

catch 22



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MAPPING EXERCISE: GOOD PRACTICE IN SUPPORTING CARE-EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE IN CUSTODY OR AT RISK



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This mapping exercise explored how Local Authorities (LAs), prisons, probation, police, and third sector organisations support care-experienced young people who are either in custody or at risk of custody. Using a combination of surveys and semi-structured interviews, the study sought to map examples of good practice that could be replicated, while also identifying barriers that prevent consistent and effective support.

KEY FINDINGS:

Identification: Many young people are not flagged as care-experienced due to inconsistent systems and poor data sharing

Support: Dedicated roles (e.g., care leaver leads, personal advisors) improve engagement, but provision is inconsistent.

Collaboration: Joint working produces better outcomes but is often reliant on goodwill rather than embedded structures.

Training: Training on care leavers is variable; trauma-informed approaches improve practice but are not universally implemented.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Standardise identification systems across all agencies.
- Ensure consistent access to dedicated care leaver support roles.
- Embed structured multi-agency collaboration protocols.
- Deliver mandatory, trauma-informed training across the workforce.
- Strengthen continuity of support for young people transitioning out of custody



The gangs didn't exploit me; the care and prison system did.

That's the trap. There's no way out, just the same cycle over and over

Young person - custody
Survey Interview



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This report has been prepared by Jayne Tanti, Care Leaver Criminal Justice Lead at NLCBF. Jayne brings a dual perspective: lived experience of the care system combined with extensive professional experience supporting children and young people in care and custody. This unique insight allows her to recognise the realities faced by care-experienced young people while also understanding the systemic challenges professionals encounter.

Jayne has delivered training and consultancy for local authorities, MOJ (Ministry of Justice), prisons, probation services, and voluntary sector organisations. This work includes developing and delivering programmes inside custody, providing direct support to young people, and equipping professionals with the skills to deliver trauma-informed care. This blend of practice and lived experience ensures this work is both authentic and actionable.

The TIRE Model

This work has been guided by the TIRE model, a framework that highlights four essential pillars of good practice for supporting care-experienced young people:

T – Trauma-Informed Practice: embedding approaches that recognise and respond to the lasting impact of trauma and instability.

I – Identification: ensuring care-experienced young people are consistently recognised so their entitlements and needs are acted upon at the earliest stage.

R – Relationships: prioritising stable, trusting, and consistent relationships, recognising these as the foundation for engagement and resilience.

E – Empowerment: creating meaningful opportunities for young people to have a voice, access advocacy, and shape their own pathways and plans.

The TIRE model has informed the analysis of good practice and barriers throughout this report and underpins the recommendations for strengthening support across agencies.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum secured funding from Catch22's Innovation award for a 12 month Justice Lead post to explore and share good practice around supporting care leavers in contact with the justice services. Alongside this mapping work, we are developing training materials & a series of online events to showcase good practice.

This work has been joint funded by the Catch22 Innovation award, investment from Catch22's Justice services and from the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum.

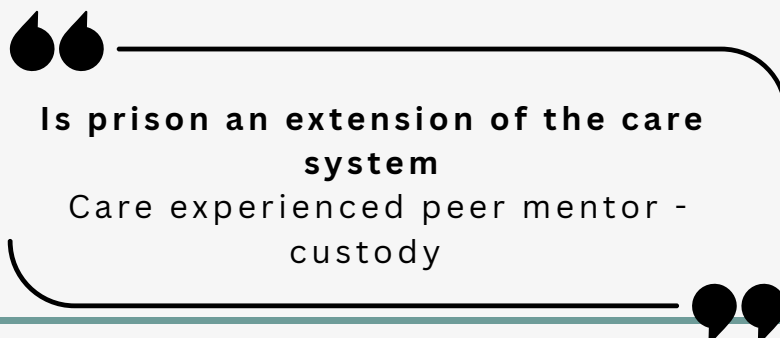
Who are we?

National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF), part of the Charity Catch22 is a forum of 135 local authority leaving care teams, and aims to improve services and support for care experienced young people. Representing over 85% of leaving care teams in England, NLCBF has a track record of influencing local authority practice and national policy. Catch22's Justice Hub Catch22 is a social business working across justice, education, apprenticeships and employability to build resilience, aspiration and prosperity in people and communities.

Catch22's Justice Hub delivers a wide range of services, working with young people and adults providing intervention, rehabilitation and victim services in prison and in the community.

Why this piece of work?

There are examples of good practice in different areas of the country in terms of the support police, prisons and probation offer to care experienced young people. We want to raise awareness of these and see them replicated across the country, so that these young people receive the best possible support. We also want to understand about the gaps in training and where we can use our networks to build better communication between leaving care and justice professionals.



INTRODUCTION-CONTINUED

Care-experienced young people are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. Research shows that nearly 50% of under-21s in custody have been in care at some point (Prison Reform Trust, 2022). These young people often experience trauma, disrupted attachments, and multiple placements moves, which can lead to psychological difficulties such as anxiety, mistrust of professionals, poor emotional regulation, and low self-esteem. They are also more likely to face school exclusion, insecure housing, and poor mental health, making them especially vulnerable when in custody (Centre for Social Justice, 2019).

Legislation such as the Children Act 1989, Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, and Children and Social Work Act 2017 requires Local Authorities (LAs) to support care leavers up to at least age 21, and up to 25 if requested. However, HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2021) reports that this support is not consistently applied in custodial settings, leaving significant gaps in identification, planning, and ongoing care.

Legislative Framework:

Professionals working with care leavers in custody have duties under several key pieces of legislation:

- Children Act 1989 – Establishes local authority responsibilities for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, including those leaving care.
- Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 – Extends support for care leavers up to age 21, and up to 25 if in education or training.
- Children and Social Work Act 2017 – Strengthens the duty to provide advice, assistance, and accommodation for care leavers, and clarifies the local authority's role.
- Human Rights Act 1998 & Equality Act 2010 – Require professionals to ensure care leavers' rights and equal treatment in custody.

Professional Duty of Care:

- Identify care leavers promptly on arrival in custody.
- Ensure care leavers have a pathway plan and access to Personal Advisors (PAs).
- Liaise with local authorities to maintain continuity of care.
- Ensure care leavers' safety, well-being, and access to education, training, and health services.

INTRODUCTION-CONTINUED

Entitlements for Care Leavers in Custody:

- Ongoing support from their responsible local authority.
- Assistance with accommodation, education, training, and employment planning.
- Access to health care, including mental health support.
- Advocacy support, including access to third sector organisation's that provide independent advocacy.

Personal Advisors (PAs)

PAs are appointed to guide care leavers through key transitions, including time spent in custody. Their statutory duties include visiting within 10 days of a young person entering prison and helping with pathway planning.

However, there are recurring challenges:

Delays in engagement: Over 25% of care leavers did not meet their PA until age 18 or older, limiting effective planning (Ofsted, 2022).

Inconsistent relationships: Some care leavers reported cancelled visits, lack of trust, or feeling unsupported (Ofsted, 2022).

Training gaps: While PAs are skilled in practical support (housing, finances), many lack trauma-informed training to address emotional and psychological needs (NIHR, 2024).

Information-sharing barriers: PAs often struggle to access timely information about a young person's movements in custody, especially when young people are held outside their "home" Local Authority.

Prison Staff

Prison officers and staff are often the first line of support, yet they face challenges balancing care and control.

- Research shows staff in Young Offender Institutions often feel ill-equipped to respond to trauma and complex needs, as their training focuses more on discipline and safety (Day, 2025).
- High staff turnover and limited resources make consistent relationship-building difficult, leaving some care-experienced young people unsupported.
- Positive initiatives exist for example, the Rees Foundation provides training delivered by care-experienced trainers, improving staff awareness and empathy (Rees Foundation, 2023).

INTRODUCTION-CONTINUED

Police

Police play a critical role in the early identification of care-experienced young people:

West Midlands Police now screen for care-leaver status during custody risk assessments, an example of good practice (College of Policing, 2025).

In Scotland, Police Scotland's Care Experienced Colleagues Group brings care-experienced voices into policing policy, reinforcing corporate parenting responsibilities (Police Scotland, 2022).

Despite these innovations, there is currently no consistent way to record and transfer this information into courts or prisons, leading to loss of crucial data during transitions.

Probation Services

Probation officers support resettlement and supervision post-release. However, HM Inspectorate of Probation (2024) found:

Insufficient trauma-informed training: Many probation staff are not confident in addressing the unique needs of care-experienced young people.

Information gaps: Important details about a young person's care history were missing in two-thirds of case reviews, undermining effective planning.

Good practice: Where probation services worked closely with LAs and voluntary sector partners, support was more tailored and effective.

Summary

Across PAs, prison staff, police, and probation, the evidence shows good practice exists but is inconsistent. Early identification is patchy, information-sharing is fragmented, and staff often lack training or resources to respond effectively.

Multi-agency collaboration, when it happens, demonstrates significant benefits, but remains uneven across regions and institutions.

OBJECTIVES

- To explore how key agencies support care-experienced young people in custody or at risk.
- To identify replicable examples of good practice.
- To highlight barriers and challenges to effective support.
- To focus on four key areas: identification, support, collaboration, and training.

Scope

This mapping exercise included responses from 67 LAs, prisons, probation services, police, and third sector organisations.

Methods: surveys and interviews with professionals.

Limitations: The report represents a snapshot of practice rather than a full national picture. While responses were received from a range of geographical areas across England, not every area contributed, which means the findings cannot represent all regions. However, contributions were gained from all key organisations.

Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was used, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interview insights.

Data Collection

Online survey distributed to agencies 67 professionals completed the survey

Semi-structured interviews with 12 professionals.

Timeframe: June-September 2025

Data Analysis

Survey data analysed descriptively.

Interviews thematically coded under four focus areas.

Lived Experience: Young Peoples Views

This section was co-produced with members of the **YPBMF**, all of whom have lived experience of being in care and/or in custody. Additional interviews were also conducted with care-experienced young people outside the forum to ensure a wider range of perspectives. All insights have been anonymised and directly informed the findings and recommendations presented here. These reflections offer an unfiltered insight into what it truly feels like to be care-experienced within the criminal justice system, bringing to life the daily realities behind the data, fear, isolation, and resilience in the face of systems not designed with them in mind.

Key Themes and Messages

1. Fear of Disclosure and Lack of Psychological Safety

Young people described how unsafe it feels to disclose that they are care-experienced. Many spoke of worrying about being judged, labelled, or treated differently, and of not knowing what would happen to the information they share. This fear is rooted in a lifetime of inconsistent responses from professionals and systems. It highlights the urgent need for environments where care-experienced people can feel psychologically safe, where their identity is understood, respected, and protected.

2. Staff Awareness, Trauma, and Cultural Understanding

Participants emphasised the lack of understanding and empathy from staff who interact with them. Too often, professionals see “offending behaviour” rather than the trauma behind it. Some young people spoke about how care-experienced often felt like the reason they were targeted by police and arrested. Several young people spoke powerfully about the lasting impact of being arrested and strip-searched. These moments were described as *distressing*, *humiliating*, and *dehumanising*. One young person stated bluntly: “**Prison is dehumanising.**” For many, these experiences triggered memories of earlier trauma and reinforced feelings of fear, shame, and invisibility. What hurt most, they said, was that “***no one checked if they were okay afterwards. There was no emotional support, no conversation, no care, just a silence that left them to cope alone***”.

Young people also highlighted that staff often lack awareness of the cultural backgrounds and needs of Black and minority ethnic care-experienced individuals.

They spoke about not having culturally appropriate support, role models, or opportunities to maintain connections with their heritage. Combined with experiences of racial bias or discrimination, this gap can leave young people feeling further isolated and misunderstood. Recognising and respecting cultural identity is essential to providing equitable, trauma-informed support.

3. Inequality and Isolation

Many participants spoke about feeling materially and emotionally different from peers who have family support. While others may have families to send in clothes, toiletries, or money, care-experienced young people often go without. Something as small as deodorant or a clean T-shirt becomes a reminder of what they are missing. One young person put it simply but powerfully: **“A care leaver is a care leaver, no matter where they’re from.”**

This captures the frustration about postcode lotteries and inconsistent support.

Care-experienced young people should not have to rely on luck or geography to have their basic needs met.

4. Concerns About Professional Understanding and Rights Awareness

Another recurring theme was the lack of understanding from those tasked with supporting them. One young person shared:

“It is worrying that people responsible for supporting us don’t always understand what we have been through or what our rights are.”

This sentiment highlights both the disappointment and fatigue many care-experienced young people feel, having to repeatedly explain their experiences to professionals who already know. It demonstrates the gap between policy intentions and the lived reality of those the system is meant to protect.

5. Positive Reflections

Professionals' Willingness to Learn Despite the challenges shared, young people also recognised moments of hope. Many professionals involved in the mapping work expressed a genuine desire to learn and improve. One young person reflected:

"It's good to know professionals want training to do better, they just need the right support and leadership."

This hope is fragile but meaningful. It shows that when professionals are open and willing to listen, trust can begin to rebuild

Recommendations from Lived Experience

- **Training must be developed and delivered by care-experienced people, including black and other ethnic minority voices.**

This ensures authenticity, relevance and that cultural and racial considerations are embedded in the content.

- **Training should be mandatory and embedded, not optional or inconsistent**

As one participant said, the expectation that professionals support care-experienced people without training **"echoes what many of us have felt, that we are navigating systems ill-equipped to understand and respond to our specific needs."**

- **Cultural awareness must be central to practice.**

Professionals need to understand and respond to the specific needs of Black and minority ethnic care-experienced young people, including supporting cultural identity, heritage connections, and addressing experiences of racial bias or discrimination.

- **Lack of understanding undermines trust and perpetuates disadvantage.**

When professionals are not trauma-informed, culturally aware, or knowledgeable about care experience, it reinforces cycles of isolation and disengagement, leaving young people to navigate the system alone.

Embedding co-produced, trauma-informed, and care-experienced-led training across agencies is essential to closing this gap and creating systems that truly understand, value, and respond to care-experienced young people of all backgrounds.

Voices of Experience

“A care leaver is a care leaver, no matter where they’re from.” “It is worrying that people responsible for supporting us don’t always understand what we have been through or what our rights are.”

“It’s good to know professionals want training to do better, they just need the right support and leadership.”

“No one asked if I was okay. After the strip search, I just felt empty, like I didn’t matter.”

“Prison is dehumanising.”

“Sometimes I feel like no one sees me as a Black care leaver, my culture, my identity, my history, it’s invisible.”

Note: This section and the accompanying quotes were co-produced with the young people involved in the consultation. All contributors have lived experience of being in care and/or custody, and their voices have directly shaped the findings and recommendations presented. Additional interviews with care-experienced young people outside the forum reinforced these themes, demonstrating that these experiences are widely shared.

FINDINGS

Section 1: Identification

Identification of Care-Experienced Young People

Good Practice

Police Screening: Some police forces are taking positive steps to identify care-experienced young people early. For example, West Midlands Police screen for care-experienced status during risk assessments, which helps officers recognise vulnerabilities and additional support needs at the earliest point of contact.

Advocacy Awareness: Early identification can also trigger access to advocacy services such as NYAS and Become who run an advice line. These services support care-experienced young people in understanding their rights and accessing support during custody and on release. When properly informed, young people can use advocacy to challenge decisions, understand entitlements, and navigate pathways more effectively. However, awareness of these services is often low, and prison or probation staff are not always aware how to facilitate access.

Limitations / Barriers

- **Transition Gaps:** While identification occurs at police contact, due to poor data-sharing systems, this information is not consistently recorded or transferred to court or prison systems. As a result, the young person's care history often does not inform support later in the criminal justice process.
- **Prison Reception / Induction Screening:** Prisons typically ask about care experience during reception or induction. However, young people may not disclose this information for several reasons:
 - Stigma or fear of judgment – they may worry about being labelled or treated differently.
 - Mistrust of staff – especially if they have had negative experiences with authorities.
 - Perceived irrelevance – they may not believe that disclosing their care status will lead to meaningful support.
 - Timing or environment – being asked sensitive questions during a stressful reception process can reduce willingness to share.

FINDINGS-CONTINUED

Fear of consequences – concerns about being treated as higher risk or having information misused.

Advocacy barriers: Even when services like NYAS and Become are available, young people often do not know they are entitled to support. Access can also be restricted due to custody protocols, and staff are not always aware how to facilitate visits or involvement, creating gaps in independent advocacy support.



I didn't tell anyone I was in care when I first came into prison. I didn't want other lads to know, and I didn't trust what would happen with that information.

Young person, in custody



Interpretation:

Early identification at police or reception stage is a positive step, but without systems to record, share, and act on this information, the benefit is limited. This highlights a critical gap between identification and actionable support within the criminal justice pathway.



Police are asking about care history at risk assessment, which is good, but once the young person goes to court or enters prison, there's nowhere to record it, so it doesn't inform support.

Police custody professional - Survey interview



FINDINGS-CONTINUED

Section 2: Support

Good Practice

Some prisons have introduced dedicated care leaver specific point of contact (SPOC's), usually located within equality teams or offender management units, to act as points of contact for care-experienced young people. While provision varies across the prison estate, these roles provide opportunities to build awareness and strengthen support pathways.

External organisations such as the Rees Foundation have also contributed wraparound support models. They deliver specific courses for care-experienced young people in custody, designed to build confidence, promote resilience, and provide practical life skills. These programmes offer valuable opportunities for young people to develop, although some prison staff reported that the courses do not always run as efficiently as intended due to staff shortages and resource pressures.

A particularly strong example of good practice is seen in Durham Local Authority's partnership with HMP Durham. Their approach demonstrates how local authorities and prisons can collaborate to improve lived experiences and reduce barriers for care-experienced young people.

Drop-in Cafés: Durham LA runs regular sessions inside the prison where care-experienced young people can speak with staff about their rights, entitlements, and pathway planning. This informal environment helps to break down barriers, reduce stigma and encourage disclosure of care status.

Support for Out-of-Area Young People: Durham LA does not restrict its support to young people from its own area. Staff actively liaise with Personal Advisors (PAs) in other local authorities to ensure continuity of care and help overcome common barriers caused by cross-boundary issues.

FINDINGS-CONTINUED

Prison Packs: In collaboration with the prison, Durham LA has developed “welcome packs” containing bedding, clothing, and basic items. These mimic what a young person might receive from family, helping to reduce feelings of isolation and inequality.

Probation and PA support Example

One young person who was at risk of contact with gang members he was affiliated with. His PA identified the risk of attending a probation appointment in the town centre and intervened to ensure a safe pathway. Without the PA’s intervention, the young person would have failed to make the appointment, potentially resulting in a recall to custody.

Custody-Specific Local Offer: Coventry LA has tailored its Local Offer to address the specific needs of care-experienced young people in custody. This includes guidance on entitlements, emotional support, and access to resettlement planning. <https://www.coventry.gov.uk/childrens-social-care/care-leavers/4>

This holistic approach illustrates how partnership working can mitigate the sense of disconnection from family that many care-experienced young people face in custody and can also model replicable practices for other regions.

Barriers

Despite these examples of innovation, significant barriers remain in supporting care-experienced young people:

- Lack of continuity between custody and community disrupts stability, with care-experienced young people often reporting inconsistent engagement from their PAs, particularly if they are held outside their home authority.
- Personal Advisor (PA) visits are not always accessible. Young people may have moved prisons without their PA being updated, making coordination difficult. In some cases, young people do not recognise that the person attending under a legal visit is their PA and therefore choose not to attend. Others may refuse visits for personal reasons, such as mistrust, disengagement, or a desire to avoid discussing care status in a prison setting. This creates a gap in relationship-building and pathway planning.

FINDINGS-CONTINUED

- Resource pressures mean that not all prisons can support initiatives like Durham's. Staff workloads (e.g., offender managers with large caseloads) limit time available for individualised support.
- Varied local offers create confusion about entitlements. What is available to a young person often depends on where they are from, not what they need.
- Limited training for both prison staff and PAs in trauma-informed practice can reduce confidence in engaging with this group effectively.
- Third sector support is inconsistent. While organisations like the Rees Foundation offer valuable interventions, access is dependent on the area the young person is from and the prison they are in. This means some young people benefit from additional courses or resettlement preparation, while others miss out due to geographical or funding differences.
- Some prisons provide access to advocacy support services such as NYAS and the Become Advice Line (via the young person's pin). Where prisons do support the Become Advice Line, young people often face additional barriers such as lack of in-cell technology, limiting privacy, and fear of disclosing their care leaver status in front of others.

This inconsistency directly impacts the equity of support during custody and on resettlement.



I have so many cases on my workload. I couldn't give care leavers the time they really needed, even when I wanted to.

Prison Offender Manager
Mapping survey



FINDINGS-CONTINUED

Section 3: Collaboration

Good Practice



Collaboration between agencies is critical to ensuring continuity of care and effective resettlement for care-experienced young people. Examples of good practice identified in the research include:

Regular Multi-Agency Meetings: In some areas, prisons, local authorities, probation, and third sector organisations meet regularly to share information, coordinate support, and review individual cases. This helps improve transitions from custody to the community and reduces the likelihood of duplication or gaps in provision. The Always Hope project (University of Sussex, 2024) provides evidence that integrated planning across prison, probation and leaving care services significantly improves outcomes for care-experienced young adults during and after custodial sentences. The evaluation found that joint planning ensures that pathways for release are clearer, responsibilities between practitioners are better coordinated, and accountability is enhanced. Young people in the project reported better awareness of support available, while professionals noted that earlier identification of care leaver status allowed for more consistent resettlement planning.

Third Sector Partnerships: Organisations such as the Care Leaver Covenant and other charities play a critical role in filling gaps where statutory services cannot provide consistent support. They offer mentoring, employment opportunities, and resettlement guidance, often stepping in where local authority or probation capacity is limited (Care Leaver Covenant, 2022).

FINDINGS-CONTINUED

West Midlands Police & LA Collaboration: A specific example of effective collaboration occurred when West Midlands Police identified a young person's care-experienced status through their risk assessment process in custody. This information allowed police to contact the young person's PA, who confirmed that the individual was in a housing crisis. Multi-agency coordination, including support from the local authority, ensured emergency accommodation was provided before release, reducing immediate vulnerability and lowering the risk of reoffending. This demonstrates how early identification combined with coordinated action can have a tangible impact on outcomes for care-experienced young people.

Where these practices are embedded, they demonstrate that structured collaboration leads to stronger relationships, more consistent planning, and better outcomes for young people.

Barriers

Despite positive examples, collaboration remains inconsistent and fragmented across the system. Key barriers identified include:

- **Agencies Working in Silos:** Prisons, probation, local authorities, and police often operate independently, with minimal coordination. This limits opportunities for information-sharing and results in duplication or missed support.
- **Confusion Over Responsibilities:** Professionals across different agencies expressed uncertainty over who holds ultimate responsibility for care-experienced young people in custody. Evidence suggests some Personal Advisors (PAs) believe responsibility lies with prisons, while prison staff assume it lies with the local authority. This confusion leaves young people at risk of "falling through the gaps" (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021).
- **Pathway Planning Inconsistencies:** Pathway planning is not always integrated across agencies. Even where planning is taking place, it is often inconsistent, with responsibilities applied unevenly between local authorities and prison settings.

FINDINGS-CONTINUED

- **Patchy Collaboration:** Where services attempt to work together, arrangements are often ad hoc and reliant on individual champions rather than formalised structures. This means that good practice depends heavily on the presence of motivated staff, and when they leave, the collaboration often breaks down.
- **Lack of Role Clarity:** Professionals frequently reported limited understanding of each other's roles and remits. For example, probation officers may not fully understand the statutory duties of PAs, while local authority staff may be unfamiliar with prison processes. This lack of role clarity reduces trust and hinders the development of coordinated approaches.
- **Access Barriers to Advocacy Services:** Young people may not be able to contact Advocacy services due to lack of in-cell technology, limited privacy or lack of awareness by the young person and staff. This can prevent timely intervention and reduce opportunities for support during custody and on release.

“We keep asking each other whose responsibility it is. The prison thinks it's the LA, the LA thinks it's probation. In the end, the young person gets lost.”

Probation Officer



Overall, while collaboration is widely recognised as essential, systemic barriers and role confusion mean that effective multi-agency working is far from embedded.

FINDINGS-CONTINUED

Section 4: Training

Good Practice

Some regions have implemented trauma-informed training, which has improved staff awareness of the needs of care-experienced young people and strengthened their confidence in engaging appropriately.

West Midlands Police provide an example of effective practice: through partnership with the Care Leaver Covenant, custody officers received targeted training on the experiences and needs of care-experienced young people. Officers reported being more knowledgeable, empathetic, and confident, resulting in better identification of care-experienced young people and timely contact with Personal Advisors (College of Policing, 2025).

Training has also benefited probation officers in areas where local authorities or third sector organisations have delivered joint training sessions, helping them understand the statutory responsibilities of LAs, prison processes, and the role of PAs.

We are expected to take on this role supporting care leavers, but we have never been given any training on how to do it.
Criminal Justice Professional
Mapping survey

Barriers

Despite these examples, training provision remains inconsistent across agencies:

- Many staff report receiving no formal training on care leavers' needs, including Police, prison staff, PAs, and probation officers.

FINDINGS-CONTINUED

- Prison SPOCs highlighted gaps in knowledge: one did not know what a young person was entitled to, while another lacked confidence to challenge the LA when a young person was entitled to support.
- Many PAs are unaware of the needs of care-experienced young people in custody or at risk, including their role as an appropriate adult or the procedures for prison visits.
- There is limited cross-agency understanding: professionals often lack awareness of other organisations' roles, responsibilities, and processes.
- All professionals surveyed highlighted the need for joint training, which could include prisons, probation, PAs, police, and third sector organisations, to build mutual understanding, strengthen collaboration, and improve outcomes.
- Importantly, all participants were open to training, recognising that it would improve their confidence, ensure consistent support, and help young people access the services and entitlements they need.



I feel like I am expected to support care leavers in really complex situations, but I don't know how to do it.

Criminal Justice Professional
Mapping survey



DISCUSSION-INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

This research confirms national concerns: while examples of good practice exist, they are patchy and inconsistent across the system.

Identification (Section 1): Early identification by police, such as West Midlands Police risk assessments, demonstrates positive outcomes when information is shared promptly with PAs. However, inconsistencies in recording, data sharing, and young people's willingness to disclose leave gaps that prevent timely interventions.

Support (Section 2): Dedicated care leaver officers, Durham LA's drop-in cafés, prison packs, and Rees Foundation courses provide meaningful interventions. Yet, resource constraints, inaccessible PA visits, and inequitable third sector support mean many young people do not consistently receive support in custody or on resettlement.

Collaboration (Section 3): Multi-agency working improves outcomes when effective, such as the West Midlands Police example. Nevertheless, siloed working, unclear responsibilities, and reliance on individual champions limit sustained collaboration and integrated pathway planning.

Training (Section 4): Trauma-informed training and joint cross-agency initiatives improve awareness, confidence, and professional engagement. However, high turnover, inconsistent provision, and limited understanding of other agencies' roles reduce overall effectiveness.



Overall, care-experienced young people remain vulnerable to falling through the gaps, with support largely dependent on geography, available champions, and individual organisational resources.

COMPARISON WITH EXISTING LITERATURE

Prison Reform Trust (2022) and HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2021) highlight the urgent need for systemic changes in how care leavers are supported in custody, echoing findings that identification, support, and multi-agency collaboration are inconsistent.

Laming (2016) emphasises the importance of trauma-informed training, clear role responsibilities, and consistent flagging systems to ensure care-experienced children and young people receive timely and appropriate interventions.

This mapping work supports these conclusions and adds new evidence from survey and interview data that demonstrates:

- PA visits are often inaccessible or ineffective due to logistical, procedural, or relational barriers.
- Third sector provision varies by region and prison, affecting equity of care.
- Multi-agency collaboration is frequently reliant on informal champions, risking disruption when personnel change.

Implications

To improve outcomes for care-experienced young people, agencies must move from ad-hoc, location-dependent practices to embedded, systemic approaches:

- **Consistent Identification:** Implement national standards for flagging care-experienced status across police, courts, and prisons.
- **Equitable Support:** Ensure every young person has access to care leaver officers, prison packs, and tailored interventions regardless of location.
- **Formalised Multi-Agency Collaboration:** Establish structured meetings, joint pathway planning, and clear role responsibilities to reduce siloed working and reliance on individual champions.
- **Cross-Agency Training:** Deliver consistent, trauma-informed, joint training across prison staff, PAs, probation, police, and third sector organisations to enhance awareness, confidence, and mutual understanding.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Embed evaluation mechanisms to ensure good practice is replicated, scaled, and sustained across regions.

By addressing these areas, agencies can guarantee that care-experienced young people receive the support they are entitled to, reduce reoffending risk, and improve psychological, social, and resettlement outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE STEPS

Based on the findings from Sections 1–4, survey/interview data, and recent developments in extending corporate parenting duties, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Standardised Identification Processes

- Implement consistent flagging systems across police, courts, and prisons.
- Ensure care-experienced status is recorded, shared, and followed through with PAs and relevant agencies.
- Create safe and confidential reporting mechanisms to encourage disclosure during induction and screening.

2. Dedicated and Equitable Support

- Establish dedicated care leaver officers in all prisons, with clearly defined responsibilities.
- Ensure access to prison packs, drop-in support, and tailored Local Offers regardless of the young person's home authority.
- Enhance PA engagement: visits should be accessible, known to the young person, and coordinated with custody schedules.
- Improve access to third sector support, ensuring programmes are consistently available across regions and prisons.

3. Formalised Multi-Agency Collaboration

- Embed structured collaboration frameworks between prisons, probation, PAs, local authorities, police, and third sector organisations.
- Hold regular multi-agency meetings and joint pathway planning to reduce reliance on individual champions.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities to ensure continuity of care and eliminate confusion.

4. Cross-Agency and Trauma-Informed Training

- Deliver joint, mandatory, trauma-informed training for all professionals.
- Training should cover statutory entitlements, roles of other agencies, and practical procedures such as appropriate adult visits and resettlement planning.
- Provide refresher training to maintain knowledge despite staff turnover.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE STEPS

5. Centralised Accessible Database

- Develop a secure, centralised database accessible to prisons, probation, police, PAs, and third sector organisations.
- Include care status, pathway plans, contact details, and support needs.
- Ensure data sharing protocols are aligned with legislation (e.g., GDPR).
- Establish a clear approach for local authority and criminal justice professionals to contact each other.

6. Mandatory Role Agreements

- All staff should sign formal role agreements clarifying responsibilities, support interventions, and expected collaboration standards.
- This will increase accountability and reduce confusion over agency responsibilities.

7. Implementing Corporate Parenting Duties Across All Agencies

- Policy Integration: Update policies in police, prisons, probation, and third sector organisations to include corporate parenting duties.
- Training & Workforce Development: Provide mandatory, agency-specific, and joint training, including practical guidance and case studies.
- Monitoring & Accountability: Appoint champions, establish oversight boards, and integrate corporate parenting performance into appraisal systems.
- Practical Tools: Provide guidance packs, templates, and access to a centralised database with care-experienced young people's support plans.
- Culture & Leadership: Leadership should champion corporate parenting, promote trauma-informed practice and recognise exemplary support.

8. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Replication of Good Practice

- Evaluate initiatives like Durham LA's drop-in cafés, West Midlands Police interventions, and Rees Foundation courses.
- Develop replication frameworks to expand successful models nationally.
- Use evaluation data to continually improve services and ensure consistent, high-quality support.

NLCBF NEXT STEPS

Building on the findings of this mapping work and the voices of care-experienced young people, the next phase will focus on turning insight into action. These next steps aim to strengthen support for care-experienced young people in or at risk of custody by embedding trauma-informed, collaborative, and co-produced practice across agencies.

1. Develop and Deliver Trauma-Informed Training for Personal Advisors

A specialist training programme will be developed and delivered for Personal Advisors (PAs) to increase their confidence and skills in supporting young people in custody.

The training will focus on trauma-informed approaches, understanding the impact of custody on care-experienced young people, and building safe, trusting relationships within custodial settings.

It will also explore the roles and responsibilities of PAs in custody, how to collaborate effectively with prisons, and how to advocate for young people's rights and wellbeing.

Training will be co-produced and co-delivered with care-experienced young people who have lived experience of custody, ensuring authenticity and relevance.

2. Develop Trauma-Informed Handbooks

Two practical handbooks will be produced to support professionals working with care-experienced young people in custody.

Handbook for Personal Advisors: A detailed, trauma-informed guide to supporting young people before, during, and after custody. It will outline key responsibilities, processes, and best practice for maintaining relationships and ensuring continuity of care.

Handbook for Prison Staff: A concise, practical resource explaining what it means to be care-experienced, the impact of trauma, and how to identify and respond to the needs of care-experienced individuals in custody. This guide will include information on the role of PAs, pathway planning, and how prison staff can work collaboratively with external agencies.

NLCBF NEXT STEPS

3. Deliver a Three-Part Online Training Series: Bridging the Gap

A three-part online training series, Bridging the Gap: Supporting Care-Experienced Young People in Contact with the Justice System, will be delivered to professionals across sectors.

The series will draw directly from the mapping work, highlighting both good practice and barriers identified through consultation with young people and professionals. Each session will feature guest speakers from different sectors, including prisons, probation, local authorities, and the police, alongside young people with lived experience of care and custody.

Session 1: Early Identification and Prevention

Focused on recognising risk and protective factors, early intervention, and building resilience to prevent custody.

Session 2: In Custody – Collaboration and Good Practice

Exploring effective partnership working between prisons and local authorities, understanding trauma and identity, and sharing lessons from the mapping work.

Session 3: Resettlement and Intervention

Covering transition planning, continuity of support, and collaboration between local authorities, probation, and advocacy services.

All sessions will be trauma-informed, co-produced, and action-oriented, aimed at strengthening collaboration and improving outcomes.

4. Research: Understanding What Personal Advisors Need

A piece of qualitative research will be undertaken with Personal Advisors to better understand what they need to effectively support young people in custody.

The research will explore barriers to engagement with prisons, training needs, and areas where additional support or resources are required.

Findings will directly inform the design of future training, resources, and national guidance.

NLCBF NEXT STEPS

5. Multi-Agency Collaboration and System Change

To ensure consistent and joined-up practice, multi-agency training and development will also be prioritised across prisons, police, probation, and local authorities.

This will clarify “who does what” across the system and promote shared responsibility for supporting care-experienced young people. Training will be trauma-informed, culturally aware, and grounded in lived experience, ensuring that all professionals understand how to work collaboratively and with empathy.

Alongside the training, collaboration, and research identified within the next steps, it is essential to deepen our understanding of the different identities and lived experiences that shape how young people encounter care and custody. The mapping work and youth consultation highlighted that some care-experienced young people face additional layers of disadvantage, linked to culture, identity, parenthood, neurodiversity, or sexuality. Future work must ensure these voices are heard and their specific needs recognised within trauma-informed and inclusive practice.

Exploring the Needs of Underrepresented Care-Experienced Groups

Through the mapping work and youth consultation, it became clear that some care-experienced young people remain unseen and unheard within existing systems. Their experiences are shaped not only by their time in care or custody but also by their identity, culture, and circumstances. To truly bridge the gap, we must look deeper at these intersecting needs and ensure that support is equitable, inclusive, and trauma-informed.

Care-experienced young parents, particularly mothers, face significant disadvantage and fear. Many described being afraid to disclose their care-experienced status due to a deep concern that it would lead to increased scrutiny or the removal of their baby. This fear often prevents them from reaching out for help when they need it most. Some questioned whether their childhood records and past care histories were being used as a basis for child protection decisions before their baby was even born, reinforcing mistrust and feelings of inequality. These young women spoke of wanting to be seen not through the lens of their past, but for who they are now: parents striving to do better, often without the family networks or emotional support that others take for granted.

NLCBF NEXT STEPS

Black and minority ethnic, young people described feeling misunderstood, over-scrutinised, or disconnected from their cultural identity in both care and custody. They called for professionals to have cultural awareness and for systems to reflect the diversity of the young people they serve.

Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller, young people often feel stigmatised and misrepresented. Their strong sense of community and identity is rarely acknowledged or supported within statutory systems. Building trust requires recognition of their culture and a genuine commitment to inclusion.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people face multiple layers of loss, family, country, language, and identity, while navigating complex legal and care processes. In custody, these experiences can be retraumatised by isolation, fear, and a lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate support.

LGBTQ+ care-experienced young people spoke about struggling to feel safe, seen, or accepted within environments that were not inclusive. Many feared discrimination or rejection and called for professionals to create spaces where they could be themselves without judgment.

Neurodiverse young people highlighted the lack of understanding around how trauma and neurodiversity interact. They described being labelled as “difficult” rather than recognised as having communication, sensory, or regulation needs that require different approaches.

These voices remind us that care experience is not one story, but many. Intersectionality must be at the heart of every policy, training, and intervention moving forward. To break cycles of disadvantage, we must see each young person fully, in their identity, their culture, and their humanity and ensure systems are built to understand and support that complexity.

NLCBF NEXT STEPS

Overall Aim

These next steps will build a consistent, trauma-informed framework that strengthens the support available to care-experienced young people in contact with the justice system. By combining professional training, co-produced resources, and lived experience leadership, this work aims to bridge the gap between care and custody, ensuring every young person is seen, understood, and supported with dignity and respect.

CONCLUSION

Care-experienced young people in custody or at-risk face complex psychological, social, and systemic challenges. While examples of good practice exist, such as Durham LA's prison cafés, West Midlands Police identification, and third sector courses, these practices are inconsistent, location-dependent, and often reliant on individual champions.

Key barriers include:

- Fragmented identification and communication systems
- Siloed agency working and unclear responsibilities
- Inconsistent training and high staff turnover
- Unequal access to third sector support

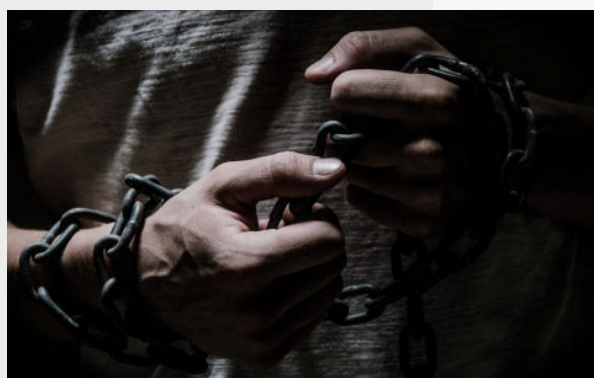
Addressing these challenges requires a systemic, multi-agency approach, including:

- Standardised identification, centralised databases, and mandatory role agreements
- Formalised corporate parenting duties across police, prisons, probation, and third sector organisations
- Structured collaboration, joint trauma-informed training, and robust monitoring

Implementing these measures ensures care-experienced young people receive consistent, accountable, and coordinated support, reducing vulnerability and improving outcomes in custody, probation, policing, and community settings.

OUTCOME

A system that treats corporate parenting as a shared responsibility, backed by clear policies, training, monitoring, and leadership, will help guarantee that all care-experienced young people receive the support and protection they are legally entitled to, improving wellbeing, continuity of care, and long-term resettlement outcomes



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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey questions.

Appendix B: Interview schedule.

Appendix C: Detailed data tables.

APENDIX A

Section 1: Organisation Details

- Name of Organisation
- Type of Organisation
- Region / Local Authority
- Contact Name and Role
- Email Address

Section 2: Care Leaver Identification & Support (Justice settings)

- How are care experienced young people identified in your setting?
- Is there a named professional responsible for overseeing care leavers support?
- If yes, what is their role?
- Do you involve Personal Advisors in plans when working with care experienced young people?
- If your organisation supports care leavers in custody, what services do you provide?

Section 3: Good Practice Supporting Care Experienced Young People

- What is working well in your area regarding support for care experienced young people in contact with justice services?
- Do you have any local protocols/policies that are working well?
- If yes, what do these cover?

Section 4: Barriers or Challenges

- What are the challenges and barriers you are facing?
- Suggestions on how to overcome these barriers or challenges?
- Are there geographical challenges?
- Please explain
- What do you think could improve support?

Section 5: Training Needs

- Have you received any training about supporting care experienced young people in contact with the justice system?
- What training have you received?
- What training would be beneficial in your role?
- Any other training that would be beneficial?
- Would you be interested in joint training with other organisations?

APENDIX A- CONTINUED

Section 6: Participation and Final Comments

- Do you do any consultation/participation work with care experienced young people?
- If yes, what does this look like?
- Any other comments or recommendations?
- Would you be happy for us to contact you for a follow-up or to share good practice?

Primary Data Sources

All quotations from interviews and surveys are drawn from primary data. To protect confidentiality, participants are referred to by role or pseudonym, and identifying details have been removed.

“Is prison an extension of the care system” Focus group
Care experienced peer mentor. HMP Parc, 2025

“I have so many cases on my workload. I couldn’t give care leavers the time they really needed, even when I wanted to”.
Prison Offender Manager, mapping survey, 2025

“I didn’t tell anyone I was in care when I first came into prison. I didn’t want other lads to know, and I didn’t trust what would happen with that information”. Young person, in custody.
Local authority professional, mapping survey interview, 2025

“Police are asking about care history at risk assessment, which is good, but once the young person goes to court or enters prison, there’s nowhere to record it, so it doesn’t inform support”.
Police custody professional, mapping survey interview, 2025.

“Were expected to take on this role supporting care leavers, but we have never been given any training on how to do it”.
Criminal Justice Professional, mapping survey, 2025.

“I feel like I am expected to support care leavers in really complex situations, but I don’t know how to do it”.
Criminal Justice Professional, mapping survey, 2025.

We keep asking each other whose responsibility it is. The prison thinks it’s the LA, the LA thinks it’s probation. In the end, the young person gets lost.”
Probation Officer, mapping survey, 2025

APENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

Purpose:

This appendix provides the interview schedules used to guide data collection with participants. It includes the questions and prompts asked during each interview.

Staff Interview Schedule

Participant Group: Staff working with care leavers

Duration: 30-45 minutes

Format: Semi-structured

Questions / Prompts:

Can you describe your role in supporting care leavers?

What challenges do you face in your work with care leavers?

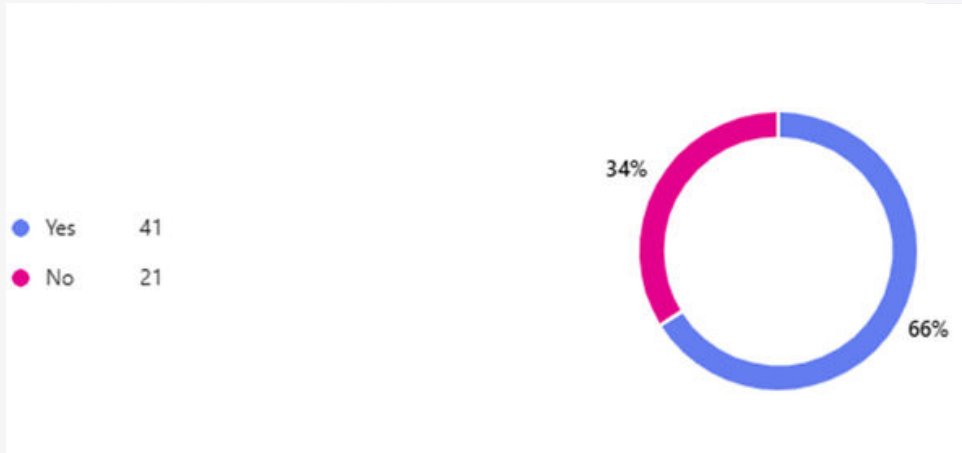
How do you coordinate with other professionals to support care leavers?

Can you give an example of a successful support intervention?

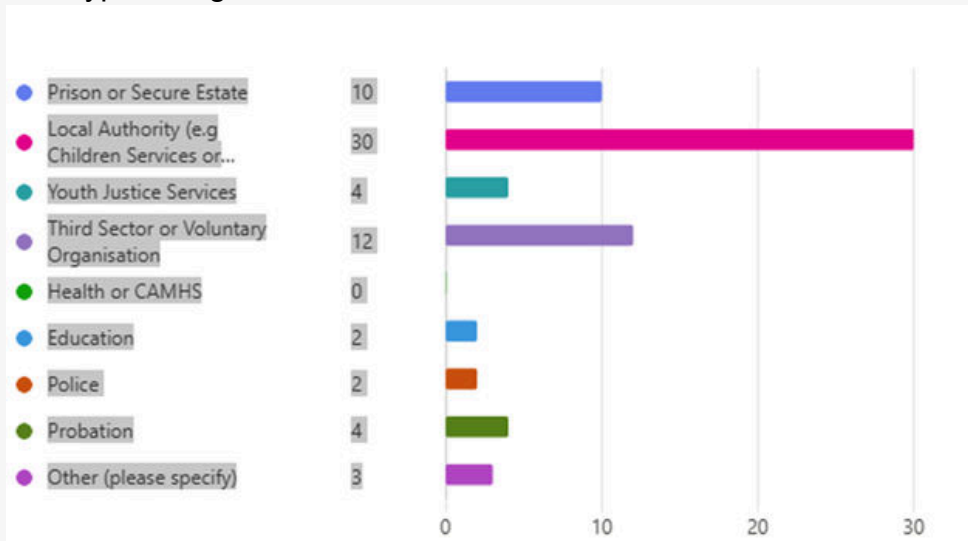
Are there areas where you feel additional support or resources are needed?

APENDIX C: DATA TABLES

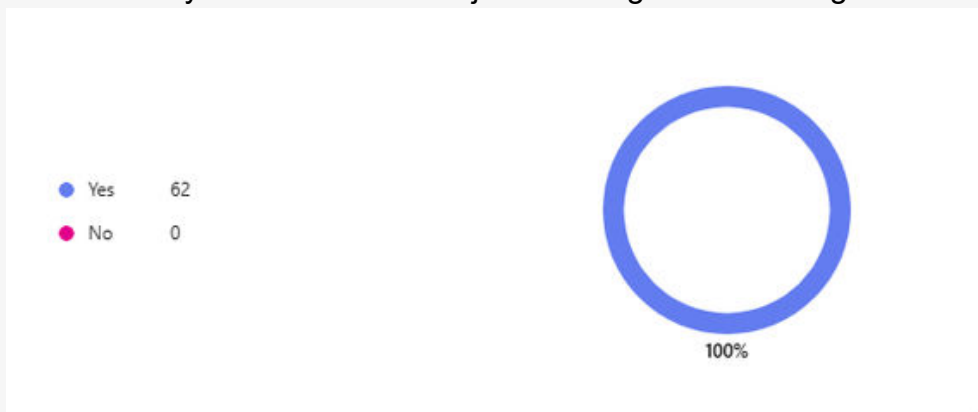
Q6. Are there any geographical challenges

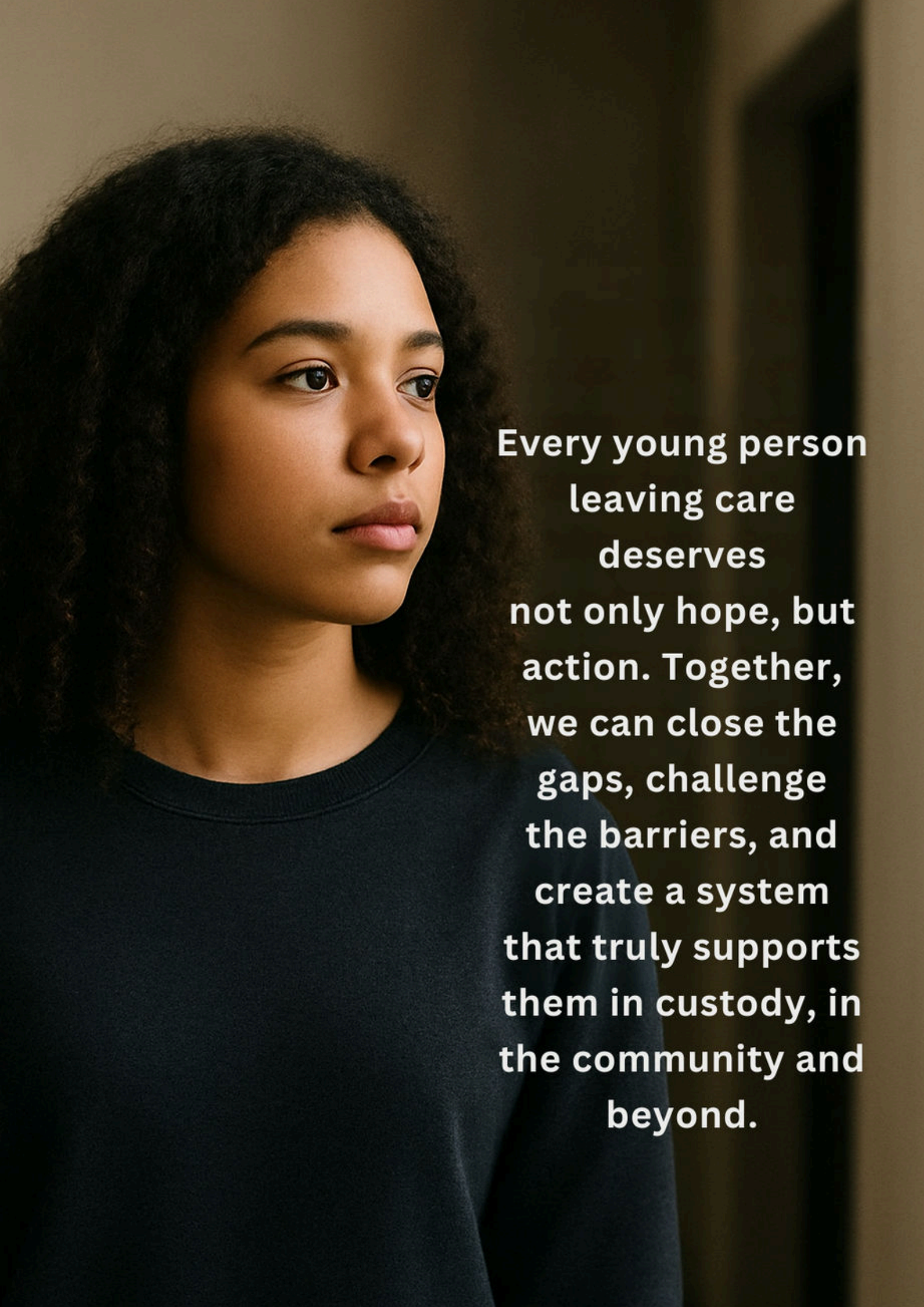


Q2. Type of organisation



Q23. Would you be interested in joint training with other organisations



A young woman with dark, curly hair is shown in profile, looking towards the right. She has a thoughtful and slightly somber expression. She is wearing a dark-colored, long-sleeved shirt. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**Every young person
leaving care
deserves
not only hope, but
action. Together,
we can close the
gaps, challenge
the barriers, and
create a system
that truly supports
them in custody, in
the community and
beyond.**