



Evaluation of the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum

Executive Summary

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Authored by: Ellie Mendez Sayer and Dr. Claire Baker



Foreword

A word from Victoria Odude, Young People's Benchmarking Forum's (YPBMF) Steering Group Representative

This evaluation shows that the forum doesn't just create space for discussion, it leads to action. We're seeing real changes in practice, stronger connections, and growing national influence, with organisations actually listening to and responding to what care experienced young people are saying.

The recommendations in this report are a real opportunity to build on that progress and go further in strengthening participation, supporting local authorities to embed co-production, and continuing to turn lived experience into meaningful change.

With growing commitment across the sector to improve outcomes for care leavers, there's a real opportunity to build on this momentum and learn from what works, especially the way YPBMF meaningfully involves young people in shaping the services and support that affect their lives. I've seen first-hand the impact of doing this well, and the difference it makes.

A word from Matt Clayton, National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum's (NLCBF) Steering Group Chair

It's a real delight to write part of the foreword to this evaluation. I think back to my early engagement with the forum as a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed leaving care team manager. Joining the forum had a huge impact on me personally, and more importantly helped improve support and services for care experienced young people in my local authority.

The forum is unique in bringing together those delivering statutory services for care leavers with the young people receiving them, ensuring support continues to improve. The findings in this evaluation reflect what I've seen: the forum leads to real changes that positively affect young people leaving care.

The evaluation also shows the forum's growing national influence, helping to shape legislation, policy and regulations. YPBMF's work is impressive, with 'In Their Own Words' a particular highlight.

It's encouraging to see this work leading to change in so many authorities. There is always more to do, but this evaluation shows we achieve more by working together. With the first 'United for Change for Care Leavers' event this year, now is a great time to get involved if you're not part of the forum yet.

Acknowledgements

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We would also like to sincerely thank the YPBMF Legends who were members of the Advisory Group, Mark, Esla, Leo-Dann and Reece, for their guidance and advice. Their contributions were invaluable and played a crucial role in shaping the design, analysis and reporting of the evaluation.

Finally, we extend our sincere appreciation to the local authority teams and care experienced young people from the YPBMF who took part in the evaluation and generously shared their time, expertise and insights. We are equally grateful to representatives from government departments, agencies and third sector organisations for contributing valuable perspectives on the forum's impact and influence.

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Authors: Ellie Mendez Sayer and Dr. Claire Baker



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Introduction

The NLCBF is a national 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 brings together practitioners, managers and care experienced young people to improve outcomes for care leavers through shared learning, collaboration and collective influence.

The forum provides a space for members to share practice, strengthen professional networks, interpret national policy and develop responses to common challenges. Its offer includes practitioner and manager events, Communities of Practice, thematic workshops, a members' website and tailored support. The YPBMF embeds the lived experience of care leavers across governance, delivery and influencing activity, strengthening the forum's credibility and impact.

Evaluation Purpose

This independent evaluation was commissioned at a pivotal point for the NLCBF, as it prepares to refresh its strategy for 2026–2029. The evaluation provides an evidence informed assessment of the forum's impact, strengths and development needs, ensuring that the next phase of the NLCBF's work is grounded in the experiences of its members and care experienced young people, and focused on where the forum can add most value. To guide this work, the evaluation explored four core areas:

- **Forum objectives and member experience:** how local authorities and young people experience the NLCBF, and key enablers and barriers shaping engagement.
- **Progress against YPBMF recommendations:** progress made since the 2021 YPBMF evaluation, from the perspective of young people and staff.
- **Impact on policy, practice and partnership working:** how the forum influences individual professionals, local authority practice, partnership working and regional and national policies.
- **Strategy and future priorities:** implications for the NLCBF's 2026–2029 strategy, including where to focus time, resources and partnerships.



Overview of Methodology

The evaluation covered NLCBF activity delivered between April 2021 and December 2025, reflecting the period in which the forum embedded a hybrid model of delivery. It included all elements of the core membership offer: Hybrid events, Communities of Practice, thematic workshops, the members' website, and bespoke engagement with local authorities and external stakeholders. A mixed methods approach was used:



Survey of local authority members: a national online survey was distributed to all **134** NLCBF member local authorities. A total of **104** responses were received from 64 local authorities, representing **48%** of the membership. Respondents included leaving care service managers, frontline practitioners, participation leads and staff from partner organisations.



Qualitative interviews with staff and stakeholders: A total of **12** in depth interviews were conducted with NLCBF delivery staff, Catch22 staff, NLCBF Steering Group representatives and relevant national and regional stakeholders from government departments, agencies and third sector organisations.



Local authority case studies: Five local authorities were selected to take part in qualitative fieldwork to reflect variation in geography, size, engagement with the forum and Ofsted leaving care service ratings. Each case study involved two in depth staff interviews (ten interviews in total), alongside two cross authority focus groups, enabling exploration of how forum learning translates into local practice and policy.



YPBMF fieldwork: An online focus group took place with care experienced young people involved in the YPBMF. Alongside this, at a national YPBMF event, five one-to-one interviews with Champions and Legends were conducted and a short Menti survey was completed by **22** care leavers. This fieldwork focused on progress against previous recommendations and priorities for the future.



Collaborative workshops: Two workshops were held with the NLCBF team, Steering Group members, the Evaluation Advisory Group and partners: a Theory of Change workshop and a Next Steps workshop, supporting shared reflection and sense making around emerging findings.

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. The work was underpinned by a participatory and trauma-informed approach. Ethical practice was embedded throughout, with informed consent, confidentiality and safeguarding central to all stages of fieldwork, ensuring that participants were able to engage safely, respectfully and meaningfully.

Further details on the evaluation methodology and sampling approach are provided in Annex B.

Forum Objectives

A central aim of the evaluation was to develop a clear understanding of the NLCBF's core objectives and intended outcomes. This was approached in two stages. First, a Theory of Change workshop was held with the NLCBF delivery team and the Advisory Group to articulate the forum's intended objectives, activities and outcomes. This was followed by fieldwork with NLCBF members to explore their understanding of the forum objectives.

The Theory of Change, developed as part of the evaluation (Annex A), sets out a clear and shared vision for the NLCBF as a national forum that improves outcomes for care experienced young people by strengthening local practice, amplifying lived experience and increasing collective influence across the leaving care system. In the short term, the forum aims to build capability, confidence and connection among leaving care professionals and care experienced young people through shared learning, peer support and meaningful participation. Over the longer term, these outcomes are intended to contribute to more consistent, informed and youth-centred practice across local authorities, stronger collaboration and partnership working, and greater influence on policy and system level decision making. The Theory of Change highlights the ethos underpinning this impact, including trusted relationships and the embedding of lived experience through co-production.

Across interviews and focus groups, stakeholders described a strong alignment between the Theory of Change and their perspectives on forum objectives. All groups emphasised the NLCBF's role in facilitating sharing of learning, insight and experience. While the sharing of good practice was seen as important, participants placed particular value on the opportunity to exchange experiences, challenges, mitigations, expertise and emerging ideas in a trusted national space. Members also highlighted the forum's role in bringing together the collective voice of professionals from local authorities alongside the perspectives of care experienced young people, strengthening both peer learning and collective national policy influence. The evaluation findings suggest that the forum's core objectives are well understood, highly relevant and reflected consistently across both the Theory of Change and member experience.

Forum Overall Enablers

Stakeholders consistently identified the culture of the forum as a central enabler of its effectiveness, particularly the strong sense of community it fosters among members. The NLCBF was described as a supportive, inclusive and nonjudgemental space, where professionals can engage openly with peers, share experiences and reflect honestly on challenges in leaving care practice. This sense of belonging was seen as critical in sustaining engagement and encouraging meaningful participation across the network.

"It's [the forum] that sense of community, of being able to turn to somebody in a very different local authority and say, how do you deal with this problem?"

- NLCBF local authority member

The expertise of the NLCBF delivery team was highlighted as a key enabler. Members valued the team's deep understanding of the leaving care landscape and their ability to make informed, strategic decisions about priorities and focus. This was seen as ensuring that forum activity remains credible, relevant and responsive to both policy developments and frontline realities.

Stakeholders also emphasised the relevance, timeliness and accessibility of the forum's offer. Topics, discussions and resources were described as closely aligned to current pressures within leaving care services, making engagement feel worthwhile and directly applicable to practice. The mix of events, networks and formats was seen as supporting engagement across different roles, levels of experience and local authority contexts, allowing members to participate in ways that best suit their capacity and needs.

Being explicitly young people centred was identified as a defining enabler of NLCBF's approach. The forum was widely regarded as a sector leader in meaningful participation, demonstrating what high quality youth involvement can look like for local authorities, government and partner organisations. Care experienced young people reported feeling involved, listened to and able to influence the direction of the forum, while professionals consistently highlighted the insight, challenge and authenticity that this lived experience perspective brings. The embedding of young people's voices across governance, delivery and influencing activity was seen as strengthening learning, enhancing credibility and ensuring that the forum remains grounded in the realities of care leaver's lives.

"I think that YBPMF are brilliant because they really put care leavers at the heart of everything that they do. They always make sure that we are heard and we're listened to, and I think the relationship between NLCBF and YBPMF is such a strong one. I think that everything that we do in YBPMF gets kind of enhanced by NLCBF, and they'll make sure that everything is followed through."

- YBPMF member



Forum Overall Barriers

Stakeholders highlighted that, while the forum is valued, it is not consistently utilised across all local authorities. High workloads and competing priorities often limit professionals' ability to engage, even where there is recognition of the forum's relevance. Awareness of the full range of opportunities available also varies, with engagement often dependent on whether senior leaders actively champion the forum, something stakeholders noted largely sits beyond NLCBF's direct control. The evaluation also identified uneven geographic representation across the forum, with participation varying between areas.

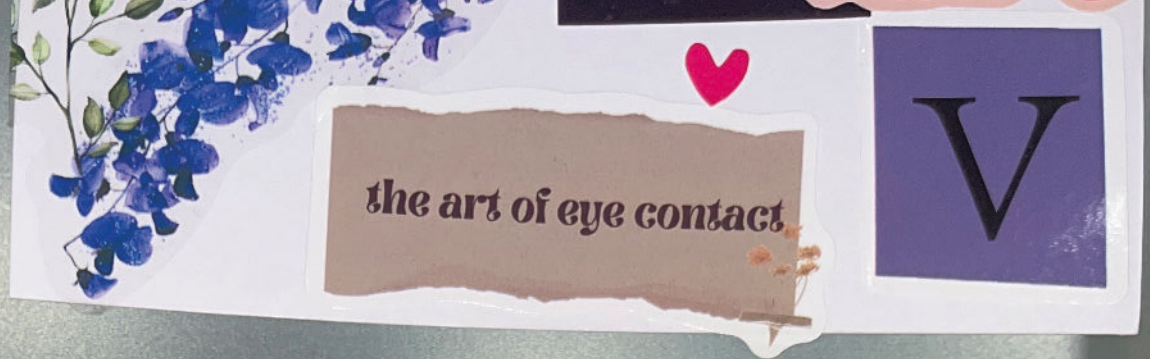
The forum's ability to expand its work is also constrained by limited funding flexibility and staff capacity. Funding is tied to specific activities and resource intensive event delivery restricts options to pursue additional policy work or respond quickly to emerging priorities.

Enablers and Barriers Across Individual Elements

Evaluation survey findings demonstrate strong overall satisfaction, with between **79%** and **90%** of respondents rating every element of the core offer as either very or extremely valuable. The sections below summarise how members experience each forum component in practice, highlighting what works well and where there are opportunities for refinement.



*In Their Own Words: Parliamentary Event 2025,
Photo Credit: Rylee Dickson, YPBMF Legend*



	Strengths	Areas for improvement
Hybrid Practitioner and Manager Events	- Valued for providing protected time away from day-to-day pressures, enabling deeper reflection and learning. Well-balanced programme design, combining practice, policy, research and lived experience. Strong networking opportunities, supporting peer connection and collaboration across local authorities. Purpose-designed hybrid delivery increases accessibility for those unable to travel, supported by reliable facilitation and technology.	Location, travel and limited in-person capacity restrict access for some members. Personal Advisers (PAs) are at risk of lower engagement due to workload pressures, limited managerial encouragement and variable awareness. - Online participation seen by some as less conducive to deep reflection.
Community of Practices and Thematic Workshops	- Widely regarded as one of the most effective elements of the forum offer, with strong and growing engagement. Focused, thematic design (e.g. supporting care leavers in employment; care experienced parents) enables in-depth exploration of complex practice issues and practical problem solving. Contributions from care experienced young people and external partners ground learning in lived experience and cross-sector insight. Accessible online format, reinforced by follow up materials and learning that informs new resources and training.	- Scope to broaden sector wide partner involvement. - Opportunity to strengthen youth codesign, subject to additional capacity. - Stakeholders identified new priority themes, most notably housing and separated young people.
NLCBF Member Website and Resources	- Recent investment has improved usability, consistency and navigation. - The resource library and event materials are highly valued by regular users. - The events section and contact directory support easier booking and cross-authority collaboration. - Strong interest in virtual tours delivered by NLCBF staff to promote effective use.	- The website remains underutilised, with engagement largely prompted by emails. - Awareness of the breadth of resources varies. Administrative processes are time consuming. - Members suggested improvements to navigation, search functionality and user guidance.

	Strengths	Areas for improvement
One-to-One Support	- Highly valued by those who access it, providing tailored, context specific support. - Combines reflective space, practical advice and signposting, grounded in staff expertise and operational understanding. - Described as relational, responsive and accessible.	Limited awareness of the structured, bookable offer. - Delivery constrained by capacity, including a temporary pause. - Strong appetite to expand the offer, particularly reinstating in-person support and offering sessions to whole teams.
Member Communications	- Communications are clear, regular and relevant, supporting awareness of activity and resources. Email is the most reliable channel, especially when messages include direct links. - Use of concise, well-structured updates reflects awareness of workload pressures.	- Awareness of the full offer remains uneven, particularly among PAs. - Survey findings highlight the need for clearer promotion and signposting. - Members suggested more engaging emails and wider direct mailing. Remote team meeting updates and website demonstrations were welcomed, alongside sharing effective internal communication practices.

“I think this depends on how invested the managers are from the service in the NLCBF forum and if they attend meetings. Some seem to bring back ideas and then nothing gets done about it.”

- Evaluation survey respondent, leaving care professional

“I think there is scope for this to be increased - our team manager attends events, but I don't think our PAs make the most of the membership. That is down to us as a local authority though.”

- Evaluation survey respondent, leaving care professional

Progress Made Against the YPBMF Recommendations

In 2021, an evaluation of the YPBMF produced ten recommendations to strengthen youth participation, influence and impact. These were taken forward through a jointly developed YPBMF-NLCBF action plan. A core focus of the current evaluation was to assess progress against these recommendations, drawing on interviews and focus groups with YPBMF members and NLCBF staff. For clarity, findings are summarised across five overarching themes:

1. Expanding the influence and involvement of the YPBMF within the NLCBF

There is strong consensus that the YPBMF is now firmly embedded within NLCBF governance, strategy and delivery. Young people's influence is described as central to shaping the forum's priorities, culture and direction, with the YPBMF no longer seen as an add-on but as a driving force behind the forum's work. A key milestone has been the introduction of a YPBMF representative on the NLCBF Steering Group, strengthening accountability and creating clearer feedback loops between young people and decision makers. YPBMF members are now involved across events as contributors and co-deliverers. The YPBMF residential, held for the first time in 2025, was highlighted as a particularly powerful mechanism for youth-led reflection and strategic influence, while the 'In Their Own Words' programme has also become a cornerstone of embedding care leaver voice across forum activity and national influencing work.

While progress is substantial, some challenges remain. Concerns were raised about the pressure placed on a single Steering Group representative. There is a desire from YPBMF members for greater involvement in research and more freedom to shape event formats and content. NLCBF staff emphasised the importance of consolidating participation through skills development and support, rather than continually expanding roles without sufficient capacity.

2. Expanding reach and awareness of the YPBMF among care leavers

Reach and engagement have increased significantly in recent years. Champion applications rose by 45% between 2023 and 2025, and forum qualitative feedback indicates year-on-year growth in attendance at YPBMF events. This progress has been supported by additional capacity through a dedicated Participation Worker, proactive engagement with local authorities, and the use of hybrid events as a more accessible entry point for new participants. The YPBMF newsletter, shaped by young people, has strengthened visibility and celebration of achievements. The establishment of the Legends group (alumni group for YPBMF Champions after their first year of involvement) has fostered continuity, peer support and a strong sense of community. Efforts to improve diversity have progressed with a champion recruitment focus across regions and protected characteristics.

However, gaps remain in how reach is monitored. There is no formal system for tracking how care leavers hear about the YPBMF or how many attend events, and the newsletter and social media offer remain at an early stage of development. As participation grows, NLCBF staff emphasise the importance of ensuring that support for new and longstanding YPBMF members remains of high quality.

3. Capturing and sharing learning from YPBMF work

Substantial progress has been made in capturing and disseminating learning, particularly through the 'In Their Own Words' programme. 'In their Own Words' reports are now widely shared via the website, email, social media, newsletters and events, and are recognised by national stakeholders as a credible and influential platform for care leaver voice. YPBMF panels at events provide a structured way for young people to share collective insight without pressure to disclose personal experiences, while the YPBMF Steering Group representative plays a key role in maintaining feedback loops. Early examples of creative dissemination, including short films, videos and podcasts, have been well received, though expanding these approaches would require additional capacity and skills.

4. Increasing access to, and engagement with, key decision makers

The NLCBF has developed strong working relationships with a number of key national stakeholders, including Ofsted, the Department for Education, HMPPS and the National Adviser for Care Leavers. These relationships have supported more regular dialogue between decision makers and YPBMF members and have created clearer routes for care experienced young people's voices to reach national policy and system leaders.

'In Their Own Words' has become a major mechanism for securing access to policymakers, with care leaver led surveys and events opening doors to Parliament and senior leaders. YPBMF members are increasingly present at high profile external events and report feeling taken seriously and listened to.

"We got the opportunity to be involved with Ofsted's consultation about the regulation of semi-independent living for 16 and 17-year-olds. And we even got to go down to the House of Lords, and it was just brilliant getting to meet all these policymakers and really high-up people, and being able to advocate for ourselves. And then we did some work around the review of children's social care. There's just so many opportunities for us to speak to these people... I can definitely see an improvement and an influx of all these different opportunities, and people are actually listening to us, it's great."

- YPBMF member

At the same time, relationships with government can be fragile due to staff turnover and political change. While engagement is strong in some areas, there is a desire to extend dialogue more consistently across a wider range of departments to ensure care leaver voices influence all relevant policy areas.

5. Embedding co-production principles within local authorities

Progress has been made in supporting local authorities to strengthen co-production. The NLCBF Participation Network is now established and growing, providing spaces to share good practice and problem solve. The Participation Summit and YPBMF led events have acted as catalysts for learning, innovation and visibility of care leaver led work, while the sessional worker team continues to expand and model effective participatory practice. National stakeholders increasingly view the forum as a benchmark for meaningful participation, with evidence of influence on organisational expectations of participatory engagement at a national level.

“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

Despite this progress, participatory practice remains uneven across local authorities, and further work to address these disparities is constrained by NLCBF capacity. While there are clear plans to deepen this work, such as the development of a local champions model and co-production workshops with individual local authorities co-delivered with YPBMF members, such delivery will require additional staff time and resources to ensure sustainability and quality.



YPBMF Celebration 2025, Photo Credit: Rylee Dickson, YPBMF Legend

Impact

Impact on Professionals

The evaluation found strong and consistent evidence that engagement with NLCBF has a positive impact on professionals working with care experienced young people, supporting their wellbeing, professional development, confidence and sense of connection. Survey findings were highly positive across almost all indicators (Figure 6 on Annex C).



73% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that engagement with the NLCBF has had a positive impact on their professional wellbeing.



88% of survey respondents reported that listening to and learning from care experienced voices through the forum has positively influenced their practice.

Members described the forum as a source of **reassurance, validation and renewed purpose**, helping them sense check their work against national practice and reinforcing confidence that they are “on the right track”. External recognition of effective and innovative practice was described as motivating and affirming, reinforcing the value and importance of their work with care experienced young people.

A strong theme was the forum’s role in **supporting professional development** in a complex and evolving leaving care landscape. Members highlighted the importance of having access to up-to-date policy, guidance and examples of practice across a wide range of areas, including housing, mental health, immigration and education. Both newer practitioners and those with more experience described the forum as strengthening their knowledge, confidence and professional judgement.

Engagement with NLCBF also plays a significant role in **reducing professional isolation and providing a much needed morale boost**. Professionals described feeling part of a national community that understands the unique challenges of leaving care work, particularly when specialist roles can otherwise be isolating.

This sense of solidarity and renewal was closely linked to **increased confidence and motivation to advocate for improvements locally**. Members reported feeling more empowered to challenge practice, lobby for change and draw on examples from elsewhere as evidence that meaningful improvement is possible, even within challenging constraints.

“We have survived as a team in the past due to being a member of this forum. It’s a place of safety for leaving care managers that allows us to feel listened to and valued. I’ve challenged my LA around policies and legislation, and we have really robust strategic support in place now in our own LA.”

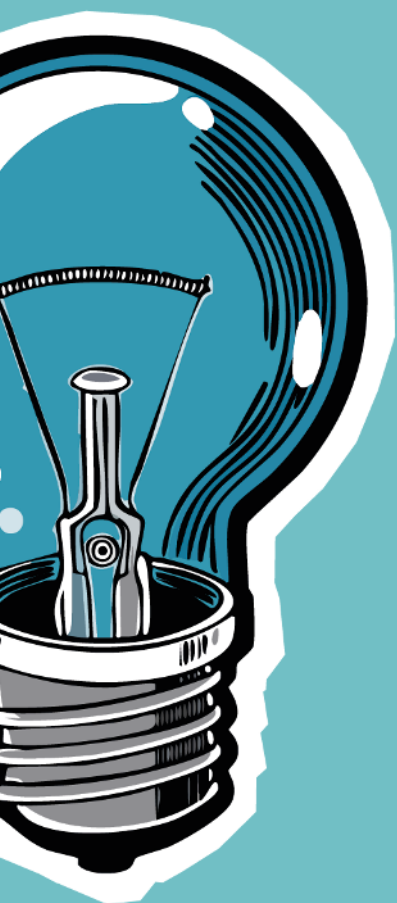
- Evaluation survey respondent, leaving care manager

Impact on Local Practice and Policy

Survey findings indicate that NLCBF membership is associated with meaningful changes to professional practice. While members found it difficult to attribute specific policy or practice changes solely to the forum, interviews and focus groups consistently **described the NLCBF as a key driver within the wider ecosystem that enables improvement, providing ideas, evidence, confidence and collective momentum**. Its impact was understood as cumulative, with the steady accumulation of insights and learning shaping services over time.



Over 3/4 of survey respondents reported changes to their professional practice as a result of engaging with the forum.



Members described how the forum shapes local policy, outlining the mechanisms for change:

- **Sharing and implementing learning:** The forum enables local authorities to move beyond sharing good practice by creating space to explore how change is achieved in practice, including discussion of strategies, challenges and solutions. Members valued drawing on the expertise of peers and the exchange of shared tools, policies, protocols and resources.
- **Creating a ripple effect of internal learning:** Learning from the forum is taken back into local teams, prompting internal discussion, reflection and locally tailored adaptation, raising the profile of key issues and acting as a catalyst for collective thinking rather than direct replication.
- **Strengthening lobbying power:** By providing concrete examples of successful practice elsewhere, the forum strengthens professionals' confidence and evidence base to challenge senior leaders and advocate for local authorities improvements.

“I really like the fact that we have that flexibility to be able to be creative and kind of steal ideas from what other people are doing and seeing how we can make that work for our local authority. But also, we can use that as a lobbying tool as well within our own local authorities, with our senior leadership team, with our councillors, to say, hey, that local authority over there are actually offering this to their care leavers.”

- NLCBF local authority member

“It is just the sheer amount of knowledge that can be shared, and the sheer amount of ideas [through the forum]. 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

Members spoke about how engagement with the NLCBF has influenced local authority policy and practice across three interconnected areas: operational processes, overall practice, and changes to the local offer for care leavers.

At an organisational level, members reported that **the forum supported improvements to internal systems, workforce development and organisational readiness**. For example, engagement with NLCBF informs updates to guidance, training and policies, strengthens preparation for Ofsted inspections, and increases awareness of national funding streams.

“They've got quite a range [of content] that doesn't just focus on what you do in your local authority. It'll bring in other things that's not just about your operational day-to-day stuff, like strategic insights on what we should be doing better or what are the groups of young care leavers that we can often miss? It's that kind of mix that I really like.”

- NLCBF local authority member

“There was this homelessness prevention money. And we'd sit around tables in the forum and ask, so how are you spending that money? And some local authorities would be going, well, what money? And we'd say, well, you're on the list. Your local authority got £142,000 last year. Did you see it?”

- NLCBF local authority member

Alongside these organisational changes, members described significant shifts in day-to-day practice. Interview and survey evidence indicates that these **changes span specialist service development, partnership working, relational practice and implementation of national policy** (Figure 7 on Annex C).



74% of survey respondents adapted their own practice based on learning from other local authorities through the forum.



86% of survey respondents felt that NLCBF membership had some or a significant impact on how their local authority supports care experienced young people.

Key examples cited by members included the development of new specialist mental health resources and dedicated posts within leaving care teams, strengthened approaches to supporting separated migrant young people, and improved relationships with adult social care that enables smoother transitions.

The forum's influence on local care leaver offers emerged as a clear and consistent theme. Members described how the NLCBF amplifies strong practice and provides structured opportunities for peer learning, raising the overall quality of local offers without pushing for uniformity. Instead, the forum supports a shared ambition for high quality, responsive provision while recognising the need for local tailoring.

Examples of changes to local offers influenced by the forum included **increased financial support** for care leavers, **guarantor schemes for private renting**, practical **cost-of-living support**, **expanded provision for care experienced adults in custody**, and the development or redesign of **care leaver hubs to be more welcoming, stigma free and codesigned with care leavers**.

"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

Findings from 'In Their Own Words' reports have been described as informing strategic decision making by helping identify priorities and strengthen the case for funding; supporting service improvement through reviews of local offers and shared learning; and strengthening care leaver voice.



A recent survey with local authorities focused on the impact of NLCBF's 'In Their Own Words' reports found that 85% of local authority members reported it had influenced or supported their work.

"Hearing what care experienced young people would find most useful nationally, has given me courage to challenge decisions and to strengthen my care experienced cohort in the Care Leavers Council to challenge things for themselves."

- Evaluation survey respondent, leaving care professional

Impact on Partnership Working

The evaluation found that the NLCBF plays a meaningful role in strengthening partnership working across local authorities and with wider stakeholders. Two-thirds (63%) of survey respondents answered yes to the statement *"I have built stronger professional networks through the NLCBF"*, and members consistently described the forum as an important mechanism for building professional connections through events, introductions facilitated by the NLCBF team and access to the member contact database.

A central theme was the development of **peer relationships that extend beyond formal forum activity**. Members described forming trusted connections with colleagues in other local authorities, enabling ongoing sharing of learning, documents and insight into how changes had been implemented elsewhere. Over time, these relationships supported informal problem solving and sense checking, and were seen as an important extension of members' professional support networks.

The evaluation also identified strengthened **local and regional collaboration**. Relationships formed through the forum were described as leading to stronger regional groups and collaborative projects that supported greater consistency and higher standards across local offers. Examples included the development of a regional app to support care leavers' access to information and the expansion of the Care Leavers' Football Tournament from five teams to twenty.



Over two thirds (69%) of survey respondents reported that NLCBF membership had some or a significant impact on how their local authority collaborates with others to develop and support initiatives.

“When we were starting our young parents’ group, it enabled us to reach out to some of those local authorities that were doing really well. We were able to contact [two different Local Authorities] that had done some work around this already. It was really helpful for us as almost like a reference point.”

- NLCBF local authority member

Members also highlighted **more joined-up working with other key partners**, including improved relationships with prisons, leading to more consistent support for care experienced young people in custody, and strengthened collaboration with large employers to enhance Education, Employment and Training opportunities.

Finally, participants emphasised the practical benefits of improved **cross boundary working**, noting that relationships formed through the forum and easy access to contact details (with the member website contact directory) made it far easier to coordinate support when young care leavers moved between local authorities, supporting continuity of care.

“Our kids are always moving across boundaries... it's brilliant that I've got my list of exactly who I need to contact in each local authority to resolve issues. On a very practical level, the membership means I can say to my PAs, right, you need to find somebody in [name of LA]. I go on the website, find my [LA] connection, and we're in... That's a very practical, very real life tool that the Benchmarking Forum gives.”

- NLCBF local authority member



Impact on Policy and Practice at the National and Regional Level

The evaluation found that the NLCBF plays a significant role in influencing care leaving policy and practice at national and regional levels. Interview and focus group participants consistently described the forum as a respected and credible voice in national policy spaces, with the expertise, legitimacy and relationships needed to influence government and sector wide discussions. Survey findings echo this, with **73% of respondents reporting that the NLCBF has had some or a significant impact on care leaving policy and practice nationally or regionally**. However, some NLCBF members reported uncertainty, suggesting that NLCBF influencing activity is not always visible to the wider membership.

“There is a direct link between the NLCBF and tangible changes in national policy.”

- National stakeholder

A defining strength of the forum’s national influencing approach is its ability to **amplify the voices of care experienced young people**. In particular, the ‘In Their Own Words’ reports and events were repeatedly highlighted as a central mechanism through which the forum influences national agendas. National stakeholders described ‘In Their Own Words’ reports as a powerful source of qualitative insight that is often missing from official datasets, providing depth and context that shapes priorities, informs policy development and strengthens advocacy.

“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

“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

National stakeholders provided concrete examples of **tangible policy** shifts that were directly, though not exclusively, influenced by the forum's work. Some examples include:

- 'In Their Own Words' recommendations being adopted by the Department of Health and Social Care, such as free prescriptions and dental and eyecare for care leavers up to age 25;
- Progress made on campaigns relating to different issues, such as care leavers as a protected characteristic;
- Strengthened corporate parenting duties;
- Ofsted's introduction of a separate judgement for care leavers.

The forum was also described as an important partner to third sector organisations, supporting joint advocacy efforts and helping identify gaps in national systems, such as the absence of a nationally recognised qualification for Personal Advisers.

"I think, given their resources, they deliver a big impact."

- Evaluation survey respondent, leaving care professional

At a regional level, the evaluation found strong evidence that the NLCBF strengthens **regional collaboration and collective action**. Members and regional stakeholders described the forum as instrumental in bringing local authorities together to develop and improve regional care leaver offers, and facilitating collaboration between national bodies and regional groups. A major example is the forum's role in chairing the **London Leaving Care Managers Forum**, bringing together managers from all 33 London boroughs. Members credited this space with significantly raising the standard of local offers across London, supporting greater consistency while respecting local variation.

Finally, Manager and Practitioner Events were described as a crucial mechanism for **strengthening relationships between local authorities and national bodies** such as Ofsted, the Department for Education, HMPPS and third sector organisations. These events support two-way dialogue, enabling national stakeholders to test policy ideas and local authorities to feedback on implementation challenges. Stakeholders expressed a strong appetite for the NLCBF to continue expanding its role as a bridge between local, regional and national systems.

"Being able to kind of have those discussions with local managers really helps us, when we're introducing new policies or programmes, to have that understanding of what the likely impact and challenges will be on the ground."

- National stakeholder

Recommendations for the 2026–2029 NLCBF Strategy

The evaluation asked all stakeholders to reflect on what the forum should prioritise and focus on in their upcoming 3 year strategy. It was understood that the forum cannot deliver all of these recommendations simultaneously and should treat these as a prioritised menu of strategic options. The full set of evaluation recommendations can be found in the main report, but a summary is outlined here:

1

Strengthening Youth Participation and Influence

- Further embed care experienced young people within **governance and decision making**, including increased representation on the NLCBF steering group.
- Deepen and diversify participation to reflect **different care leaver journeys and protected characteristics**, including separated migrant young people and those with experience of the criminal justice system.
- Explore new structures to amplify youth voice, including: **a national care experience steering group** with representatives from relevant third sector participation groups; expanded outreach (e.g. 'YPBMF on tour'); and more support for young people to **design and lead their own YPBMF projects**.
- Support local authorities to create more local **sustainable, youth-led spaces** focused on community, belonging and peer connection.

2

Expanding and Enhancing Forum Activity

- Open selected spaces to **external partners**, recognising that improving outcomes for care leavers requires collaboration across health, housing, education, employment, justice and the voluntary sector.
- Involve partners more systematically in **Communities of Practice and thematic workshops** to support ongoing dialogue.
- Model effective **corporate parenting panels** aligned with national guidance.
- Continue to shift from one-off engagement with external partners to **sustained collaboration and feedback loops**.

3

Strengthening Communication and Member Engagement

- Improve visibility and accessibility of the forum offer through a short **website explainer video for teams, themed newsletters and curated learning packs**.
- Simplify **website account management** so whole teams can access resources easily.
- Focus engagement on **least engaged local authorities**.
- Share examples of effective local authority **internal dissemination models**, such as rotating forum leads or team-based event attendance with follow-up discussion within local authorities.

4

Empowering and Supporting Leaving Care Teams

- Provide more **practical implementation support**, including tools, templates and step-by-step guidance to help teams apply learning locally.
- Strengthen sharing of the **'how' behind effective practice**, such as business cases, cost-benefit analysis and stakeholder engagement approaches.
- Improve **post event follow-up**, encouraging participants to identify priority actions and supporting internal dissemination.
- Reintroduce **one-to-one local authority** visits to offer tailored support and reflection on implementation.

5

Strengthening Regional Collaboration and National Influence

- Expand and strengthen **regional groups**, ensuring equitable access across the country and supporting multi-agency collaboration.
- Engage regional decision makers where key levers sit, including mayors, **Integrated Care Systems and transport authorities**.
- Deepen national policy influence by strengthening relationships with **government departments, Ofsted and other corporate parents**, while reducing reliance on individual contacts.
- Explore publishing **periodic national insight reports** highlighting system-level challenges facing leaving care teams.

6

Strengthening Evaluation, Learning and Impact Measurement

- Strengthen annual surveys to capture more **nuanced evidence of impact**.
- Introduce light touch qualitative feedback mechanisms across activities.
- Embed a **consistent system for capturing and logging learning**.
- **Improve monitoring data**, including how members and young people hear about the forum and attendance levels.
- Consider co-creating an **action plan** with YPBMF to track progress against evaluation recommendations.





NLCBF MAGIC INGREDIENTS 'ETHOS'

- * Relationships enable change. We foster a collaborative, strengths-based culture that creates safe, trusting spaces where people can learn, connect and work together
- * Lived experience shapes our work. We place young people's voices at the heart of our priorities while valuing and amplifying the perspectives of partners across local and national systems
- * We believe change is possible. We approach our work with curiosity, optimism and responsiveness, building strong relationships and communities that support lasting change



PROBLEM/CONTEXT

Young people leaving care show resilience and ambition, yet they continue to face significant challenges and often experience poorer outcomes compared to their peers. Support for care experienced young people varies widely between local authorities (LAs), creating a postcode lottery that determines the opportunities and resources available. These disparities are further compounded by systemic and structural barriers that extend beyond the control of local authorities. While there have been efforts to improve policy and practice progress has been insufficient to deliver the consistent, high-quality support care leavers need to thrive

VISION STATEMENT

Consistent, high quality support for care experienced young people, designed with young people and delivered by organisations working together, leads to improved stability, connection and opportunities for every young person leaving care



OUTPUTS

PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

- Care experienced young people participate in activities within the forum and with partner organisations
- Delivery of collaborative forums, events and thematic workshops attended by professionals from local authorities across the country and external stakeholders from different sectors

RESEARCH AND POLICY INFLUENCE

- Development of care experienced young people-led research, podcasts, insight reports, practice guides and tools
- Development of policy proposals and influencing activities supported by insights from local authorities and care experienced young people

RESOURCES AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

- Members-only website to facilitate connection between local authorities and share resources
- Development of a centralised bank of resources about local authority services and support



SHORT/ INTERMEDIATE TERM OUTCOMES

YPBMF MEMBERS AND CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE ATTENDING NLCBF EVENTS

- Increased participation of care experienced young people in efforts to improve policy and practice
- YPBMF members' views are quoted in external reports and policy documents
- Care experienced young people involved feel empowered, heard, a sense of belonging and connected to a larger collective voice
- Care experienced young people broaden their horizons through new experiences, developing skills and confidence

DECISION MAKERS

- Decision makers improve their understanding of existing challenges, enablers and good practice, allowing them to identify and prioritise gaps in knowledge and service provision

LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND PROFESSIONALS

- Professionals increase their understanding of good practice and feel empowered to act as agents of change.
- Local authorities are connected through strong peer networks that enable shared learning and the adoption of evidence-informed good practice
- Increased dialogue between local authorities and national and regional partners leads to more opportunities to share challenges, constraints and solutions



LONG TERM OUTCOMES

INNOVATE

- Partnership working facilitated by the forum leads to the scaling of co-produced innovations that improve the lives of care experienced young people

IMPROVE

- Local authorities and public bodies communicate effectively with each other to work around key issues
- Greater consistency and standardisation in service delivery improves the quality and responsiveness of care, reducing postcode-based inequalities
- Care experienced young people perspectives are recognised as essential to decision-making, strengthening the relevance and effectiveness of services

INFLUENCE

- Local and national policy and practice are influenced by care experienced young people, driving meaningful change in their lives
- The forum is recognised as a national driver of change
- Local authorities have increased agency in influencing local and national policy

Annex B: Evaluation Methodology

In addition to what is mentioned in the main report, the following details provide further information on the evaluation methods and approach.

Core Principles Underpinning the Evaluation

The evaluation was grounded in a set of core principles that guided the design, fieldwork and analysis:

Co-production with care experienced young people: Care experienced young people were involved at every stage, from shaping research tools to interpreting findings. Their insights ensured the evaluation remained grounded in lived experience and youth voice.

Collaborative and developmental: The evaluation was developed in close partnership with the NLCBF and Catch22 team from the outset. Early inception meetings, iterative tool development and ongoing communication ensured that the evaluation design aligned with the forum's key strategic questions.

The evaluation was designed not only to assess impact but to support organisational learning. Workshops throughout the evaluation allowed for iterative feedback loops and reflective discussions, giving the NLCBF team the opportunity to engage with emerging findings.

Person centred, proportionate and low burden: The evaluation was designed to be accessible, respectful and responsive to the needs of both professionals and care experienced young people. This meant ensuring that methods were proportionate and low burden for participants, recognising the pressures facing local authorities and the busy lives led by care leavers. Tools and activities were developed to be flexible, trauma-informed and person-centred, enabling participants to engage in ways that felt safe, manageable and meaningful to them.

Mixed-methods and triangulated: Evidence was drawn from multiple sources (surveys, interviews, focus groups, document review and monitoring data), to build a robust and nuanced understanding of the forum's impact. Triangulation across methods strengthened the validity and depth of findings.

Data Collection Methods and Sampling Approach

Document review: A review of NLCBF strategies, action plans, monitoring data, previous evaluations and policy documents provided essential context and informed the development of tools and the Theory of Change.

Theory of Change workshop: A collaborative workshop with the NLCBF team, Steering Group and YPBMF representatives to review and refine the forum's Theory of Change and ensure alignment between the evaluation questions and intended outcomes.

Survey of local authority members: A national survey was disseminated to all **134** NLCBF local authority members to explore experiences of the membership offer, perceived impact and priorities for development. The survey was open for **7** weeks (mid-October to early December 2025), and included a mix of closed questions and free text response options. A one week pilot was undertaken to test clarity of questions, relevance and accessibility.

While the survey was open to all members, responses were received from **64** member authorities (**48%** participation), with **104** individual responses received in total. Respondents held a range of roles, most commonly leaving care service managers (**52%**), followed by frontline practitioners (**23%**).

Seven qualitative interviews with NLCBF team and governance: seven in-depth interviews were conducted with:

- One Catch22 member of staff with oversight of the NLCBF;
- Four members of the NLCBF delivery team;
- Two representatives from the NLCBF Steering Group, including the YPBMF Steering Group representative.

These interviews explored delivery, strategic direction and organisational learning.

Five qualitative interviews with national stakeholders: Five national and regional stakeholders were selected based on their strategic relevance to leaving care policy and practice and their engagement with NLCBF. This included representatives from government departments and agencies, regional leaving care organisations, and relevant charities. This sample provided insight into the forum's influence at national and system levels.

Local authority interviews and focus groups: Five case studies involving interviews and focus groups with leaving care teams to explore the forum's impact on practice, culture and outcomes for young people. Each case study included two in-depth interviews with key staff, totalling 10 interviews overall. Two cross-authority focus groups were held bringing together professionals from all five case study areas. This approach enabled both depth (within each local authority) and breadth (across the group).

The five local authorities were purposefully selected to reflect variation in:

- Geography: two urban areas, two rural areas, and one coastal area;
- Regional spread: Yorkshire and the Humber (one), East of England (one), West Midlands (one), South West (one), London (one);
- Ofsted leaving-care service ratings;
- Levels of engagement with the NLCBF¹ (two of the 20 local authorities most engaged with the forum, one of the 20 local authorities least engaged with the forum, and two local authorities that were neither the most or least engaged).

YPBMF fieldwork: Care experienced young people were recruited through the Champions and Legends groups, with flexibility for those preferring one-to-one interviews. A focus group was held to understand progress against previous recommendations and identify priorities for the future. Additional engagement activities were held at the YPBMF hybrid event in November 2025. This included short one-to-one interviews with five Champions and Legends and a five minute Menti survey completed by 22 care leavers attending the event.

1 NLCBF monitoring data was used to determine which local authorities were the least and more engaged.

Next Steps workshop: A collaborative session with the NLCBF team, NLCBF Steering Group, the Evaluation Advisory Group, and other relevant stakeholders, to reflect on emerging findings and shape strategic priorities.

.....

Analysis and Reporting

- All qualitative data (interviews, focus groups and workshop transcripts) were uploaded to NVivo. A coding framework was developed collaboratively, drawing on the six thematic areas, emerging patterns from early fieldwork, and insights from the Advisory Group. Coding was iterative, with regular sense-making discussions to refine themes and ensure consistency. Analysis focused on identifying: recurring patterns, areas of divergence, mechanisms of change, concrete examples of impact, and opportunities for development.
 - Survey data was cleaned, anonymised and analysed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations. Findings were triangulated with qualitative data to strengthen validity.
 - Findings were synthesised into: an **Emerging Findings** presentation (December 2025), a **Next Steps workshop** (December 2025) and the **final evaluation report** (February 2026).
-

Ethical Approach

The evaluation was underpinned by a rigorous ethical framework designed to protect the autonomy, dignity and wellbeing of all participants, particularly care experienced young people. The approach emphasised informed consent, confidentiality, and a trauma-informed practice throughout. All participants opted in voluntarily, were provided with clear information about the purpose of the evaluation and the limits of confidentiality, and were reminded that they could pause, decline questions or withdraw at any point. Fieldwork methods were designed to be accessible, person-centred and sensitive to participants' needs, with flexibility around format, timing and communication preferences. The Advisory Group also reviewed the tools with these principles in mind. Safeguarding procedures were agreed with Catch22 in advance, including a clear escalation pathway for any disclosures of risk of harm.

Data protection and confidentiality were central to the evaluation design. Only minimal personal data was collected, and all information was stored securely, anonymised during analysis, and scheduled for deletion one year after project completion. Recordings and transcripts were handled in line with GDPR requirements, and care was taken to avoid jigsaw identification in reporting. All researchers were appropriately trained, DBS checked and supported through reflective practice to mitigate the emotional impact of working with sensitive material. This ethical approach ensured that the evaluation was conducted safely, respectfully and in line with best practice for research involving vulnerable groups.

Annex C: Survey Results

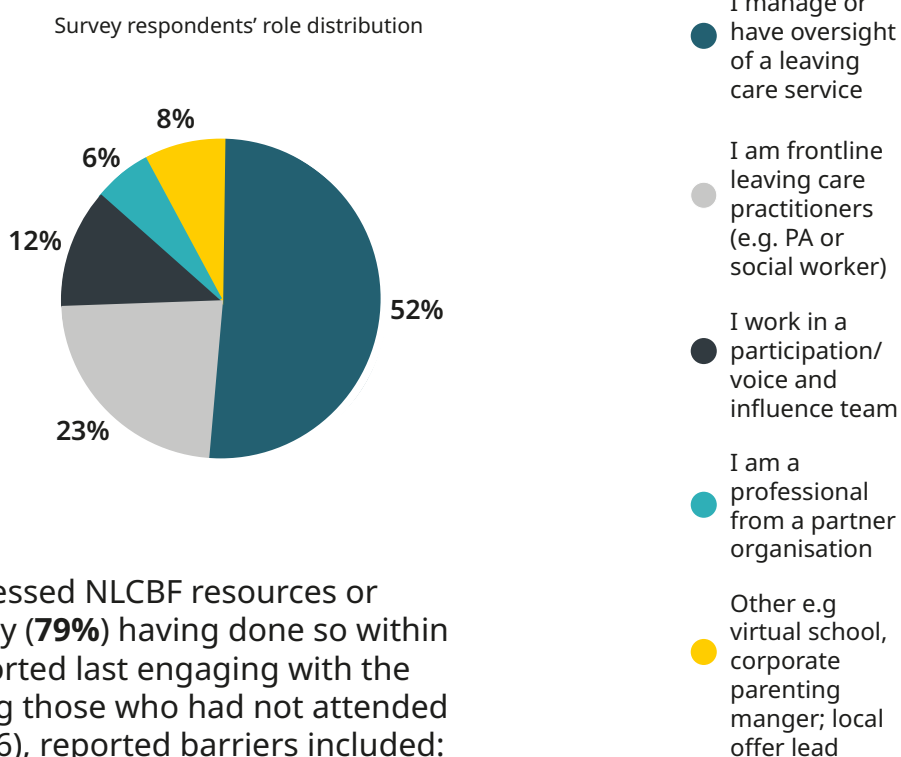
The evaluation team, together with feedback from the Advisory Group, developed an online survey. The survey questions were in line with the evaluation questions, and the content was reviewed by the NLCBF/Catch22 team. Managers, practitioners and partners from NLCBF member authorities were invited to share their views and experiences of the forum.

The first question in the survey asked respondents to confirm if they agreed to take part in the evaluation. Survey responses were anonymous. It took approximately 20 minutes to complete. It was distributed in several ways:

- The NLCBF team sent an email invitation to complete the survey to all primary and secondary NLCBF member contacts (**238** people from **134** LAs). Reminder emails were also sent.
- A short video about the evaluation survey was created and shown at NLCBF events, alongside a request for attendees to complete the survey. Time was also allocated during the PA Celebration Event (November) and the NLCBF Managers Forum (December) for attendees to complete the survey.
- The survey was advertised through a news item on the members' website, reaching over **4,000** registered members, and was also shared on social media platforms such as LinkedIn.

*In total, **104 survey responses were received** from 64 out of 134 local authority members, representing 48% participation. Figure 1 shows the distribution of roles among respondents.*

Figure 1



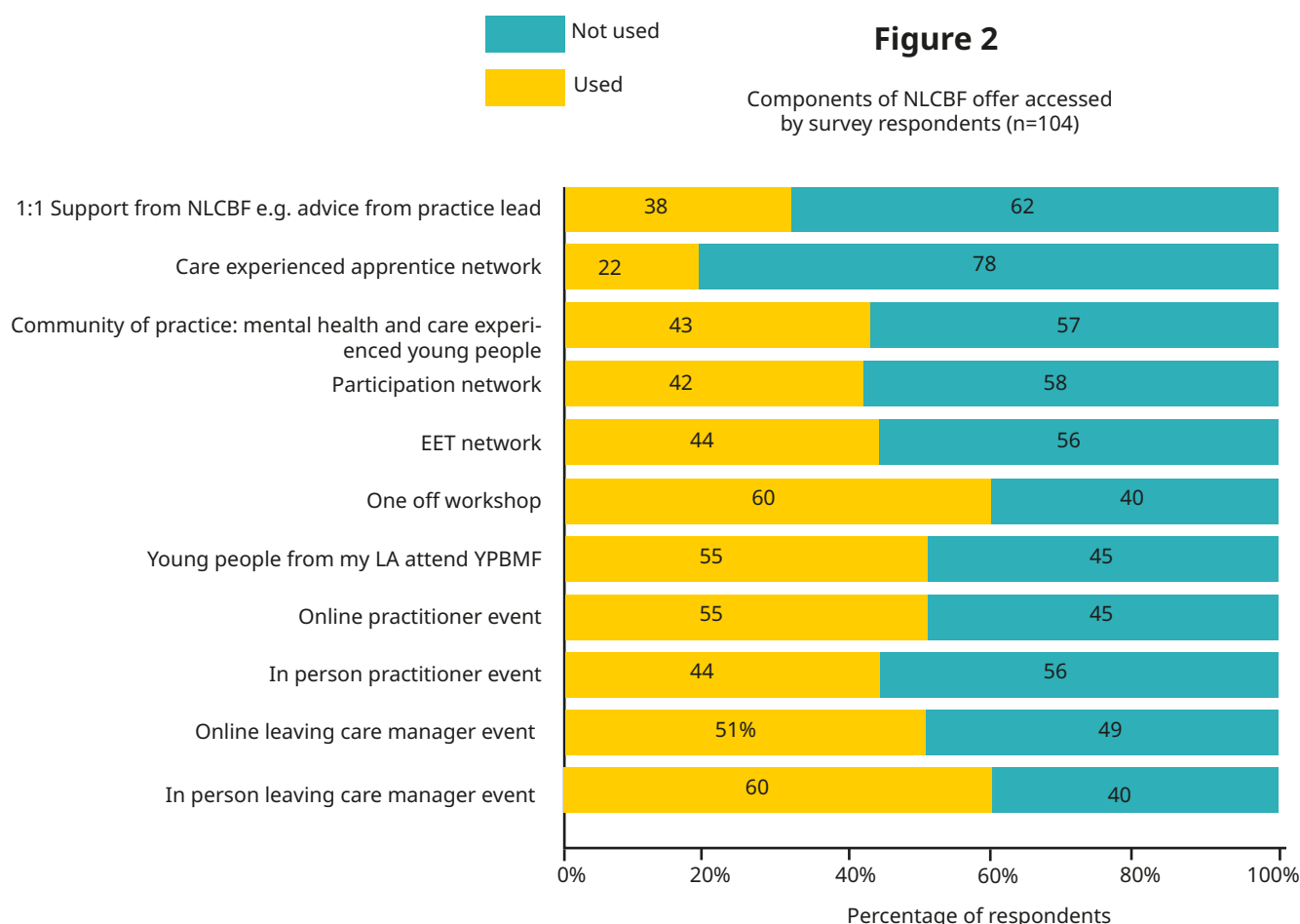
Engagement with the forum

Most respondents (**94%**) had accessed NLCBF resources or attended events, with the majority (**79%**) having done so within the last six months. Only **3%** reported last engaging with the forum over two years ago. Among those who had not attended events or accessed resources (n=6), reported barriers included:

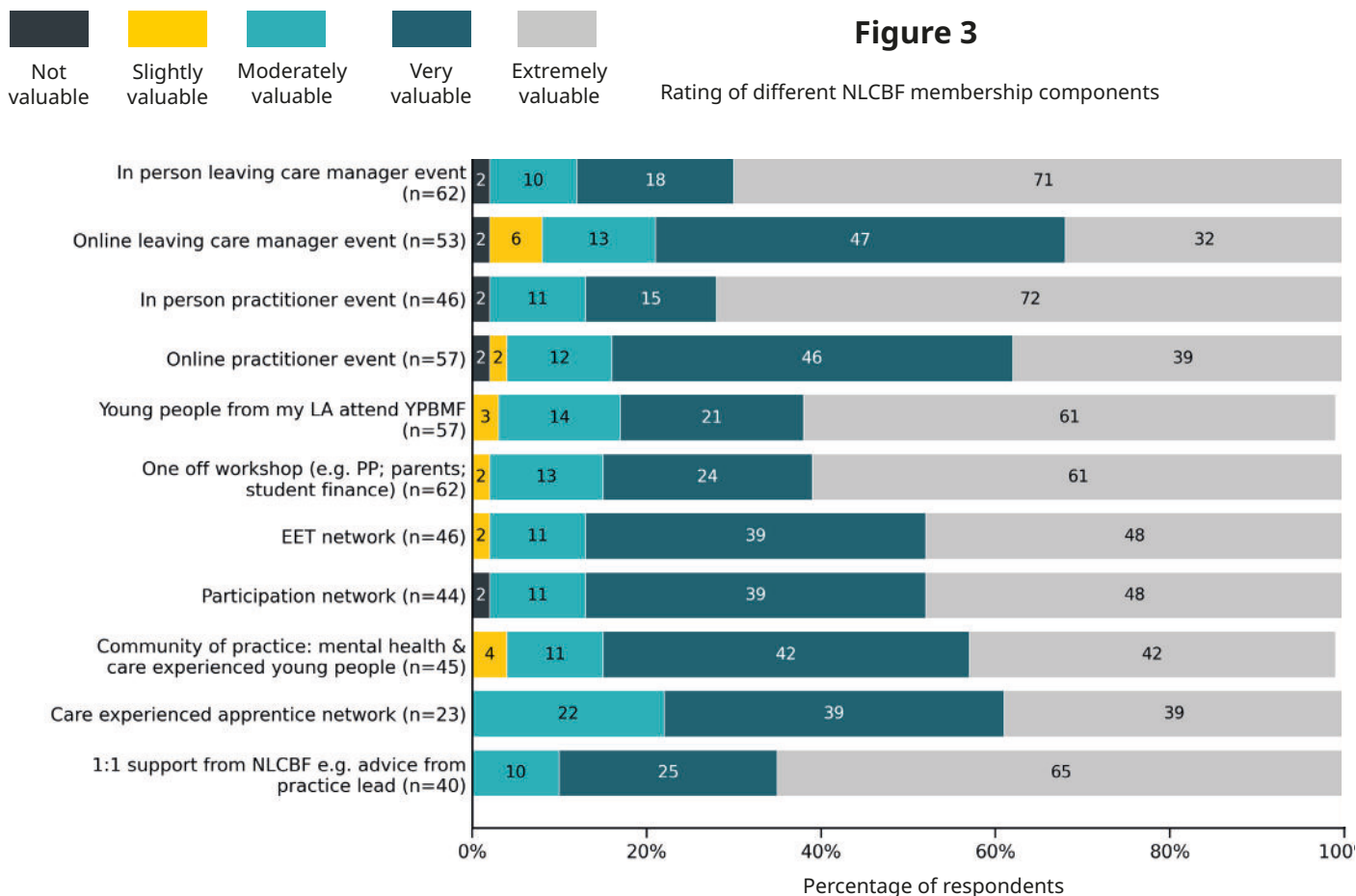
- Not aware of events or resources (n=4)
- Workload pressures (n=3)
- Wasn't sure how to get involved (n=2)

Rating different components of the NLCBF membership offer

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had used different components of NLCBF's membership offer (see Figure 2). The findings show that respondents were most likely to have attended in-person leaving care managers events and one-off workshops. In contrast, the care experienced apprentice network was the component least frequently accessed by survey respondents.



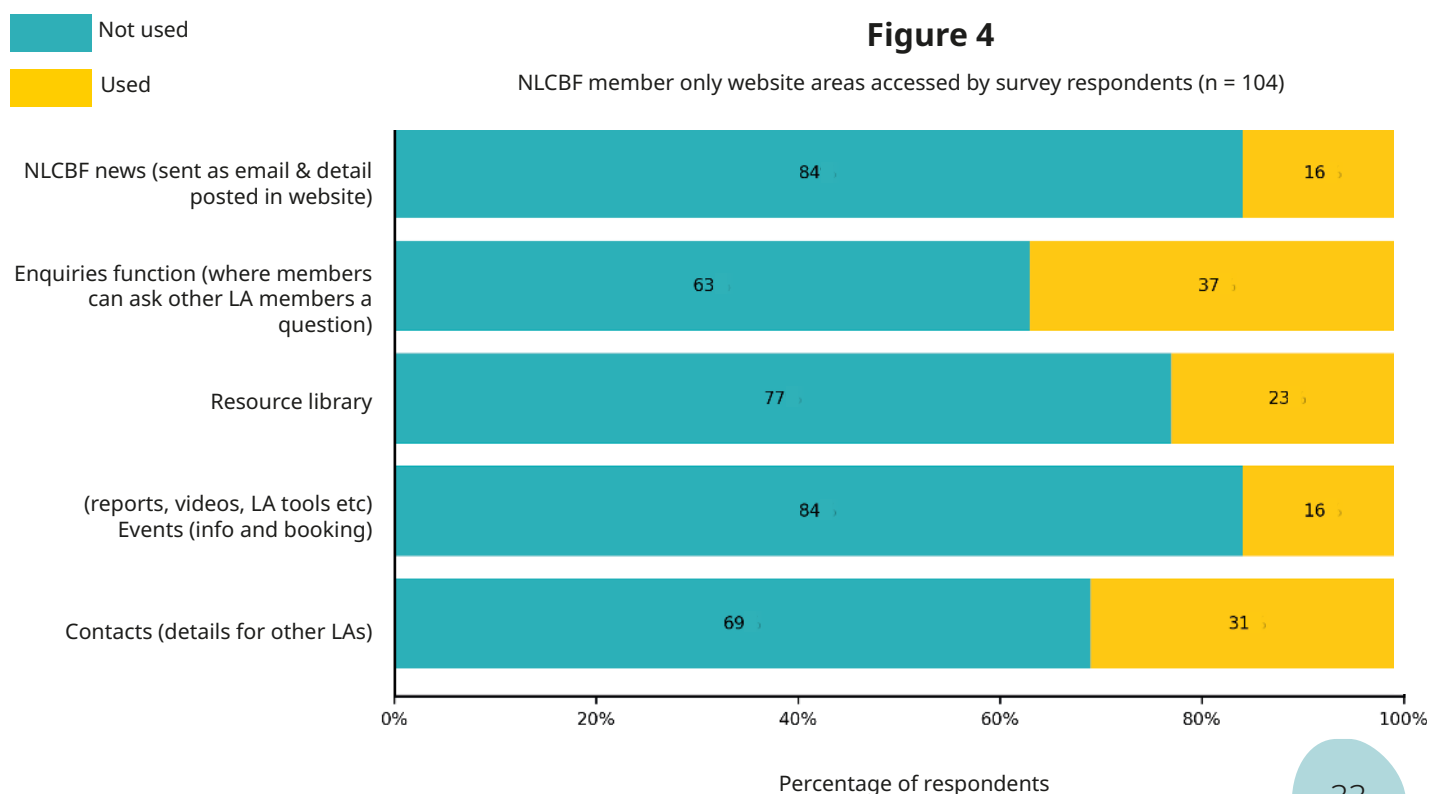
When respondents had accessed part of the membership offer they were asked to rate how valuable they found it (see Figure 3). The areas rated highest (extremely valuable) were in person leaving care manager and in person practitioner events. The components rated lowest were online leaving care manager events and the care experienced apprentice network, based on the combined proportion of respondents who rated them as not valuable, slightly valuable, or moderately valuable. This is likely related to the fact that care experienced apprentices, who are the main audience of this network, are unlikely to have taken part in the survey.



*respondents who answered 'I've not used this' removed from responses in figure

NLCBF members-only website

Respondents were asked to rate the value of different parts of the NLCBF's members-only website. Response options ranged from 'not valuable' to 'extremely valuable', with an additional option to indicate if the component had not been used (see Figure 4). Respondents were most likely to have used the NLCBF news and events functions, while the enquiry function was the least frequently accessed.



If respondents had accessed the members-only website, they were also asked to rate how valuable they found it (see Figure 5). The areas rated highest (extremely valuable) were the events function and contact details section. Of all the areas assessed, the enquiry function scored the lowest.

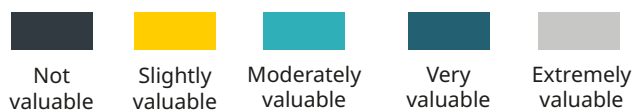
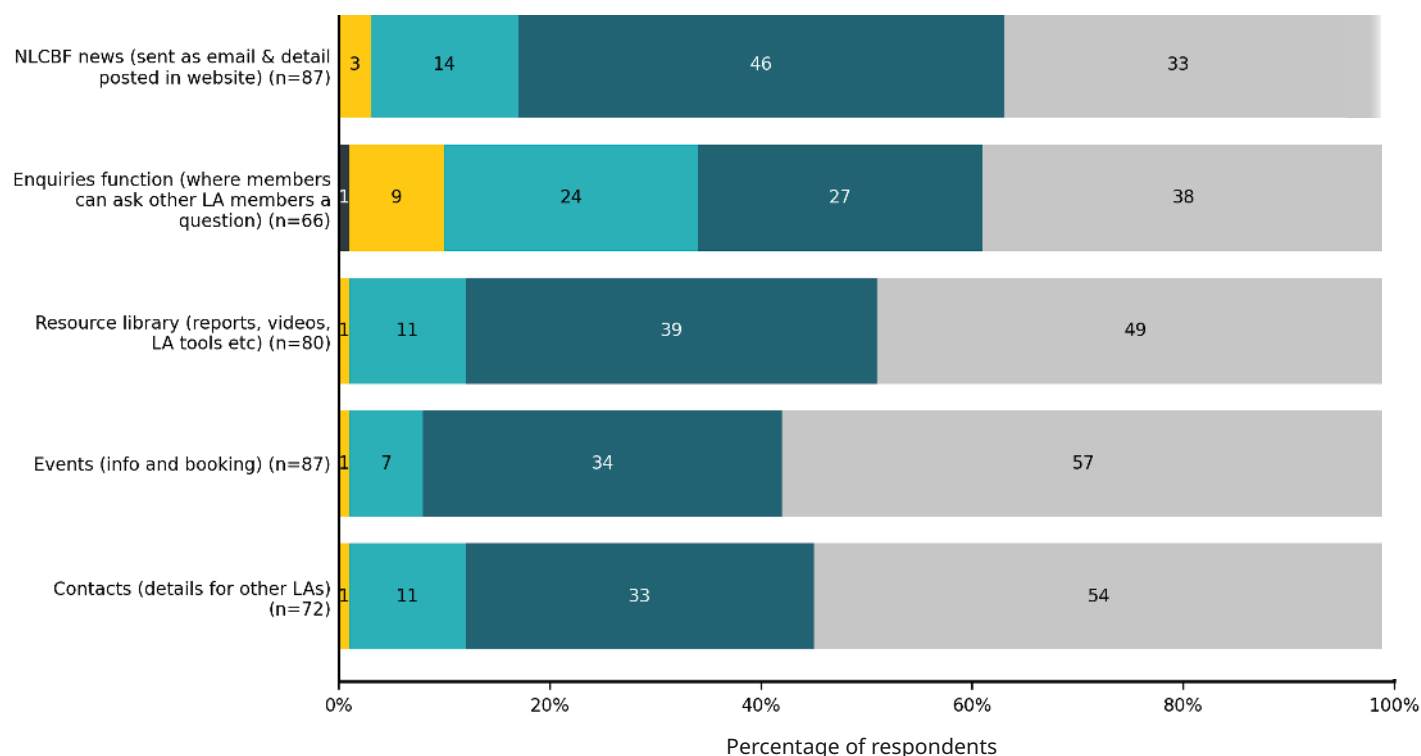


Figure 5

Rating of different parts of the NLCBF members-only website



*respondents who answered 'I've not used this' removed from responses in figure

Impact of NLCBF membership on individuals and their work

Respondents were asked to reflect on their experience and rate how much they agreed or disagreed with statements about the forum's impact. Results were generally positive with most people agreeing or strongly agreeing to statements about the impact NLCBF has had on them. Statements relating to respondents' influence on national thinking and reduced professional isolation received the lowest scores, including: *"I feel that my voice and experience contribute to shaping national thinking on leaving care"* and *"The NLCBF has helped me feel less isolated in my role"*. The highest impact scores were associated with statements relating to members' sense of connection to a national community of leaving care professionals and opportunities to learn from care experienced young people (see Figure 6).

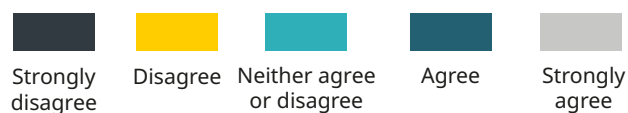
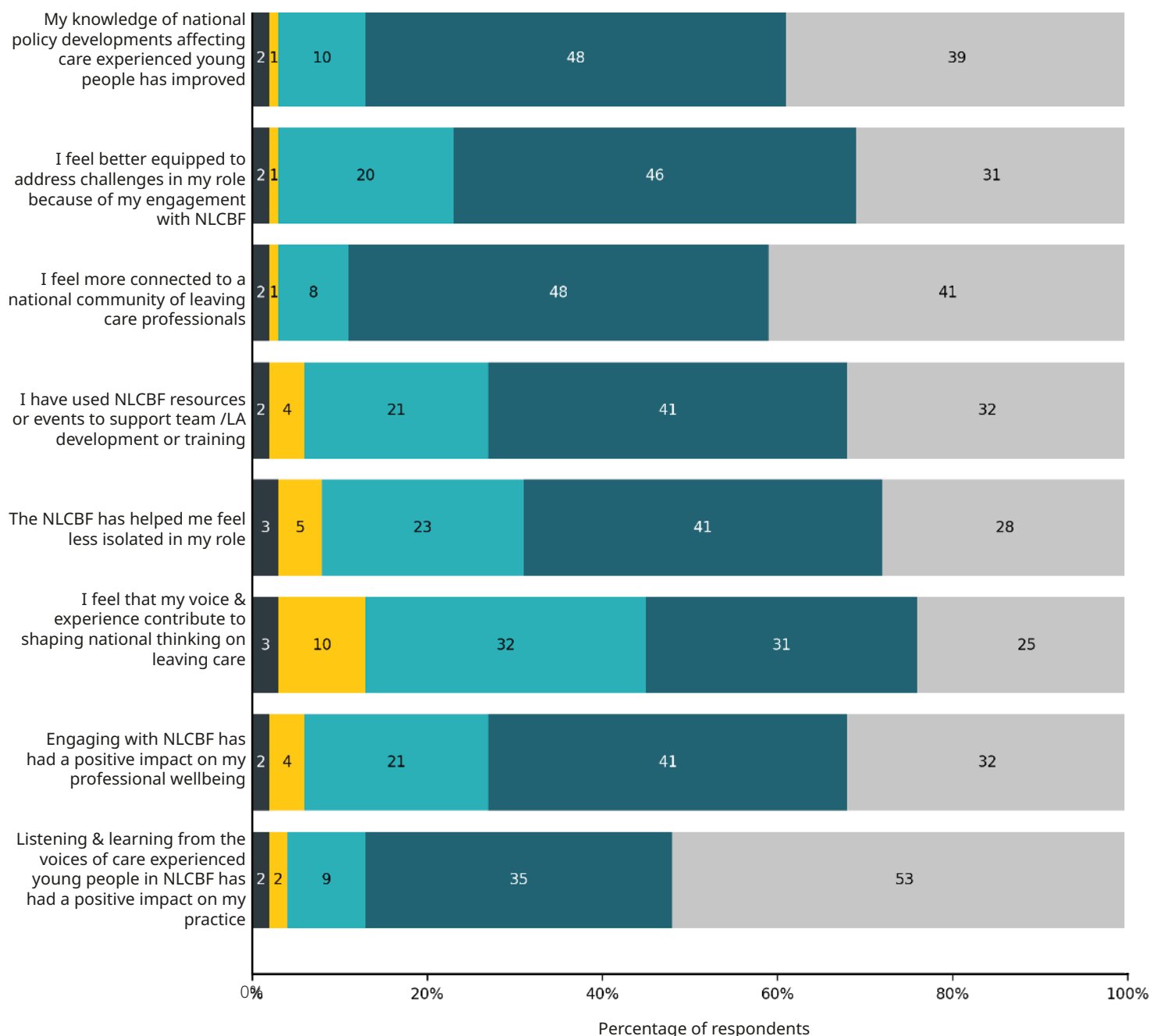


Figure 6

Levels of Agreement with Statements About the Forum's Impact (n = 104)

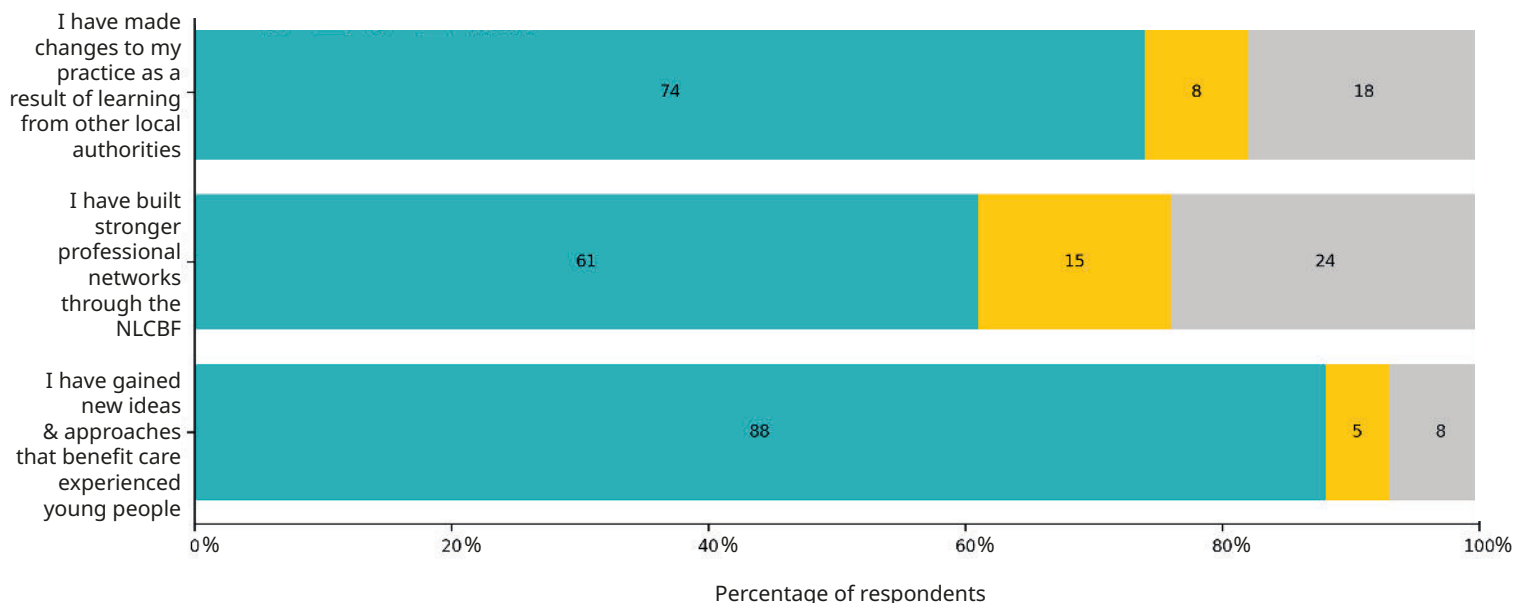


When survey respondents were asked about changes made as a result of NLCBF membership, many (**88%**) reported they had gained new ideas that benefit care experienced young people (see Figure 7). A smaller percentage of respondents (**61%**) reported that they had built stronger professional networks through the forum.



Figure 7

Applicability of statements about change as a result of NLCBF membership (n = 104)

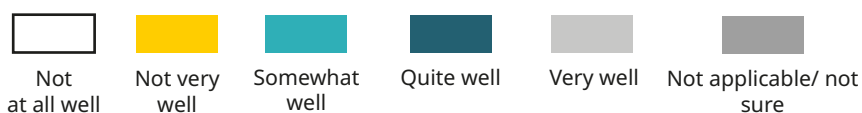
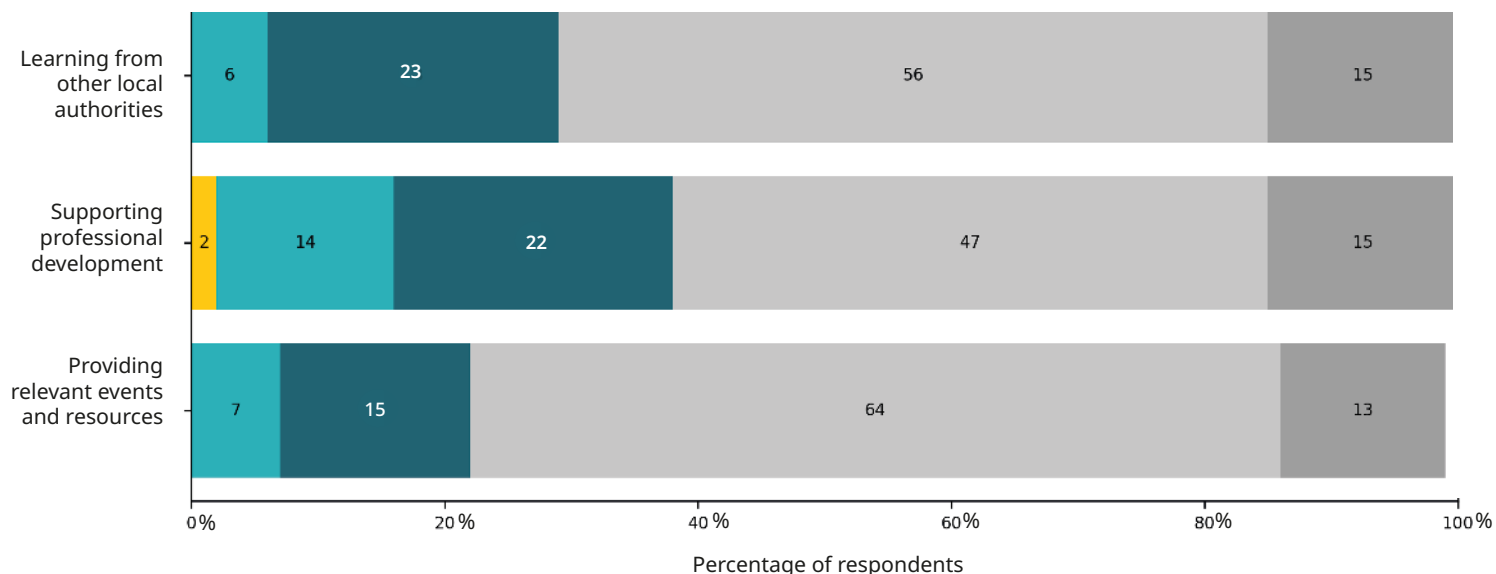


Impact of NLCBF membership on local authorities

In relation to whether NLCBF membership met the needs of local authorities, responses were positive. Overall, **79%** of respondents reported that the forum met needs related to learning from other local authorities and providing relevant events and resources 'quite well' or 'very well'. Among the areas assessed, 'supporting professional development' received the lowest rating; however, this still scored relatively highly at **69%** (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

How well NLCBF membership meets the needs of local authorities (n = 104)

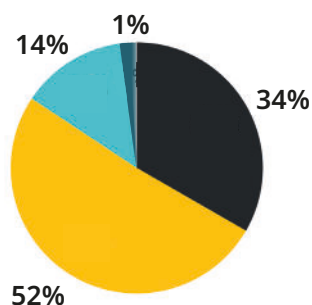


Survey respondents were asked to appraise whether NLCBF membership had an impact on various areas of their local authority's work (see Figure 9). The area in which NLCBF membership appeared to have the greatest impact was on the work local authorities undertake to support care experienced young people, with **86%** of respondents reporting either a 'big impact' or 'some impact'.

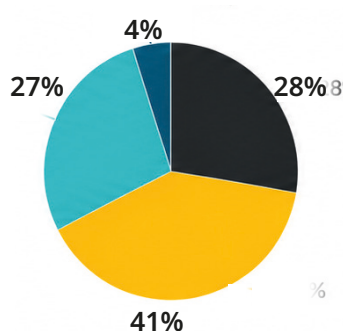
Figure 9

Impact of NLCBF membership on areas of local authority work (n = 104)

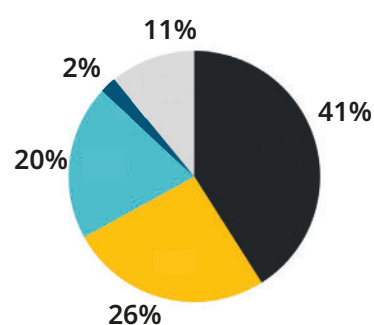
NLCBF membership has had an impact on the work [my] local authority does to support care experienced young people



NLCBF membership has had an impact on how [my] authority collaborates with other local authorities to develop & support initiatives for care experienced young people



NLCBF membership has had an impact on care experienced young people from [my] local authority who have engaged with NLCBF



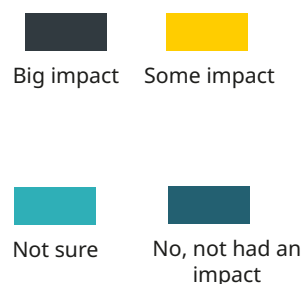
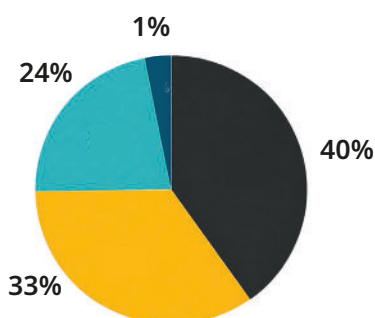
Impact nationally and regionally of the NLCBF

Respondents' views were sought on whether NLCBF had an impact on care leaving policies and practices nationally or regionally. A majority of respondents (**73%**) reported that the NLCBF had either a 'big impact' or 'some impact' (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

Impact of NLCBF membership nationally and regionally (n = 102)

NLCBF has had an impact on care leaving policies and practices nationally or regionally*



*n=2 missing responses

Email: nlcbf@catch-22.org.uk
Website: www.leavingcare.org



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TRUST