMF Champion

Full foreword available at: [In Their Own Words – Mental Health & Health report.](#)

Key findings:

- **62%** found it difficult to get the mental health support they needed.
- **36%** say that their leaving care team are well trained in health and mental health, but 36% disagree.
- **31%** have a formal diagnosis, but a further 35% believe they are neurodivergent with many saying it is difficult to get the diagnosis or support that they need.

Challenges

Care experienced individuals often need a specialised approach to mental health support and many recorded themselves as neurodivergent. Yet they face specific barriers to accessing health services and many struggle to get the diagnosis and support that they need. We also heard that professional's knowledge and awareness strongly impact access to support. Individuals who felt their PA or leaving care team were well trained in mental health, found it easier to get the support they needed. Similarly, those who found it easy to get an assessment for neurodivergence found it easier to access support for this. However, almost half said it is difficult to get an assessment for neurodivergence.

“I recently had a mental health support request denied because I had 'enough support'....PA support and living in supported accommodation should not prevent you from getting a mental health referral.”

What can help?

Increase awareness of the specific challenges care experienced individuals face and improve the accessibility of services for support and diagnosis. Offering free prescriptions and dedicated mental health support helps to break down some barriers. However, care experienced individuals also benefit from additional support to stay physically and mentally healthy. Activities that involve being active, having fun, and connecting with others all support overall well-being.

“

Mental health care leavers nurse. We need more of those! Community mental health services are god awful. That really needs looking at.”

What we are asking for

- A national offer around health for care experienced individuals e.g. gym memberships, free NHS prescriptions, and access to NHS dentists in all areas.
- Dedicated Mental Health & Health training and support within all leaving care teams.
- Fund national research into Neurodiversity and care experience to better understand the scale and the needs of this group of care experienced individuals.

Read the full report for the complete foreword, list of findings, examples of best practice, and local or national asks. [In Their Own Words – Mental Health & Health Report](#). Scan QR code below.



Communities of Support – Executive Summary



...you may have been uprooted from one environment to another when entering the care system, affecting or indeed shattering that vital sense of belonging and identity...being a part of communities has countless benefits, such as reducing social isolation and loneliness by connecting with others, providing advice where needed and even emotional support in times of crisis..."

from Dyllan YPBMF Champion

Full foreword available at: [In Their Own Words –Communities of Support report.](#)

Key findings:

- **52%** of young people felt somewhat connected to their community, but older age groups feel less connected.
- Access to community services can be difficult, especially for leisure facilities.

Challenges

Meeting new people, travelling to new places, and a lack of information or communication can make care experienced individuals feel anxious and reluctant to access their community. In addition, neurodivergent young people, and those with mental health conditions often find appointments or events overwhelming. We also found that travel distance, cost, and reliability can be difficult to navigate, creating barriers to accessing the community.



Anxiety, plus I don't have much money to spend, so I'd rather not spend it on bus fares or giving petrol money."

What can help?

Maintain regular contact, ask about interests, and proactively share relevant opportunities. Activities which are specifically for care experienced young people provide valuable opportunities to build support networks but there needs to be a variety of activities which are free, accessible, and fun. Make sure all the details are included and use multiple methods of communication to get the message out to care experienced individuals. Acknowledge the anxieties and barriers, and provide support, such as covering transport costs or allowing a plus one.



I don't actually know anyone that lives in my area. When I moved, it would have been great to have the chance to sit with my PA and go through what's in the area."

What we are asking for

- Provide universal free travel and free gym membership for care experienced individuals with a +1 offer for gyms and activities.
- The Care Leaver Covenant to source a wide range of leisure and hobby offers for young people to get involved with including cinema, sports clubs, etc.
- Address the mental health barriers that prevent us being part of the community.

Read the full report for the complete foreword, list of findings, examples of best practice, and local or national asks. [In Their Own Words – Communities of Support Report](#). Scan QR code below.



Safe and Affordable Homes – Executive Summary



...feeling safe in your neighbourhood and home shouldn't be a luxury but some care experienced individuals might believe it to be... a secure and stable home would encourage young people to build foundations they'll need to thrive through education, employment or other things they want to do..."

from Esla YPBMF Champion

Full foreword available at: [In Their Own Words –Safe and Affordable report.](#)

Key findings:

- **49%** say care leavers are prioritised for housing in their local area.
- Only **19%** felt like they got all the support they needed to manage their monthly outgoings.
- **25%** have been advised to make themselves homeless to move to a more appropriate home.

Challenges

A lack of suitable housing options, high living costs, and housing systems which are difficult to navigate prevent care experienced individuals from finding a safe and stable home. Many felt unsafe due to high crime rates, and poor security measures at home, or in their neighbourhood. Some are even being advised to make themselves homeless to move to a more appropriate home and others are at risk of losing their home due to rent arrears. Whilst almost half feel they are 'doing ok' paying bills, very few said they were getting the support they needed to help them manage their living costs. On top of this, care experienced individuals have limited support networks to advise and support them with tasks such as repairs, decorating, or household chores.

What can help?

We must avoid assumptions that those living independently no longer need support. Instead, they need a place to call home - affordable accommodation, which is well maintained, in areas where they feel safe and connected. This includes practical and financial support for decorating and white goods alongside more flexibility in how the Setting Up Home allowance can be used. Supportive relationships that empower them to make decisions and overcome challenges can make a big difference, especially during transitions.

What we are asking for

- A clear national message that all care experienced individuals 18 – 25 years should be on priority banding.
- Expand the National House Project (NHP) to more local authorities – providing excellent support to get people in their own homes and learn how to manage their tenancy with a support network.
- A local offer that makes young people feel safe and secure e.g. Ring Doorbells, CCTV, and homes in safer areas.

Read the full report for the complete foreword, list of findings, examples of best practice, and local or national asks: [In Their Own Words: Safe & Affordable Homes](#). Scan QR code below.



Support after 21 & 25 years of age – Executive Summary

I turn 25 soon and my PA and leaving care team have all reassured me that they aren't washing their hands of me, this gives me a sense of security. Not everyone has that, but everyone should have that. ...I don't think most people would kick their child out at 21 or even 25. Remember that we are human, and a lot of us have experienced trauma ..."

from Reece YPBMF Legend

Full foreword available at: [In Their Own Words –Safe and Affordable report.](#)

Key findings:

- **26%** had their support withdrawn or reduced at 21 years or younger.
- **28%** had their support withdrawn or reduced at 25 years.
- *Very few know how to go back to the leaving care service and ask for help after support is withdrawn.*

Challenges

The majority of care experienced individuals do not know what support is available after the age of 21. In most cases this is because they are not at this stage yet, however some that are approaching 21 are still not aware despite wanting to find out. Those that were aware felt that the support got worse due to less contact with professionals, feeling abandoned, and reduced financial support. Most felt that support did not change at 25 as it had already been withdrawn at an earlier age, others said support was significantly reduced at 25. All of these changes come at an age where care experienced individuals are often managing other life transitions such as moving home.

... It's not acceptable because you get chucked out at 25 and everyone's 25 is different, which is why I don't agree with it. It should be if you have eligible care needs you get what you want and need."

What can help?

Every care experienced individual should know where and how to seek help and be able to access an up-to-date Care Leavers Local Offer. Every care experienced individual has different communication needs and preferences so it's important to communicate in different formats. If support is withdrawn services should stay in contact at least annually to reassure and remind care experienced individuals that they can still reach out for help and advice.

What we are asking for

- A clear offer for 21 - 25 years so they know what support is available.
- Extend, review and make sure Staying Put & Staying Close is funded to benefit as many care experienced individuals as possible.
- National funding for 21+ networks of support. Youth groups, activities, and care leaver projects from commissioned services and Care Leavers Hubs that are focussed on this age group.

Read the full report for the complete foreword, list of findings, examples of best practice, and local or national asks: [In Their Own Words: Support after 21 & 25 years of age report](#). Scan QR code below.





Notes



*Please scan QR code to
view the 'In Their Own
Words' page*

**Thank you to the care
experienced young
people and adults who
shared their views and
contributed to this report.**

Thanks to our YPBMF Champions, Legends and NLCBF Sessional workers who co-produced our workshops, events and reports.

Thank you to the Local Authority Leaving Care teams, Coram Voice, Become, Care Leavers National Movement, Drive Forward Foundation, and everybody who circulated the survey.

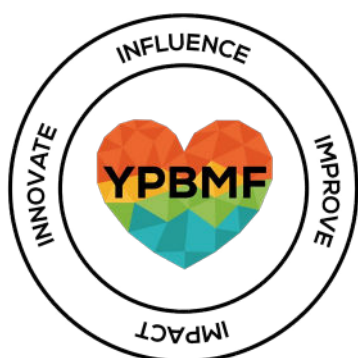
CONTACT US

Invite us to your events, ask us questions about the reports and let us know what you are planning to do as a result of reading our reports, listening to or watching our events:

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The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum is run by the charity Catch22 & funded through membership fees from local authorities.



**catch
22**

