Mental Health and Health

Listening & Learning from In Their Own Words

Listening to care experienced young people, learning from practice, and tracking progress.



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Overview of In Their Own Words

In Their Own Words (ITOW) is a well established and influential part of the annual work of Young People's Benchmarking Forum (YPBMF) within Catch22's National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF). It is a programme of annual events, surveys, blogs, and reports designed and delivered by care experienced young people.

In Their Own Words creates space for young people to speak directly with changemakers (policy and practice) about the realities of leaving care. Their messages are not filtered through professionals; they are presented in their own words, with clarity, urgency, and expertise. Importantly, it does not only highlight the challenges faced by young people but actively involves them in shaping the solutions that would make a difference.

For the latest In Their Own Words, YPBMF developed a national survey completed by over 200 care experienced individuals. Based on the survey findings YPBMF co produced five reports on:

- Cost of Living
- Mental Health & Health
- Safe and Affordable Accommodation
- Communities of Support
- Support after 21 and 25.

Since its launch in 2024, more than 1,300 professionals have heard In Their Own Words messages directly from YPBMF Champions & Legends, at more than 20 national events including at a parliamentary reception, the National Children and Adult Services Conference, Ofsted workshops, LGA and other national and regional events.

In Their Own Words has become a recognised national platform, and this stage of the project is all about exploring what changes—local and national—have taken place in relation to YPBMFs Key Asks, where In Their Own Words had contributed to that progress, and what difference it is making to care experienced individuals.

Impact of In Their Own Words

At our In Their Own Words event in July 2025, YPBMF Legends interviewed Leaving Care Service Managers, to help gain an understanding of what they had done in response to our Local Asks. A follow up survey -'In Their Own Words - We Said You Did' was sent to service leads and leaving care team managers. It captures how the messages, evidence, and lived experience at the heart of In Their Own Words are influencing thinking, shaping services, and supporting better outcomes for care experienced young people and adults.

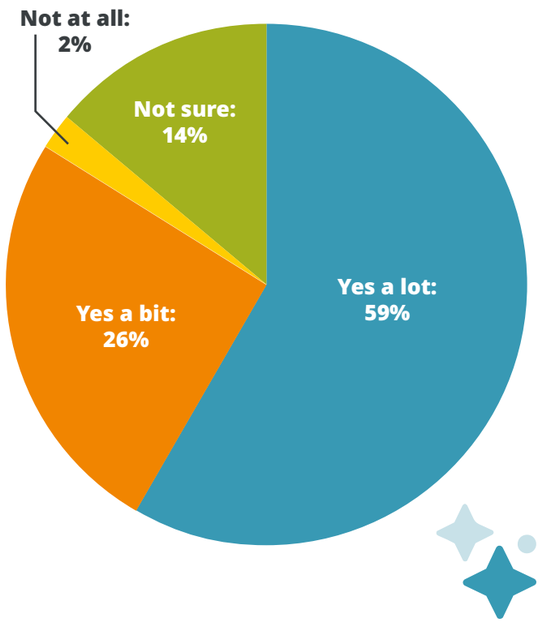
"It is good to hear about young people's views more nationally as this adds weight to seeking support for our young people from seniors in the authority"

Leaving care professional

85% of leaving care professionals surveyed reported In Their Own Words had influenced or supported their work.

Have 'In Their Own Words' reports and events influenced or supported the work you do?

- Yes a lot: 59% (34)
- Yes a bit: 26% (15)
- Not at all: 2% (1)
- Not sure: 14% (8)



We heard that In Their Own Words...

- Helps local authorities decide what to focus on and what needs prioritising
- Helps local authorities review and strengthen their local offer for care leavers
- Helps local authorities make the case for funding
- Motivates local authorities to start new work or make changes
- Raises awareness of care leaver issues across the whole council
- Helps partner organisations review the support they provide
- Is used with local care experienced young people to support their challenge and influencing work
- Shares examples of good practice which inspires local authorities to learn and adapt from these ideas
- Provides national evidence about what care leavers say and what they want to change (helping to back up local care leavers' voice)

The 'In Their Own Words: We Said You Did' survey asked about all five themes. This report focuses on learning, progress, and impact relating to the Key Asks for Mental Health & Health



Local Asks Mental Health and Health

The 'In Their Own Words: We Said, You Did' survey asked leaving care professionals to tell us if they had responded to the 'local asks' from the original report.

Just under half of respondents (46%) had mental health specialists within leaving care teams, fewer areas currently provided out of hours support (23%)

	We have this	We are working towards this	Decided not to do	Not sure	Total
Mental health workers	6 (46%)	7 (54%)	-	-	13
PAs have mental health training	4 (31%)	9 (69%)	-	-	13
Out hours support	3 (23%)	9 (69%)	-	1 (8%)	13

For each of these Local Asks respondents were asked to share examples of how they were addressing these locally.

Health and Mental health specialist within care leavers teams – having mental health workers and leaving care nurses who are accessible at care leavers' hubs

"One of our PA's is a Mental Health specialist who coordinates support. It is good and it helps but we definitely could do with more"

Care experienced young person from the North-East

- **East Sussex** has a full-time specialist mental health nurse located in the team who attends weekly lunch groups, provides 1:1 assessment and intervention with young people and facilitates group work.
- **Southend** has a mental health and wellbeing champion in the team who runs support and wellbeing groups for care leavers.
- **Bolton Staying Close service** has two emotional health workers.
- **Durham** has an emotional wellbeing worker within the team who runs wellbeing sessions; arts and crafts days and makes thing to sell (any profit goes into the hub). They make wellbeing boxes for care leavers, offer emotional support at times of crisis and support referrals to other agencies

Other examples:

- Working with NHS to identify a clear pathway for care leavers to access mental health support.
- An emotional wellbeing team in the hub (one afternoon a week), a looked after nurse in the hub (once a month) and a wellbeing room which allows space for people to sit and reflect or have sessions with a wellbeing practitioner.
- Care Leavers hub with dedicated space for therapy sessions from the Emotional Well-being Hub (funded through Staying Close).
- A wellbeing/ mental health practitioner within the service offering direct 1:1 therapeutic support for young people, consultations for social workers and group wellbeing sessions at the hub. This is open to all young people regardless of where they live (so not exclusive to those who live in borough)
- A bespoke mental health offer for care leavers via therapeutic service. This is funded by the Integrated Care Board.

Mental health and health training – leaving care teams benefit from having specialists within the team but all PAs should have mental health training and be trauma informed.

"Half of our PA's are outstanding in this type of thing, but half aren't so it's luck of the draw on which one you get. Some PA's have a personal understanding from their own experience - those PA's get it and they understand us"

Care experienced young person from North-East

- **Coventry** PAs have accessed mental health first aid training, with trauma informed and relational practice discussed regularly within supervision, group supervision and team meetings.
- **East Sussex** has a mental health specialist nurse supporting the staff team. They lead on group reflective practice and training events e.g. impact of trauma, suicidal ideation and managing anxiety.
- **Herefordshire** ensure staff at supported accommodation provision are trained in trauma informed practice.

Other examples:

- Trauma informed training across the leaving care service with a current focus on trauma training for separated young people.



Out of hours support – finding solutions for out of hours support such as commissioning voluntary organisations, Care leavers' hubs with crisis support and apps e.g. Kooth or Ask Jan Kooth is a digital mental health and wellbeing service offering confidential online support. Ask Jan provides 24/7 digital mental health support to care-experienced people.

"We do have Ask Jan but it's not used because people don't know it's there, or what it is. I only found out about it by chance when I was in a meeting with the PA's and it got mentioned. It feels like it's not on anyone's agenda to let us know it's available – and if we don't know about it then we can't ask for it."

Care experienced young Person from the North-East

- **Coventry** provide access to the Rees Foundation's Ask Jan support for all care leavers.
- **Bolton** Staying Close service use safety plans and out of hours services as part of contingency planning in Pathway Plans.

Other examples:

- A local authority developing a care leaver app and out of hours support will be part of the app.
- Providing access to KOOTH up to age 25.

Creating and promoting groups and activities – helping to reduce isolation and get care experienced people involved in positive activities and communities

"One of our PA's has started Wellness Walks which are quite canny because you can join on to the walk at different points along the way"

Care experienced young Person from the North- East

- **Coventry** provide access to gyms across the city to all care leavers plus a friend.
- **Herefordshire** run groups and activities to combat isolation e.g. United friends (young people seeking asylum); Queer Leavers
- **Bolton** Staying Close service worked on relationships with young people to increase confidence and reduce loneliness e.g. support groups to go out for a meal, bowling etc
- **East Sussex's** Health and Wellbeing social prescribing model provides young people with a personalised budget (£500) which can be used to access activities which will positively impact their mental health, improve self-esteem, lessen isolation and over time reduce reliance on specialist health services.



National Asks Mental Health & Health

Our national asks were primarily identified to influence national policy and new funding of services and solutions across the country, but some local authorities had made progress towards securing support and provision for these national asks at a local level. The 'In Their Own Words: We Said, You Did' survey also asked leaving care professionals about progress made against the national asks.

Since publishing our original reports, we have seen progress towards In Their Own Words Key Asks, with national policy and funding priorities focussing on free prescriptions, priority access to free dental health, and access to mental health support via the expanded Staying Close provision.

The area local authority respondents were most confident they were already providing, just under half were doing so, was in relation to an existing offer around health e.g. gym membership, free prescriptions. Two areas where those taking part in the survey were not sure they could progress related to neurodiversity research and access to Operation courage

Table 4 National asks – mental health and health

	We have this	We are working towards this	Decided not to do	Not sure	Not possible to achieve	Total
Neurodiversity research	-	4 (31%)	-	8 (62%)	1 (8%)	13
National health offer	6 (46%)	7 (54%)	-	-	-	13
Dental health care	2 (15%)	11 (85%)	-	-	-	13
Access to Operation Courage	-	4 (31%)	-	8 (62%)	1 (8%)	13
Specialist MH interventions	7 (54%)	4 (31%)	-	2 (15%)	-	13

For each of these National Asks respondents were asked to share any examples of how they were addressing these locally.

Neurodiversity research – fund national research into neurodiversity and care experience to get an idea of the scale of the issue and how to support individuals appropriately to thrive in work, education and life in general.

"On neurodiversity – we have a fabulous SEND leader who is 10/10. I can struggle to do my job sometimes because of my ADHD, but he helps me with things like fidget toys before important meetings"

Care experienced young person from the North-East

- **Southend's** participation team and the Youth and Care Experienced Council have developed neurodivergent support packs (to support more inclusive practice) – the work has been shortlisted for an award.

National offer around health – ensure that all local authorities and organisations are providing a good health offer e.g. gym memberships, free NHS prescriptions in all areas

- In December 2025, the UK Government announced that care leavers in England will receive free prescriptions, dental care and eyecare services up to age 25. This is an important step towards improving access to healthcare for care-experienced young people and a significant step towards YPBMF's call for a National Health Offer.
- **Bolton's** Local Offer entitles all care leavers to free NHS prescriptions until the age of 25 and free or discounted access to council leisure centres.

Address the dental health crisis – care experienced young people cannot get NHS dental health care and cannot afford private dental care. They can be left in debilitating pain which impacts on work, education and standard of life. Learn from emerging best practice and research such as the Sunny smiles project at the University of Plymouth.



- **Southend** are working closely with NHS children looked after nursing colleagues to resolve the dental crisis.
- **Devon** developed a trauma aware NHS dental service for care experienced children and young people across the county. Please see the end of this report for a case study on how and why this was implemented.

Other examples:

- Looked after nurses helping to identify dentists
- A local authority working on a dental health pilot.

Specialised mental health support – care experienced individuals often require specialist mental health interventions

- **Durham** have an in-house therapeutic team for care leavers.

Other examples:

- A local authority with a monthly emotional wellbeing panel for children in care and care leavers aged 5 to 25 with a referral process to enable access to therapy. They commission therapeutic services for talking and play therapy and have plans to recruit a counsellor to work with children presenting with sexually harmful behaviour. NB: Adult mental health access can be a barrier for young people age 18+

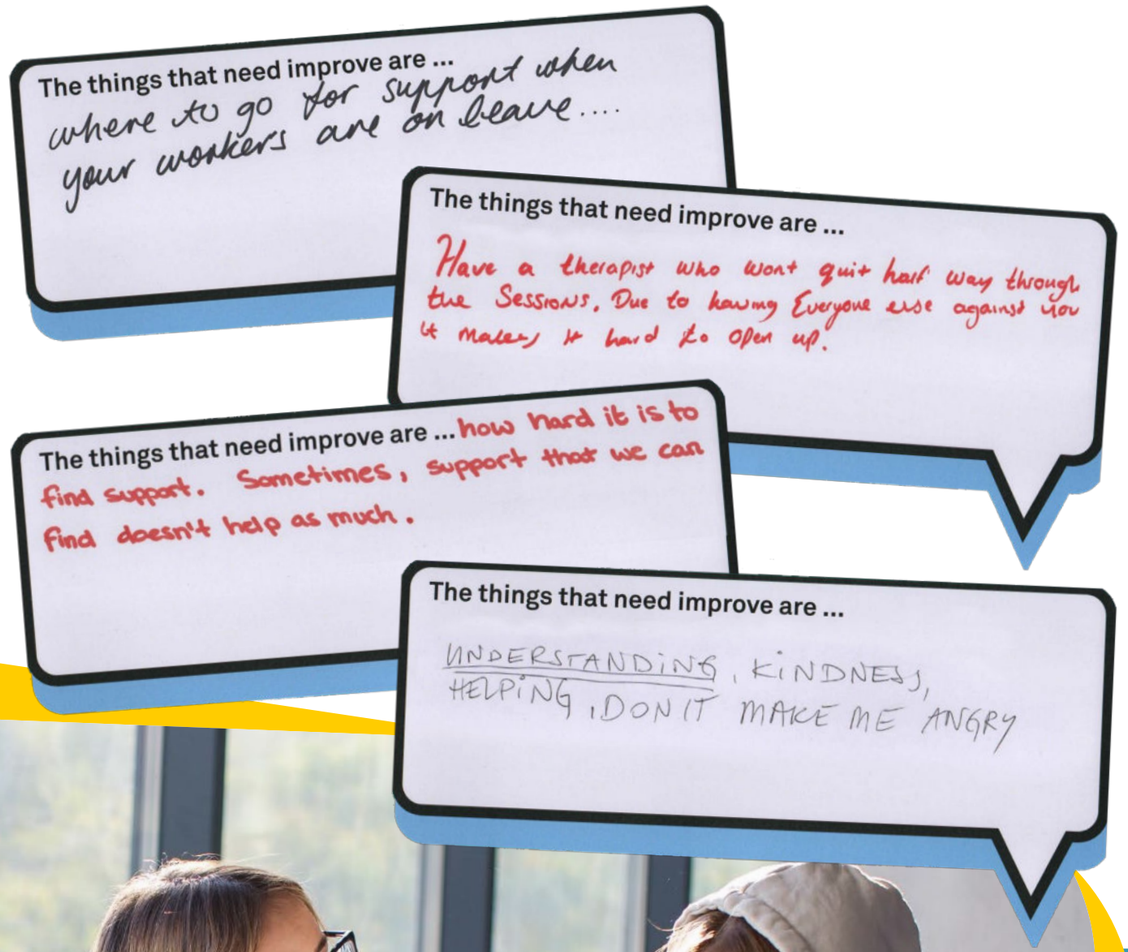
Provide access to Operation Courage – allow care experienced individuals to access the dedicated mental health services that veterans can access. Care experienced individuals are often traumatised and can suffer from PTSD

This was an idea being explored by the previous government and we are not aware of any progress in this area.

What gaps still exist?

Young people's views from YPBMF Event in Bristol July 2026.

The things that need to improve are...







Case Study: How Devon are working to address the dental health crisis

Aim:

Enable access to a trauma aware NHS dental service for the care experienced population across Devon to improve their dental health

Project Background:

Poor oral health directly affects overall health and wellbeing; limiting eating, speaking, socialising and ability to attend school or work, yet tooth decay is largely preventable.

In parts of Devon, levels of tooth decay are high. In addition, there is a wealth of national evidence demonstrating poorer dental outcomes for those who have lived in care. This context combined with reduced NHS dental service capacity and a backlog of 750 children in care requiring a dental appointment, highlighted a need for intervention.

To ensure the service met the needs of the children and young people the Oral Health Steering Group worked closely with children's services and listened directly to young people and carers.

Feedback from care experienced young people showing why we needed a dedicated service:

"The impact of not being able to get a dentist has really had an effect on me. I've tried looking in my local area to be able to get a check up or be able to see a hygienist as my teeth are detrimentally affecting me. The last time I went to a dentist was roughly in 2014 when I was with my last foster carer. ..... I've tried going to the local dentist in my area before and post-covid and they said that they are not taking on any new patients or they have not got the room for new patients.... Unfortunately there are no dentists in my area that are local to me and I feel that I would have to travel a long way out of my local area to even get a dentist appointment. I couldn't afford the travel and it would take up a lot of my time. I need a dentist that is local and accessible to me and I feel that this should change for myself and for other young people."

"I haven't been to a dentist for over 7 years. It isn't easy to get appointments"

What we did:

The Oral Health Steering Group codesigned a service initially delivered in Ilfracombe and Plymouth. The clinics were based upon the Sunny Smiles service, referred to as an example of good practice in In Their Own Words Mental Health & Health report.

An essential part of commissioning these clinics included trauma aware training to ensure trauma informed care, including longer appointment times, and provision of an oral health plan for the young person and referrer.

Service review:

Initially the clinics were provided for Children in Care up to 18 years and the uptake was low. The team then asked their cared for young people/carers and social care professionals for their feedback and were told:

- Need to expand the service from children to young adults up to 25
- Travel difficulties – need additional clinics in South Devon and Exeter
- Need friendly, flexible trauma aware services with a smile
- Care leavers preferred afternoon appointments
- Need it to be easy to book an appointment and clinic information to be shared regularly with social care staff and included in health training

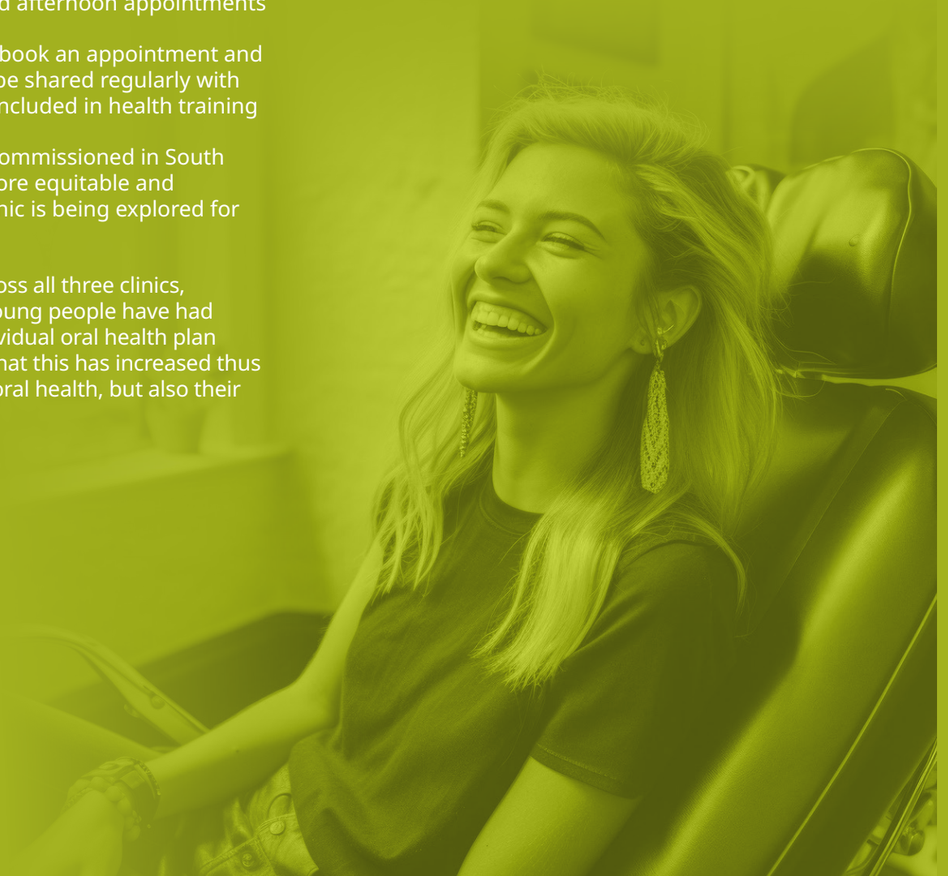
An additional clinic was commissioned in South Devon, making access more equitable and possibility of a further clinic is being explored for Exeter/East Devon.

Uptake has increased across all three clinics, and many children and young people have had an oral check-up and individual oral health plan provided, with the hope that this has increased thus improving not only their oral health, but also their trust in health services.

Project Outcomes:

The backlog of children requiring a dental appointment has decreased and a dedicated pathway for children in care and care leavers has increased access to appropriate dental care. It is an example of successful partnership working between NHS Devon ICB, dental public health, three local authority public health teams, young people, children's services and parent carer forums.

To learn more about Devon's trauma informed dental service please listen to the recorded conversation between YPBMF and the team on the NLCBF website.



Useful Resources

NLCBF Public resources

- **Reports -** Find all 5 of the original In Their Own Words reports on the NLCBF website
- **Audio recording –** Mental Health & Health Key Asks – hear directly from young people on the NLCBF website
- **Audio recording -** Mental Health & Health Key Asks – Show & Share with Devon's trauma-informed dental service on the NLCBF website
- **Audio recording -** Mental Health & Health Key Asks – Show & Share with Greenwich's specialist mental health worker on the NLCBF website
- **Video -** YPBMF's Top Tips videos of words of advice and encouragement here

External Resources

- **Video -** What care-experienced young people need you to know | UK Trauma Council
- **Video -** What do adults never ask but should about mental health and being in care? | UK Trauma Council
- **Case Study –** Leaving Care Specialist Nurse, Newham & Advanced Mental Health Specialist Northamptonshire | Transformation Partners in Health and Care
- **Case Study –** Wellbeing Walks, Hull | Coram Voice Bright Spots Resource Bank
- **Case Study -** Barts Health Young Adult Diabetes (YAD) Service | QiC Diabetes
- **Video –** Trauma informed mental health support for parents with care experience | St Helens BaBs service

NLCBF Members Resources

- **Video -** NLCBF Members Show & Share – Cumberland's Enrichment Fund
- **Video –** NLCBF Members presentation – Coram Voice From Surviving to Thriving
- ***NEW* Resource –** In Their Own Words: We Said, You Did Tracker Tool for local authorities, leaving care teams and young people to review progress together against YPBMF's Local Asks. Why not have a go at using the example on the next page to reflect with care-experienced young people on access to mental health specialists in your leaving care team.



Have a go: In Their Own Words We Said, You Did Tracker Tool

YPBMF have designed this tracker tool to help local authorities, leaving care teams and young people review progress together against each of the In Their Own Words Local Asks. The aim is not just to record what is available it is to understand whether young people know about it, can use it and find it helpful.

The full version includes helpful prompts and guidance informed by workshops with care experienced young people about what makes support inclusive, effective and accessible. NLCBF Members can download the full and editable version of the tracker tool on the Members website. Not sure if your local authority is a member? Find out **HERE**

Key Ask: Mental health specialists within leaving care teams

Use the prompts below to discuss what is available, how it is experienced and what could improve. Record your reflections in whatever way works for your group, brief notes are enough.

The examples below are fictional to show the types of reflections you might capture.

1. Where are we now?

Is this happening locally? Agree whether your area has this support, is working towards it, has decided not to provide it, or is not sure. Note what has been done and any barriers to progress.

Example: "Yes, we have this. A specialist offers appointments at our hub once a week."

2. What tells us it is working?

Look beyond whether a service exists. Consider referral routes, availability and evidence about whether young people can access support and find it helpful. Record what you know and what you still need to find out.

Example: "We have a named specialist and PA's are all confident in how to refer young people for a booking appointment. We still need to find out about waiting times and how accessible it is for young people who are in work or education"



3. What do young people say?

What does the current offer look and feel like? Do young people know about the support? Is it easy to access? Does it make a difference when they need help?

Example: "Some young people know the specialist through the hub. Others are unsure who to speak to about a referral or would prefer an introduction before booking."

4. What could we do next?

Find ways to strengthen the support so more young people can benefit. Think about clear information in the Local Offer, ways to reach out to people who do not feel confident asking for help and addressing any barriers such as location or opening hours.

Example: "Co-produce a short introduction to the specialist offer, explain how to access it and explore more flexible appointment options."

With Thanks to:

- **Dr Claire Baker**
- **Care experienced young people who shared their views**
- **Leaving care teams who contributed learning**
- **YPBMF Champions, Legends and NLCBF Sessional workers who coproduced our workshops, events and reports.**

Contact Us

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

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

Catch22 are funded through membership fees from local authorities.

