Enduring Relationships Consultation Response:

National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, Catch22

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About the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum & Our Experience

The National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF) brings together 135 local authority leaving care teams across England and Northern Ireland. It provides a space for leaving care professionals to improve services and support for young people leaving care by sharing good practice, hearing from care-experienced young people and influencing government & public bodies. NLCBF is part of the charity, Catch22.

NLCBF broadly agree that the National Framework reflects important principles of good practice in supporting enduring relationships for children in care and care leavers. Its focus on stability, belonging, trusted relationships and continuing support is welcome, and aligns with what care-experienced young people and leaving care professionals consistently identify as central to wellbeing. However, for these expectations to be meaningful, they must be embedded across everyday practice, planning, commissioning and workforce development, rather than remaining as high-level aspirations.

Our Key Asks

We welcome the Department for Education's focus on enduring relationships for all care-experienced young people, and the recognition of this within the national framework. Enduring relationships must be understood as more than individual connections; they are reciprocal, long-term and shaped by the systems around young people. To be meaningful, this agenda requires a whole-service approach that embeds relational practice across care planning, pathway planning, commissioning, Local Offers, workforce development and transition support. The key asks in this response are therefore focused on ensuring that enduring relationships are not left to chance or individual goodwill, but are actively enabled, resourced and protected through clear national expectations and consistent local implementation.

While the main focus of this consultation response is Section 3 of the framework, *Help and support*, we also consider it essential that enduring relationships are understood within the wider context of safeguarding and transition. For this reason, we have also responded to Section 2, with particular emphasis on multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and transitional safeguarding for care leavers. Relationships, belonging and safety do not end at 18, and the framework should recognise the need for coordinated support for care-experienced young people as they move into adulthood.

Our Recommendations:

- Children and young people **living away from their home Local Authority** should be **prioritised for housing** from the host council, so key relationships, community links and continuity of belonging can be maintained.
- **Post-Separation relational support** should be available to care-experienced individuals and their families, explicitly focused **on sustaining enduring relationships** as well as preventing repeat removals.
- **Local Offers** should support **reciprocal relationships**, with flexible funding for ordinary relational activities such as gifts, travel, leisure activities or bringing a friend to shared opportunities.
- Care Experienced young people to **automatically** qualify for the over **25's rate** of universal credit.
- **Lifelong Links, or equivalent arrangements**, should be available so trusted relationships can continue safely. Where these are with a professional-practitioners to be gifted the time, permission and clear guidance on maintaining contact, including boundaries around visits, celebrations and significant moments.

- **Staying Put** should be protected and strengthened as a relational offer**,** recognising the continued care provided by foster carers and addressing the current shift towards a landlord role with reduced financial support.

- **Care leavers living outside their home Local Authority** should have **equal access to hubs, activities and support**. A national reciprocal network of care leaver hubs could reduce isolation and enable access to both social and practical support.

- **Post-25 offers should be clearly written,** published and accessible, so care-experienced adults understand what support remains available beyond statutory leaving care duties.

- **The framework** should recognise **the importance of ending or changing relationships well**. Care leavers should be supported to mark transitions, such as a PA leaving, and to acknowledge the significance of that relationship.

- **The framework** should require Local Authorities to **identify and respond to the relational needs of care-experienced young people whose voices may be less visible within services**, ensuring that enduring relationships are promoted equitably and in ways that reflect individual needs, identities, communication styles and life experiences.

- **The framework** should provide **clear national guidance** on **regional approaches** to transitional safeguarding, including **information sharing**, joint accountability and coordinated support for care-experienced young people aged 18-25.

- **Young people's felt that funding for** travel to help siblings and family members stay in touch would help **promote relationships.**

- **Young people** also highlighted that family pets are often deeply missed and form an important part of their relational world. They felt that being supported to see and spend time with pets, where appropriate, would help maintain **important connections** and a sense of continuity.

- **Young people** shared they should be given more **opportunities** to learn through experience and **make mistakes safely,** rather than having all relationships and social opportunities tightly controlled.

- Young people wanted **more opportunities for meaningful family time** outside formal contact centres before turning 18, to support with the transition to managing time with family **post 18.**

- **Separate Outcome 4 into distinct outcomes for looked after children and care leavers,** whilst introducing a clear transitional approach for young people aged 16-25.

Overall comments on the National Framework.

- The framework should place greater emphasis on preserving and strengthening relationships before crisis occurs, so that relational support is proactive rather than only responding when a relationship has already broken down.
- Repairing, maintaining and developing relationships requires time, skill and manageable caseloads. Smaller caseloads for Personal Advisers supporting young people transitioning from care would enable more focused work around family relationships, friendships, community links and other trusted connections.
- Local Offers should recognise that relationships are reciprocal and often depend on ordinary fun opportunities to spend time together. This includes practical support for travel, shared activities, hobbies, celebrations and other everyday experiences that help young people maintain friendships and community connections.
- The framework sets out important aspirations but remains open to interpretation. Nationally shared examples of good practice would help show what ambitious and persistent relational practice looks like in day-to-day work, including how Local Authorities can evidence progress and embed expectations consistently.

"The importance of relationships needs to be present in every aspect of everyday business across the council." - Leaving Care Professional

Young Peoples Asks: Feedback from Young People's Benchmarking Forum Champions, during their monthly catch up meeting

- Post 21 and 25 support clearly set out and in an accessible format so that every young person knows what support is on offer and what they can access.
- Providing support to maintain relationships when professionals leave their roles or they have to move areas.
- Creating more opportunities for meaningful family time outside formal contact centres and emotional and practical support with these relationships.
- Support to spend time with siblings, especially if they have been adopted. Post 18 for this to include practical, emotional and financial support.
- Reduce barriers that prevent young people from building friendships and social networks.
- Honesty and communication when there are difficult conversations or someone is unable to stay connected or something is unable to happen.

"I have had many, many, many different social workers and all sorts of different people come and go out of my life and it's given me that an attachment anxiety, I'll be real. I don't know when someone's gonna leave or disappear"- NLCBF Champion

- **Support after age 21 and 25.** Young People felt that support can end too abruptly, even when they may still need guidance, reassurance or someone to return to during difficult times.

"Well, to put it into perspective, your doctor doesn't remove you as a patient because you haven't been to see him in a couple of years. We still need a GP surgery for when the stuff hits the fan"- NLCBF Champion

- Young people want more support to **sustain and maintain relationships when professionals leave their roles, or they must move home.** They want clear options with timelines and felt that often this was left to them to find out rather than Local Authorities having plans and options in place.

"If you are in the local area where you're from, you know people, but then you might get moved miles away to some strange place you've never been before. You don't know

anyone and you are living with strangers. And in my experience, they're making no effort to keep the relationships that you already had in that place alive. You just have to do what I do, just randomly search for a name on Facebook or something"- NLCBF Champion

"My old PA, I wish I'd had the opportunity to ask her, hey, do you want to stay in touch now after you've retired?"- NLCBF Champion

"My PA comes around maybe a month or two ago. He's like, right, we're going to close your case now because we don't feel like you need support. Just because I'm not belling off his phone going, oh I need this, I need that, doesn't mean I don't need some kind of help. He didn't even come round for long it was literally like a 10-minute thing. He's like, I'd be really interested to see what you're doing in 10 years' time and if you're still doing what you're doing now. And I'm thinking to myself, well, for one, you haven't even left no details. So how are you going to know what I'm doing in 10 years' time? I'm allowed to ring the office, but that is it."- NLCBF Champion

- **Spending time with Family – young people shared** concerns that time with families can be infrequent, difficult to access and often takes place in environments that do not support meaningful relationship-building. Young People shared that support with family relationships often drops away as young people approach adulthood, leaving them responsible for maintaining connections with little practical, emotional or financial support.

'They just put you in a contact room and say, here you go, have an hour or two to rekindle the last three months you missed out and catch up on everything, which does make it difficult.'- NLCBF Champion

- **Sibling relationships are especially important.** Young people felt more should be done to keep siblings connected and support ongoing contact, particularly after adoption or when a sibling moves to a new home or family. This support should include help with travel and accommodation after 18 where distance makes spending time together difficult.

- **Honesty and communication** were seen as important. Young people want honesty when something can't happen or if someone is not able to stay in touch.

- Young people want the ability to make **mistakes and learn from friendships as part of growing** up without feeling this was prescriptive. Young people wanted the opportunity to do this with a supportive network around them and not when they are 18 when it's like **a relational cliff edge with less support to navigate friendships and relationships.**

"When I used to live in my children's home if you was chilling in a room with another young person, they would make the biggest of problems out of it. It would be like, ah, we're ringing the police. When I was younger, I used to call it a big bubble. Because that's what it is really, like living in a big bubble."- NLCBF Champion

"When you want to go to somebody's house, you'd have to ask for DBS for their mothers, get permission slips or a worker has to ask the manager, that's all that friction. It just scares normal people off."- NLCBF Champion

"I think it's quite hard for relationships. I find that social workers like to control who you can and can't be friends with and you can't really go out and socialise. If you get into a relationship or you've got a new friend that they don't approve of, even though they've never met them, they're straight on the phone to that person's parents so that you can't see each other no more. More work needs to be done, because when you turn 18 and you're able to have that freedom to go out and see friends and have relationships, you're just going to be stuck because it's all been controlled for you. Whereas if they had a better support system and gave you a little bit more freedom while you are under the age of 18, that it would be a lot easier to maintain the relationships you'd have with different people." - NLCBF Champion

Priority Housing

Our Asks: Children and young people living away from their home Local Authority should be prioritised for housing from the host council if they wish to remain there, so key relationships, community links and continuity of belonging can be maintained.

“We can have communities, we can have relationships, but actually sometimes the systems around housing remove those from young people." -Leaving care professional.

- Many care-experienced young people build strong relationships, community links and a sense of home in the area where they live, even when this is outside their home Local Authority. Housing policy should protect these connections rather than force young people to return to an area they no longer consider home.
- Local Authorities and housing partners should develop sufficiency plans for care-experienced young people aged 18 and over, including access to safe, affordable homes where a young person has established stability and belonging.
- Reciprocal arrangements with Local Authority's where a young person is living in their area should support young people to remain in their community beyond 18 where appropriate, with priority access to social housing through care planning, pathway planning and reciprocal commissioning.

"If relationships are as important as we're saying they are, we've got to have the systems in place to support that and not ultimately force young people to either go down a private rental route or come back to a local authority that they don't consider to be home." Leaving Care Professional.

"*Sometimes they are forced to come back and leave all the relationships they have developed while they were there from school and friends in the local community, they lived in." – Leaving Care Professional*

Post-Separation Support

Our Asks: Post-Separation relational support should be available to care-experienced individuals and their families, explicitly focused on sustaining enduring relationships as well as preventing repeat removals.

- When young people enter care, support to understand and maintain first-family relationships can reduce significantly and often falls away at 18, leaving care leavers to manage complex family dynamics alone.
- Care-experienced young people want purposeful, restorative work with first families before leaving care, helping relationships become safer and supporting confidence, boundaries and emotional wellbeing into adulthood.
- This should be strengthened through access to skilled specialist support, such as family therapists, psychologists or restorative practitioners, to reduce the cliff edge at 18 and support safer enduring relationships.

Local Offers

Our Asks-Local Offers and National Offers should support reciprocal relationships, with flexible funding for ordinary relational activities such as gifts, travel, leisure activities, keeping in touch or bringing a friend to shared opportunities.

> *"Friendships are really important to young people. It's such an important part of their development."*
>
> *"When I think about relationships, there needs to be some parity."*

- Local Offers should recognise that relationships are built through shared experiences, reciprocity and ordinary social activities, not just individual support.
- National Offers should include a digital offer to maintain communication; this could be through free Wi-Fi and access to devices.
- Funding for hobbies, travel, friendships and fun should not drop away at 18, particularly for care leavers on low incomes who may not have family to rely on for informal support.

- Local Authorities should be encouraged to include relational offers such as travel, shared leisure activities, bringing a friend to an event, and small contributions towards gifts or celebrations, reflecting the support many young adults receive from parents or carers.

*"Sometimes it's hard to manage benefits when you have no other person in the family to fall onto and we as the services can't provide you with any financial support to say you go to Manchester and meet your friend***." –** *Leaving Care Professional*

"There are priorities which are priorities for young people and not priorities for us as the local authority."- Leaving Care Professional

Financial *support*

***Our Asks: Care experienced young people aged 18-24 to qualify for the over 25 rate of Universal credit*.**

- Care Experienced young people aged 18-24 should automatically qualify for the over 25 rates of universal credit. This will ease some of the pressure of the transition from care and support more opportunities to maintain and sustain important and trusted relationships.

Lifelong links

Our Asks: Lifelong Links, or equivalent arrangements, should be available so trusted relationships can continue safely. Where these relationships are with a professional, practitioners to be gifted the time, permission and clear guidance on spending time together, including boundaries around visits, celebrations and significant moments.

"The PAs often become the long-life links post 25… and it's not acknowledged in a way." – Leaving Care Professional

- Where a PA, social worker, teacher or other professional has become an important, trusted relationship, Local Authorities should provide clear guidance and protected capacity so contact can continue safely where this is in the young person's best interests.

- Guidance should distinguish between professional boundaries and ordinary relational acts, such as keeping in touch, marking birthdays, attending significant events or agreeing appropriate contact after leaving care.
- These arrangements should be supported through supervision, recording, consent, risk assessment and manageable caseloads, so responsibility does not fall on individual practitioners without organisational support or safeguards.

"We kind of record on the file, the young person, the practitioner will remain in contact and keep this relationship, but actually it can get really messy." – Leaving Care Professional

"There's a lack of guidance around what that looks like for practitioners." – Leaving Care Professional

"One of the questions I've got is… does that practitioner get support to be able to enable them to maintain that relationship?" – Leaving Care Professional

Staying put

Our Asks: Staying Put should be protected and strengthened as a relational offer, recognising the continued care provided by foster carers and addressing the current shift towards a landlord role with reduced financial support.

"For many young people, their foster family is their family and that's where they belong"- Leaving Care Professional

"Staying Put should be protected and strengthened as a relational offer, not treated primarily as a housing arrangement"- Leaving Care Professional

- Foster carers often continue to provide emotional care, practical support, advocacy and a sense of family beyond 18, yet Staying Put can reduce financial support and shift the carer's formal role towards that of a landlord.
- This can place strain on carers and alter the relationship with the young person, introducing pressures around rent, household expectations and reduced recognition of ongoing care.
- Staying Put should be resourced and supported as a relational offer, available up to 25 where appropriate, so financial or administrative changes do not undermine stability, belonging and the continued caregiving role.

"I know a lot of foster carers are saying they're no longer fostering because Staying Put is becoming too much and the funding isn't there to help support that."- Leaving Care Professional

"We've got some really, really lovely examples where foster carers are continuing to care in exactly the same way, but the funding mechanism doesn't recognise that."- Leaving Care Professional

"At 21, we're effectively asking young people to move out of the family home because a policy says so." – Leaving Care Professional

Equitable support

Our Asks: Care leavers living outside their home Local Authority should have equal access to hubs, activities and support. A national reciprocal arrangement of access to care leaver hubs could reduce isolation and enable access to both social and practical support.

"The opening of a Leaving Care Hub was absolutely astronomical in the sense that those young people that we sometimes struggle to reach out to actually came to us. The young lads necessarily we weren't always having as much contact with, we now, they're literally in the hub from actually waiting outside at 9am to play pool in the hub." -Leaving Care Professional

"The relationships they've built up now with our EET worker, with our psychologist, because they're based in the hub, the housing lead, the hub has been absolutely, I would say, phenomenal in regard to building relationships." Leaving Care Professional

- Care leavers living outside their home Local Authority should have equitable access to hubs, peer networks, activities and practical support in the area where they live.
- A national reciprocal network of care leaver hubs, supported by clear commissioning arrangements between Local Authorities, would reduce isolation, prevent boundary disputes and ensure young people can access relational and practical support locally.

"Our care leavers hub is her home. She has her own house. But our care leavers hub is her home. When she's in distress, you will see her, she will just burst in and collapse on the floor. You know something has gone wrong and everybody knows her." – Leaving Care Professional

"We have a football team; we've got some care leavers from other local authorities coming in to play as part of our football team as well. If they want to come play pool and play on the PlayStation with their mate that lives in the same semi-independent as them, that's not an issue for us because we can safely manage that because of the hub environment." - Leaving Care Professional

“The hub has been absolutely phenomenal in regard to building relationships."- leaving Care Professional

Post 25 Support

Our Asks: Post-25 offers should be clearly written, published and accessible, so care-experienced adults understand what support remains available beyond statutory leaving care duties.

"There are a group of young people who are over 25 for us and they're just so vulnerable and they're so isolated that actually they are in regular contact with their previous PA." – Leaving Care Professional

- Post-25 offers should be clearly written, published and accessible, so care-experienced adults understand what support remains available beyond statutory leaving care duties. There are Local Authorities that already do this well and could provide examples.
- Many care-experienced adults continue to rely on trusted relationships with PAs, foster carers and other significant adults beyond 25, and should not have to navigate challenges alone.
- Accessible information should set out relational support, community services, hubs, peer connection and routes back into support when circumstances change, reducing isolation and inconsistency.

"Young people were saying actually over the age of 25, yes, there is support. Some PAs will stay in touch with you. Sometimes you might get invited to a group. Because it wasn't specifically written down or it was done in quite an informal and ad hoc basis It felt like some young people were getting more time over the age of 25. They were invited to certain groups, but not everybody over 25 knew that they could do that if they wanted and some of the young people were saying, it feels like favouritism to them because they don't know what they can access and what they could ask for." -Leaving Care Professional

Transitions and Endings.

Our Asks: The framework should recognise the importance of ending or changing relationships well. Care leavers should be supported to mark transitions, such as a PA leaving, and to acknowledge the significance of that relationship.

- Relationship transitions should be central to the framework, as abrupt endings with trusted professionals can deepen experiences of loss and instability.
- Young people should have opportunities to mark significant professional relationships, say goodbye, and understand whether any future contact is possible.
- Guidance on planned endings, role changes and safe continuations should be built into pathway planning and workforce processes, recognising endings as relational moments requiring preparation and care.

"One of the points that a young person made was When they don't find out that a new PA is just allocated and that end hasn't been done in a way that they would like. I haven't been able to acknowledge them for the support that they've given me." Leaving Care Professional

Less heard voices

Our Ask: The framework should support Local Authorities to identify and respond to the relational needs of care-experienced young people whose voices may be less visible within services, ensuring that enduring relationships are promoted equitably and in ways that reflect individual needs, identities, communication styles and life experiences.

- The National Framework should recognise that care-experienced young people have different relational needs, and that less heard groups such as young people seeking safety, young people in custody and parents may require tailored approaches to building and sustaining enduring relationships.
- Local Authorities, with partners, should identify and respond to the needs of young people whose voices are often underrepresented, including young people with disabilities, young parents, care leavers in custody, unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people and those living at a distance.
- Relationship planning should be personalised through pathway planning and Local Offers, with accessible opportunities for friendships, community connection and trusted adult relationships, taking account of barriers such as transport, childcare, digital exclusion and distance.

Transitional Safeguarding

Our Asks: The framework should provide clear national guidance on regional approaches to transitional safeguarding, including information sharing, joint accountability and coordinated support for care-experienced young people aged 18-25.

- We are concerned that the proposed framework does not provide sufficient clarity on safeguarding responsibilities for vulnerable young adults aged 18-25 who may be experiencing exploitation. Where a young person over 18 declines a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) referral, agencies may use the 'Duty to Notify' process, but it is unclear how police, adult social care and partner agencies should work together to assess risk, coordinate protective responses and provide ongoing support. This is particularly important where young people do not recognise themselves as victims or do not perceive the risks they face.
- **Good practice example:** Northumberland's protocol around contextual safeguarding for care leavers aged 18-25 which is between adult and child safeguarding and the police.
- Improve guidance and training for key professionals on assessing capacity, incorporating capacity considerations into safeguarding plans, and applying Section 42 safeguarding duties under the Care Act 2014 where appropriate.

Framework recommendations

Our Asks: Separate Outcome 4 into distinct outcomes for looked after children and care leavers, whilst introducing a clear transitional approach for young people aged 16-25.

- NLCBF broadly supports separating Outcome 4 into distinct outcomes for looked after children and care leavers, as their relational needs differ significantly across childhood, transition and adulthood.
- However, separation must not create a cliff edge at 18. A transitional approach for young people aged 16-25 should ensure relationship-focused planning begins before leaving care and continues into adulthood.
- A care leaver outcome should give greater visibility to friendships, peer relationships, community belonging, first-family relationships and enduring

professional relationships, including clear guidance on how these can be supported safely.

- Any revised outcome should recognise that care-experienced young people are not a homogenous group and must reflect the differing relational needs of young people with disabilities, young parents, care leavers in custody, unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people and those living away from their home Local Authority.