

Evaluation of the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF)



CATCH22

NLCBF is a network of 134 local authority leaving care teams, representing around 85% of local authorities in England, alongside two Health and Social Care Boards in Northern Ireland. It is part of the charity Catch22 and brings together practitioners, managers and care experienced young people to improve outcomes for care leavers. Through 104 survey responses, 27 qualitative interviews, 3 focus group discussions and 2 collaborative workshops, this evaluation sought to explore the forum's impact, strengths and development needs, in order to inform its 2026-2029 strategy.

The evaluation was co-led with care experienced young people through an Advisory Group, which provided guidance on the evaluation's focus, design and interpretation of findings.

Key Findings

Impact on professionals

Engagement with the NLCBF has a strong positive impact on professionals working with care experienced young people, improving their wellbeing, professional development and confidence to advocate for improvements locally. The forum also contributes towards reducing professional isolation by creating a supportive national community of practice. 88% of survey respondents reported that learning from young people's voices has positively influenced their practice.

Impact on local practice and policy

86% of survey respondents felt that the NLCBF has impacted the way their local authority supports care experienced young people. Examples of changes adopted included strengthened approaches to supporting separated migrant young people and securing increased financial support for care leavers.

Impact on partnership working

69% of survey respondents reported that the membership had an impact on how their local authority collaborates with others, supporting regional collaboration and joint initiatives that lead to higher standards across local offers. Examples included the development of a regional app to support care leavers' access to information.

The evaluation also found that the forum promotes relationships with key partners (e.g. prisons) and enables more effective cross-boundary coordination when care experienced young people move between areas.

Impact on policy and practice

73% of survey respondents reported that the forum had an impact on care leaving policy and practice nationally or regionally. In particular, 'In Their Own Words' reports and events were highlighted as playing a key role in influencing national agendas. Examples of policy shifts directly influenced by the NLCBF included its recommendations being adopted by the Department of Health and Social Care, and Ofsted's introduction of a separate judgement for care leavers.

"If I think about the service I've got now, compared with the service I had 15 years ago, it's quite different. I would attribute a lot of the changes to ideas, little nuggets, bits and pieces that I've picked up from the forum."

- (NLCBF local authority member)

I think the standard of local offer has absolutely been raised by the benchmarking form. There's no doubt in my mind about that. I think that's a combination of that research work, the tools it developed, the ongoing workshops, the ongoing opportunities for people to reflect on their local offer with peers."

- (NLCBF local authority member)

We use In Their Own Words work as a way of informing our priorities for what we're doing. Being able to say, actually, this is what the young people say we should be focusing on is super helpful for us."

- (National or regional stakeholder)

At the forum there were some really powerful comments from young people, in particular around the lack of support once people hit 25... It has shaped some of the asks that we're putting to other government departments and to ministers because of [hearing from young people] - 'I didn't turn 25 and then suddenly everything was fine'."

- (National stakeholder)

I didn't really know that your voice could make a difference... I didn't really realise that they actually did listen to you, and it can make an impact. I didn't realise that until I went to an event... and then I realised that there was this sort of a wide, beautiful world, which is cool."

- (YPBMF member)

Progress against the Young People's Benchmarking Forum (YPBMF) 2021 Impact Plan

The study found substantial progress across all ten recommendations from a 2021 evaluation of the YPBMF, including YPBMF becoming central to NLCBF governance and influence, expanding its reach, and increasing access to national decision makers.

Recommendations

- 1. Strengthen the role of care experienced young people** in shaping the forum by embedding youth voice more deeply in governance, expanding participation to reflect diverse experiences (e.g. young people with experience of the criminal justice system), developing a national youth steering group with representatives from third sector youth groups, supporting young people to design and lead their own initiatives and helping local authorities create more youth-led spaces.
- 2. Expand and enhance forum activity** by opening selected forum spaces to external partners across different sectors (e.g. health, housing, education), involving partners in Communities of Practice and thematic workshops, modelling effective corporate parenting panels, and moving from one-off engagement towards sustained collaboration and feedback loops.
- 3. Strengthen communication and member engagement** by using tools such as short explainer videos to improve the visibility and accessibility of the forum offer, simplifying website access for teams, focusing engagement on least active local authorities, and sharing examples of effective internal dissemination models
- 4. Empower and support leaving-care teams** by providing practical resources to help them apply learning locally, sharing the "how" behind effective practice, improving post-event follow-up to support action and dissemination, and reintroducing one-to-one local authority visits for tailored support.
- 5. Strengthen regional collaboration and national influence** by expanding regional groups to support multi-agency working, engaging key regional decision makers, building stronger relationships with government departments, Ofsted and other corporate parents, and publishing periodic national insight reports on system level challenges facing leaving care teams.

Scan here to read the full report' on the NLCBF website

